



INTO
THEIR
WOODS

IVY ASHER
ANN DENTON

INTO THEIR WOODS

THE EERIE

BOOK ONE

IVY ASHER
ANN DENTON

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For the lost ones.

CONTENTS

Author's Note

1. Noah
2. Noah
3. Noah
4. Noah
5. Noah
6. Ellery
7. Noah
8. Noah
9. Noah
10. Gannon
11. Noah
12. Noah
13. Noah
14. Noah
15. Noah
16. Noah
17. Noah
18. Noah
19. Perth
20. Noah
21. Noah
22. Noah
23. Noah
24. Ruger
25. Noah
26. Noah
27. Noah
28. Noah
29. Noah
30. Noah
31. Noah

32. [Noah](#)

33. [Noah](#)

34. [Noah](#)

35. [Noah](#)

36. [Noah](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Shifter Books By Ivy Asher](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains graphic violence, graphic sex, physical assault, and other subjects that may be triggering. Mind the cliff, it's a doozy.

NOAH



New beginnings are the best. They're like a drug, a natural high full of bubbly hope and glitter-winged butterflies. They're the closest thing there is to magic.

I repeat my mantra to myself as my Bronco crawls up a road far too steep for any vehicle, much less the lemon I drive.

“Come on, baby. You can do it,” I coax my car through gritted teeth. If I break down here, I swear I’m going to find whoever designed this road and junk-punch them. My knuckles grow white, and I clench the wheel tighter as the steep two-lane road grows even narrower. I have a sudden, irrational worry that I’ll roll backward—or worse, sideways. The cliff edge beside me is vertigo-inducing, and I can no longer say I’m not afraid of heights.

It's fine, Noah. Focus on the goal. Arizona. You've never lived in the desert before. It's going to be epic. New job. New life! Maybe even a new guy. Lord knows I could use some time on my back, on top, or on all fours. I'll take what I can get at this point. Beggars can't be choosers.

I’m so close. Another day of driving and I’m there—that is if this last stretch through Colorado doesn’t kill me. I look around at the towering Rockies and wonder how many people just disappear in these mountains without a trace.

I pat my dash and coo words of encouragement at my car as I finally crest the peak of this winding road I’ve been on forever.

“Thank fuck!” I shout victoriously before starting to giggle in that road-drunk fashion brought on by too many hours behind the wheel. Of course, my silly triumph is short-lived because my view is not what I expect.

I turn down my playlist and lean forward over my steering wheel to glare out the windshield. The large, snowcapped mountains that were once in the far distance now loom closer, but there’s still no sign of the town the gas station attendant told me would be here.

Well, shit on a stick and call it a Fudgsicle.

Maybe I was supposed to take a left at that four-way stop a dozen miles back instead of a right.

I survey the winding hills, unsure if I should keep going or turn around. I poke at my phone, but the GPS is a lost cause. The map app just keeps cycling but never loading.

Lost or not, I begrudgingly have to admit it is beautiful here. I’m surrounded by a stunning quilt of fall colors that make me yearn for warm blankets, hot drinks, and a roaring fire. I’ve never seen anything like the breathtaking array all around me. The trees and bushes appear to be competing with one another to see who can create the richest, brightest shades, as though it’s some kind of longstanding beauty contest.

My stomach growls angrily and I’m reminded of the point of this detour. I’m starving and I’m really hoping I don’t have to resign myself to another protein bar. Luckily, the curving road straightens out and, like a beacon of hope, I spot a large wooden sign ahead.

“Please be a town. *Please* be a town,” I chant as I accelerate.

A warm shiver crawls down my spine when the sign grows closer. My hopeful stomach gurgles in eager anticipation of a meal that doesn’t come from a plastic package—or taste like one either.

“You are entering Howling Rapids,” I read, the white letters etched into the dark wooden board a literal sign that everything is once again right in the world.

I raise my hand in triumph and pump my fist as though I've conquered Everest instead of playing lost and found with random mountain towns.

A piercing ring fills my car, and I jump at the sudden noise. The unexpected trill sounds again, and I hurry to hit the green *Accept Call* button on my dash display.

"Hello?" I answer tentatively.

"May I please speak with Noah Lupescu?" a stiff feminine voice requests.

"You've got her."

"Yes, hi, this is Patrice over at Sun Valley Veterinary Clinic. I'm the office manager," she informs me in a no-nonsense manner that has me going slightly rigid. Just the tone of her voice gives me a school mistress vibe—the harsh Victorian kind who carries a heavy ruler and isn't afraid to use it.

"Hi, Patrice. How can I help you?" I ask formally, suddenly worried about why she's calling me. My stomach gives a nervous little hiccup, tightening and contracting before releasing again.

I'm supposed to start work at the clinic with Dr. Jindra in three weeks. It's the reason I've packed everything I own and am trekking across the freakin' country. If he's changed his mind about the offer, I'm going to lose my shit.

Don't you dare steal my new beginning, Patrice.

"Dr. Jindra originally planned for you to start at eight on the thirty-first, but he's since had to schedule a surgery for that morning. You'll be coming in at ten instead," she informs me. She doesn't ask if that's okay or apologize for the change of plans. She simply goes quiet after her instruction as though she expects her orders to be followed and that's that.

Despite the prickly delivery, her message has relief spiraling through my chest. I was certain she was calling to rip the rug right out from underneath me and tell me the vet tech position was no longer mine.

“Oh, okay,” I reply somewhat awkwardly. “I’ll see Dr. Jindra at ten then.”

“You’ll be with me to sort out your paperwork and take your drug test that morning. I don’t tolerate tardiness or standing around if you’re early, so be prompt.”

With that, she hangs up and it almost feels like she snapped her fingers in front of my face like I’m some sort of peasant and then shoulder checked me on her way out of this conversation.

I stare down at my phone for a moment and shake my head.

“Well, she seems like bestie material,” I snark before I sigh.

I think I know now why the pay is so good for this job. I initially chalked it up to the vet clinic’s remote location, thinking maybe that meant good techs were hard to come by. But I now have the sinking suspicion that the pay has nothing to do with locale and everything to do with bitch-face Patrice. She’s probably Dr. Jindra’s damn wife too. The office manager shrews always are.

Ugh.

One of my glittering *new-start* butterflies flutters off. Cowardly fucker. Or maybe it’s the smart one here.

Usually, a new beginning sparkles for a few months at least before the rust starts to peek through. Before the discontent and need to roam hits me and I start looking for opportunities elsewhere. The good thing about being a vet tech is there are lots of clinics all over the country. It’s easy for me to bounce around. I guess we’ll see how long this one lasts.

Maybe Patrice was just having a bad day. Doubtful. But I’ve worked with know-it-all assholes before. It won’t be the first time and certainly not the last. Maybe if I show up with coffee the first day, I can score some brownie points.

I settle into my seat and try not to worry too hard over what’s going to be waiting for me at the new clinic in a state

I've never been to. That's tomorrow's problem. Today's is dinner.

In the distance, I spot buildings nestled in a narrow valley. They aren't the high-rises of a big city that I'm used to, but they're signs of life and that feels like an achievement. The buildings are small, cutesy, one- and two-story structures with steeply pitched roofs. I don't see any indicators of familiar fast-food chains, but I can make do with a grocery store. A good PB&J sounds downright gourmet at this point.

Sporadic houses begin to fly by as I draw closer to the town and, before I know it, I slow down to safely cross into what looks to be the main part of Howling Rapids. There's a large park in the middle with all kinds of colorful, cheery shops bordering its edges. Some of the roofs even sport charming carved eaves. The small town has a very *Stars Hollow* vibe, including a large gazebo that sits dead center in a beautifully landscaped park.

People mill about, walking from shop to shop or enjoying the last of the sun's warmth before it threatens to dip behind the gargantuan snowy peaks.

I watch a young girl playing fetch with a massive dog in the middle of the grass. I can't identify the breed in the dying light, but he's huge. The little girl makes a sloppy uncatchable throw that reminds me of my own pitching skills. But her dog is determined and chases after it, jumping and twisting until he pulls off the nearly impossible catch. Her giggles carry right through my window, bringing a smile to my face. Aw, this place is adorable.

To my left, a large neon sign flashes the word *Diner*.

Hell yes!

I'm drawn to it like a moth to flame. I park in the first empty curbside spot I find and sling my bag over my shoulder as I climb out of my car. A chill immediately kisses my arms, but my hunger demands that I abandon any plans to forage for a jacket in the back seat. Instead, I rub my arms and speed walk toward the diner.

The name *Droolies* is hand-painted on the glass panel at the top of the door. Beneath it is a metal sign attached that reads No Skin, No Service.

My brow furrows at the odd statement, but just then the delectable smells from inside reach out and take me by the throat. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, cornbread...any scent that could be associated with a grandmother's kitchen wafts over me. I bite back a groan as I'm lured in.

"Grab a menu and sit wherever," a smiling woman wearing an apron calls out to me as she pushes through a pair of double doors and disappears into the back.

I pull a folded plastic menu from a stack sitting on a podium by the front door and scan for a seat. There's a rustic motif going on, wood tables and chairs, and even a polished wooden bar top. The lighting is soft, with hanging lamps surrounded by white paper shades giving off a moonlit glow. All in all, the effect is calming and the temperature just right—my goose bumps recede—and I lick my lips in anticipation of feeling the same food coma that I can see on a few patrons' faces as they stare bemusedly at one another.

That most definitely needs to be me.

I drop down into a booth near a window and am greeted almost immediately by a waitress close to my age with gorgeous pale ginger hair and bright, friendly blue eyes.

"Well, there's a face I haven't seen before. You must be new in town. I'm Zara," she tells me, her smile wide as she takes me in. She's got the kind of grin that's as refreshing as lemonade on a hot summer day, sweet with just a little bit of kick. I immediately like her.

"Noah," I offer. My answering smile is a touch dimmer than Zara's, but hers grows even brighter as she takes me in. She just seems so...nice.

"Great to meet you. Are you here for the Hunt tonight? I mean, of course you are. That's why everyone's here. We've had a huge rush, so I hope you weren't craving mashed

potatoes, because we literally just ran out. You didn't want those, right?"

I'm taken aback by the whirlwind of words that just tornadoed out of her. She grimaces a little and I don't know if it's because she's worried I want mashed potatoes or she knows she just word-vomited all over me.

"No, I'll survive without mashed potatoes," I assure, and the worry disappears from her face.

"Oh, thank goodness," Zara exclaims. She steps closer, the glint in her eyes now apologetic as she presses a hand to her chest and sort of sighs.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm rambling. I always do that when I'm anxious. This is my first time and I'm just so excited and nervous."

I relax a little and my smile grows softer in understanding. She must be new to waitressing. I remember how I felt on my first day at my first job. Waiting tables is not for the faint of heart, especially if today's been as busy as she says.

"You're doing awesome," I reassure her, tucking a strand of my dark brown hair behind my ear. Instead of scanning my menu, I set it down. "What do you recommend?" I ask, hoping it will make things easier on her. I'm sure she's dealt with plenty of hard tables today, and I want to make sure that I'm not one of them.

"Oooh, our burgers and pot roast are probably the biggest sellers, but turkey pot pie is the special this week, and Micah just pulled a fresh apple crumble from the oven. It's to die for."

Every word out of her mouth is better than the last. "I'll take a burger, medium rare, and the pot pie. I definitely want in on that apple crumble, but after I'm done stuffing my face on everything else," I tell her, and she beams at me.

"I like your style, Noah. I'll go get everything ordered and bring you a water. You want anything else to drink?" I shake my head while handing her the menu, and then Zara hurries off, red hair glinting each time she crosses underneath a light

fixture. She leaves me with aching cheeks from smiling too hard and a warm feeling in my chest.

I wonder if Ashwood Springs, Arizona, will be anything like this place?

I've never lived in a small town before. Putting up with Patrice's potential drill sergeant attitude at the clinic might not be so bad if everyone over in that little town is as nice as people here seem to be.

I look around, taking in the diner once more, and catch the eye of a man who's brazenly staring at me. He's got dark curly hair, a jaw that looks as strong as a Nutcracker, and a disposition that seems just as stiff. He might be handsome but the bags under his muddy green eyes show he's also exhausted.

I can relate. Road tripping across the country was exciting in theory, but now that I'm three-fourths of the way through it, I'm ready to be done.

I offer the man a small, unassuming smile because that's what you do when you accidentally make eye contact with a stranger. It seems this guy was never taught that polite social skill, however, because all he does is continue to stare.

Awkward.

He's sitting in a booth on the other side of the diner with two other big guys. They're all incredibly tall, like basketball players...but beefier. Oddly, both of his companions turn in their seats at the same time and join their friend in gawking at me.

Now that's just fucking weird.

I shift my blue-green eyes to the window, hoping they'll do the same, but I feel their gazes crawling all over me as I study the details of the park just outside.

Sunset is in full swing and the tops of the surrounding mountains are doused in reds, oranges, and purples. A few minutes ago, I'd have been caught up in how gorgeous the view is and how charming this little town appears. But now?

Unable to stop myself, I look back at the table of three men again and freeze when all of them are *still* watching me. The lining of my stomach frosts over as an unnerving chill takes up residence there.

What the hell?

They're good looking. If I were a little younger and naiver, I'd probably be flattered, but something about their attention feels too intense. This time, I don't drop my gaze in feigned politeness.

I know better than to paint myself as easy prey to anyone, so I take each of them in, one by one. There's the curly-haired guy, a pale guy with a ponytail and ice-blue eyes that send shivers down my spine, and one with dark hair and eyes and a smirk that looks more wild than nice. I do my best to convey a solid *you don't want to fuck with me* message.

None of them so much as blink as they continue to unabashedly stare me down.

Just as I start to question how safe I am in the middle of nowhere Colorado, Zara is back to set down a large water in front of me. As though she can sense my sudden unease, she follows my gaze to the booth with the three weirdos.

She pops out a hip and a whole lot of sass. "You boys drop your manners somewhere?"

Just like that, they look away, focusing back on their food and each other. She loses her glare when she turns back to me, shaking her head in exasperation. "Sorry. You'd think they'd never seen a beautiful girl before," Zara huffs with a roll of her eyes and a click of her tongue.

I offer her a weak smile as she waves a hand dismissively, as if the guys' aggression can be batted away like a bad smell. She waves off another table of men who are now watching us, shooing them like they're a flock of naughty chickens.

My cheeks burn but I lift my chin defiantly, not sure what the hell is going on.

"Don't worry about any of them, Noah. All the dens are a little rowdy right now. You know how guys get about a

competition. You don't have a thing to fret about."

Before I can ask her what any of that means, the order bell rings and she's off to pick up waiting plates, quickly dropping them at another table where a couple sits side by side holding hands. I look back over at the unsettling trio of guys and then at the other table of looky-loos I hadn't noticed until she pointed them out. Zara's admonition seems to have worked. Everyone is back to minding their own business.

Good. Maybe she's right. Maybe my big-city paranoia has followed me here and I'm overthinking things.

I exhale a deep breath and try to relax, pulling up the GPS app on my phone to program my route from here to Ashwood Springs. The last thing I need is to get any more off track in the Colorado Rockies than I am now.

The map takes forever to load, but when it does, I pinch to zoom, only to frown.

What the hell?

Why isn't Howling Rapids showing up?

It thinks I'm in the middle of nowhere. I reload the map, thinking it's glitching again, but nothing changes. I guess this town is so small it doesn't even have a dot on the map.

As I wait for my food, I figure out how to get back to the highway from here. If I get a big-ass coffee from somewhere, I should be set to do the final stretch.

Ashwood Springs, here I come.

Zara drops my food off in record time, and I dig in like the starved woman I am. Everything's even better than I hoped it would be, and before I know it, I'm polishing off my second helping of apple crumble a la mode.

So damn good.

Zara doesn't say a word about my appetite, and it makes me like her even more as I clean the plate and groan happily every time she checks on me or clears something away. I've found that most waiters, waitresses, ex-boyfriends, and former

foster parents have something to say about how much I can pack into my five-foot-eleven frame at any given meal.

I'm not exactly built like a D1 athlete, lacking the height and overall muscle mass, but I do have the overactive metabolism to support my feeding frenzies. I used to feel so self-conscious about it. These days, I don't give two shits. I feed the hunger instead of second-guessing everything or feeling ashamed.

The table of guys who lost our staring contest stand up, and my eyes flick to them, tracking their movements as they toss money on the table to cover their bill and head for the door.

Can't say I'm sorry to see them go.

The one with dark curly hair and green eyes looks my way again, his stare intense and tinged with what looks like longing.

That can't be right.

My head suddenly starts to throb, and I bring up a hand to rub my temples. I close my eyes against the ache and pinch the bridge of my nose. The headache starts to fade, strangely disappearing just as fast as it came on. Thank fuck.

When I open my eyes and look up, the group of guys is gone.



Zara hands me my card and a receipt to sign, once again apologizing profusely for not having takeaway cups of coffee.

“If you go right out of the diner and down a block, there's an amazing coffee shop that can get you squared away. Hurry though because things are kicking off soon, and they're probably getting ready to close,” Zara tells me excitedly, and I smile at her strange enthusiasm.

I'm almost bummed that Howling Rapids is nothing more than a quick food stop. I'm tempted to maybe stay the night

and do a little exploring, but I know I'll be kicking myself in the ass if I'm not thoroughly settled into my new place before my job starts. New beginnings might be epic, but unpacking is a bitch.

"Thank you," I tell Zara warmly before she rushes off again.

I leave her a hefty tip and scoot out of my booth with a smile. If she hadn't said something, I never would've guessed that today was her first day. She was a great waitress.

I spot her as I head for the door and wave goodbye.

"I'll see you out there! Good luck!" Zara calls from behind the counter as she serves one of the elderly men there a massive slice of chocolate cake.

I step out into the cold night and find myself wishing I would see her around. I've never been the best at making friends, and she seems like the type who would make it easy and fun.

"The only thing you'll be seeing is the open road," I mutter to myself as I step onto the sidewalk. "But first, coffee."

The sun is gone and the temperature outside is more frigid than it was before. My cream-colored T-shirt isn't exactly up to the job, but I follow Zara's directions and spot the coffee shop just where she said it'd be.

Bingo!

I scurry down the empty sidewalk toward the golden light like a pilgrim in search of the promised land.

Must have caffeine.

Especially after all the food I just scarfed down. Ideally, I'd go for a quick run to help burn everything off and wake up, but I'm already in for a late night of driving. Not to mention I've gotten lost once today. I'm not looking for a repeat.

I pass several cute shops that already have their lights off even though it's barely six. Good to know. Small-town hours are not what I'm used to. I'll have to look out for that at my new place.

Music plays softly through hidden speakers of the coffee shop, and there are a few groups sitting at tables outside as I pull open the door. Inside, there are three people scattered about, sipping from mugs that resemble bowls with handles.

Yes, please.

The barista glances up at me as she finishes taking the order of a pretty middle-aged woman with a stylish pixie cut, wearing a broom skirt. She's accompanied by a younger woman who's clearly attempting to impersonate Wednesday Addams with her braids and all-black ensemble.

"No. Whipped cream is disgusting."

"Agree to disagree."

"It's like pure sugar turned into foam."

"Not listening," the older woman states firmly as she grabs a lid for her whipped-cream topped to-go cup and takes a defiant sip. This gives her a delightful little white foam mustache for a moment before her tongue darts out to erase it.

They're darkness versus whimsy personified. The unmistakable affection underlying their bickering makes me think they're related. Mother and daughter, if I had to guess. I watch them, ignoring the pang of loss I feel as they mock and joke.

"Next," the barista calls out.

I step forward. The girl working the counter has a lopsided smile and the undefined cheekbones of someone still in high school.

"Mocha latte with two extra shots of espresso—the biggest you've got, please," I request.

She grins as she rings it up. "Yup. Tonight's going to be a late night for you, huh?"

I give her a nod, matching her friendly smile with one of my own while I pay. "Yeah. And I took too long at dinner. I'm probably a little behind schedule."

She chuckles and I note there's a small gap between her two front teeth. "Welcome to my world. We were supposed to close up half an hour ago, but people keep pouring in to fuel up."

"Places seem to close early around here."

She prepares my drink with practiced hands. "Only for special occasions," she responds as she slides my coffee across the counter.

I'm about to ask her what the occasion is—is it Founder's Night or some other cutesy small-town ritual? But just then, Wednesday Addams calls out, "Okay! Clear out, everybody! It's time." She uses frantic shooing motions to emphasize her point, ignoring the hippie woman at her side, who quietly scolds her. "Get out or I'll curse your toenails to curl up!" She throws out the ridiculous jest with a dead serious face.

I have to swallow down an amused snort when I see how terrified some people look at the girl's absurd threat. I let myself get caught up in the sweep of people headed out the door.

The wind has picked up and I shiver, heading back to my car. When I move away from the glowing shop window and into the shadows, someone massive appears—out of fucking nowhere. Backlit by a distant streetlight, he looks like a menacing apparition as he steps right in front of me, and we almost collide.

"Shit!" I shout, jumping slightly and then scrambling not to spill coffee on myself. "I didn't see you."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you," his deep, gruff voice scratches my ears, and it takes a minute for me to process his words through the vast amount of adrenaline flooding my system. I stare up at him and his beat-up black cowboy hat, gaping for a second as my body winds down. Finally, everything calms a little. My fingers unclench and so does my throat.

I take a step back, thanking the stars for the fact that the contents of my to-go cup didn't spill when I basically jumped

out of my own skin.

“No...no problem.” I clear my throat and give an awkward, tight-lipped smile as I step around him and hurry in the direction of my Bronco. I don’t glance back, but I do use the reflection on one of the parked cars to watch him behind me like I’m frickin’ Jason Bourne or something.

I shouldn’t have looked, because in the mirror, I see he’s turned toward me. While his feet aren’t moving, the fact that his gaze is chasing me ignites a whole new wave of concern. My paranoid brain only screams louder when another guy steps out from a doorway just past the coffee shop and joins him. Both of their gazes zero in on me, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end.

“What the hell, Noah?” I mutter. “Calm it down.” You’d think I was walking through seedy city streets with the way my heart is pounding.

These are small-town guys who are just checking out your ass. It’s not like this random little place is full of serial killers.

It’s official, no more creepy murder mystery podcasts for the rest of this trip. They are forbidden. My delicate sensibilities clearly can’t hang.

The street is eerily empty and that does not help me get rid of my case of the shivers.

I swap my coffee from hand to hand and take the time to shake each one out, hoping it will dispel the shock that just shot through my system. This is the second time in the last hour and a half that my fight-or-flight’s been set off.

Maybe I’ve just had too many energy drinks and I’m jumpier than usual, but I suddenly don’t see this town as idyllic and quaint. It’s starting to feel far more ominous.

“Leaving and never coming back here sounds like the best plan I’ve had all day,” I murmur, spotting my Bronco.

I unlock it with my key fob, the lights flashing once, and I hurriedly reach for the handle. A brutal shove from behind sends me smacking into the door, hot coffee splattering everywhere as my cup goes careening. My cheek bounces off

the window as pain explodes through my skull. For half a second, I'm confused and unsure what the hell just happened. Somehow, I'm still on my feet, my pulse hammering in my ears, as a chill that has nothing to do with the cold crawls up my spine.

I turn to try to see who just hit me, lifting my hands half in placation and half in defense. I don't get the chance to look over my shoulder when I'm tackled hard from the side. Pain crackles like lightning down my body, lighting up every nerve ending from my skull to my fingertips.

The ground is unforgiving as I'm slammed down onto it, gravel scraping off layers of skin from my face and body. I whimper, the noise as pathetic as a little kitten, when a large hand wraps around the nape of my neck and pulls me up. Warmth spills down the side of my face, and arms come around me lifting me off the pavement before the world tilts, smears, and blinks black.

NOAH



A weary groan slips from my lips as I come to. I'm cold and my head's pounding like it's been used for batting practice by an entire baseball team. The heavy ache turns piercing when I try and fail to open my eyes.

The sound of dry skittering leaves scratching against the ground is too loud in my pain-filled skull. I lift a hand to my temple and moan weakly as my fingertips graze sticky, congealing blood.

Fuck.

My muddy thoughts clear and I recall someone attacking me from behind. I force my lids open, despite my pulsing headache, terror and dread pooling in my chest. Images of dank basements and torture rooms flash in my mind but, when my vision clears, I realize I'm outside in a forest and it's dark out. Dense, towering trees surround the spot where I'm lying, and a flash of red catches my eye.

What the hell happened? Where am I?

I push up from the ground in an effort to sit, and immediately battle a wave of nausea that threatens to pull me under. I lean back against a large tree trunk, the rough bark digging into my spine as I close my eyes, blocking out the night as I breathe through the pain and queasiness.

Fabric slips off my bent knee, giving a cold gust access to the bare skin of my leg. Alarm bursts through me at the

sensation. I look down and find rich crimson velvet piled on the ground next to the moon-bleached white of my thigh.

I'm naked.

Not completely. I'm wearing a heavy cloak, but the T-shirt and leggings I had on before are gone—along with my bra and underwear. I swallow the acid that starts to climb up my throat, and run my shaky hands over the soft fabric I've been draped in. The long deep-red cloak has a hood and a golden clasp. Someone attacked me, stripped me down, and left me out in the middle of a forest at night.

What the fuck?

A horrified whimper gets trapped in my mouth as I panic and take stock of my body. I pat myself over as hot tears start to slip down my cheeks. I bite back a relieved sob when all I sense is a sore hip and the weeping cut on the side of my head. I can deal with a little blood and bruises. Those are manageable. What's not is the fact that I'm in the middle of nowhere, naked and hurt.

Is this some sick fuck's idea of a joke?

Bile singes the back of my tongue, and I'm immediately pissed at myself for not listening to my gut earlier. Something about this town tripped my worry wires. Stupidly, I'd tried to slather my fears with excuses and second-guessing, just like foster mother number four always covered blackened toast with extra jelly. I know better and yet I let myself label my unease as misjudgment.

“Good job. Now you're a dead woman,” I whisper to myself, teeth chattering as I cinch the edges of the cloak—my only protection from the elements.

At least it's soft.

Quivering, I stand, using the tree next to me for support. I survey my surroundings, trying to breathe past the terror that makes me want to curl into a ball and cry until all of this is over, whatever *this* is.

But I need to get away. I need a plan. I don't know what in the fucked-up *Handmaid's Tale* is going on here, but I won't

sit around and wait for whoever did this to me to come back.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I curse with each step. Pine needles, sticks, and dead leaves scrape at the soles of my feet as I wobble unsteadily away from the tree I woke up next to. My left eye feels dry and is having trouble focusing. I’m pretty sure I have a concussion, maybe some bruised ribs to go along with my blackening hip, but I box up any concern about my injuries and shove it away.

Survive first. Then worry about the pain.

I picture the hospital bed I’ll be recovering in after I escape this shit, and I don’t know if I’ve ever longed for anything more.

Something in my periphery moves, catching my attention, and I snap my head in that direction, causing an ache to shoot down my neck. It takes me a beat to make sense of what I see, but when I do, I stop in my tracks.

Silent.

Frozen.

Terrified.

About twenty feet away, lit by the light of the full moon that’s peeking through the branches, is someone else wearing the same red cloak that trails along the ground behind them. A delicate hand emerges from underneath the cloak and raises a lantern, which glows as bright as a golden star in the dim, tree-cast shadows.

The lantern is shoved quickly onto a bare tree branch where it sways, the beams of light shakily painting stripes across the leaf-littered ground.

Surprise at finding someone else in the woods wearing a red cloak quickly morphs into wary distrust.

What are the chances...?

I squint, trying to focus on the other person, but a hood hides their face. They’re turned away from me, just standing there as though expecting something or maybe someone to appear from that part of the forest. Apprehension and unease

skitter across my skin like insects as I watch the cloaked person, unsure what to do.

Is this my attacker?

Or were they ambushed and dumped here too?

I open my mouth to call out but then slowly close it.

What if it's whoever took me, or what if they're in on what's happening? Why do they have a lantern and I don't?

The cloaked person doesn't look big enough to be a threat, but I also have some kind of head injury, and I don't know if I'm thinking clearly. I huddle closer to the trunk of the tree behind me, hoping it will shield me if someone looks my way.

I look around, as though the trees and bushes will tell me what they know, when I spot *another* red-cloaked person on my other side. I tense, unease twitching through me, as foreboding slithers up my spine. Five huge pine trees separate us, the shadows dripping between them so dark that the person is nearly hidden from view. I worry they're going to spot me, but just like the first mysterious cloaked figure, they're staring into the forest in anticipation.

What the fuck is going on?

My mind slowly processes the scene, ticking along like an old wind-up watch at the end of its run. I'm sure I'm missing something, but my brain can't increase its speed right now because every thought feels fuzzy.

Wait.

More red-cloaked individuals come into focus. They're farther away than the two on either side of me, but each of them is clearly spaced out in a line. There have to be at least half a dozen others that I can see from where I'm standing, dabs of red painted across the deep blue darkness.

All of them are staring off in the same direction, just... waiting.

Shit.

The terrifying idea that some warped sicko brought me out here into the forest morphs into the gruesome realization that some sort of cult abducted me instead.

If it was just one man, I could try to fight—not with a ton of skill, but I might be able to hold my own.

A whole cult?

Chance and hope lock the door, sliding the bolt closed and leaving me trapped on the other side.

Oh god. Please don't tell me I'm some kind of human sacrifice.

Dread creeps up the sides of my throat, my gaze passing anxiously over each of the cloaked figures.

Thank fuck none of them move or even turn toward me. I'm not sure they've noticed I'm awake, which is surprising because I'm certain that my pounding heart and gasping breaths are as loud as a fighter jet right now. My head and ears are pulsing expectantly, anticipation churning a boiling, bubbling lava through my veins. Any second now, this line of cloaked figures is going to pivot toward me and realize that one of these things is not like the other.

My hands clench with apprehension.

But they just keep waiting.

Waiting for what?

The hairs on my arms rise with warning, and fear screams at me that I don't want to know what else could be in these woods.

I start to back away, trying to be quiet and discreet.

Something in the air changes.

Maybe it's the way the nocturnal noises of the forest suddenly stop or my adrenaline is working on overdrive to sharpen my senses in an effort to survive whatever is coming, but—all at once—I know, without a shred of doubt, that something *is* coming.

I freeze, even though everything in me is begging for me to run, to escape.

My shallow, dread-filled breaths are too loud as they saw in and out of my lungs.

Terrified, I watch the other red-cloaked figures, each of them locked in place just like me.

Are they...are they not in on this? Are they clueless and hurt too?

But I'm out of time to ask questions.

A stick snaps in the distance and the air in my chest retreats.

Tension thickens the cold night, pressing in against me, and I taste acrid fear. I want to spit to remove the taint from my tongue, but I'm too afraid to move.

Two glowing orbs suddenly appear out of nowhere. I stop breathing as they slowly, steadily move closer, floating three or maybe four feet above the ground. It takes my panicked mind a moment to understand what I'm seeing.

It's a pair of eyes.

Yellow eyes, set in a dark gray and silver furred face.

The biggest wolf I've ever seen seems to coalesce out of nowhere.

It's as though the beast materializes from the darkness itself, one paw moving in front of the other as it stalks its prey. The only problem is I'm pretty sure *I'm* the prey.

Fuck my life. This is worse than a cult. Torn apart alive and then eaten? That's number four on my list of worst ways to die.

The wolf slips from the shadows, and just when I think *that's* bad enough, two more massive beasts step out of the darkness and join the first. Each of them watches me as they stalk closer, a brutal glint of anticipation flickering in their cold gazes. My knees knock painfully together as a full-body clench born of horror seizes control of my system.

A deep growl rumbles from one of the beasts, and I swear I hear the challenge to *run* in the menacing sound.

I have zero intention of doing that. I know better than to activate a predator's prey drive. All my years of working with animals scream inside my head at once—a cacophony of warnings and instructions. Cautiously, I angle my body so I'm not squaring off with the wolves and drop my gaze. I keep track of the wild animals while also searching the ground for a stick or a rock. The branches of the tree behind me are too high, so climbing to get away from them is out.

Think. Breathe and think, I coach myself.

I spot a decent-sized rock a couple feet away when a high-pitched scream rips through the night. The shriek makes me jump and stumble back with fright, and the wolves' attention snaps in the direction of the sound. Sharp teeth gleam as the wolves' lips pull back into snarls.

As though the scream was some sort of starter pistol, the other red-cloaked people suddenly bolt into action. Each of them sprints in a different direction, their cloaks trailing behind them in billowing crimson lines.

Instinctively, I run too, unable to stop myself. I know it's the last thing I should be doing, but it's as though some baser nature is overriding my common sense. The need to flee surges through me and wipes away anything else.

I spin and race into the trees behind me. Pumping my arms, I work to steady my shaking breaths so that I can feed my lungs and fuel my muscles. I pick up speed faster than I thought possible—thank fuck for adrenaline—and I desperately hope that the wolves have found someone else to chase in the mayhem.

As I run, my cloak fans out behind me like some fucked-up cape of doom. The clasp presses tight against my throat, making me all too aware of the blood surging through my veins there. I want to tear the cloak off, but it's the only thing I have that can protect my fragile flesh from the unfolding nightmare all around me.

My feet stumble and slide across dead, damp leaves, and I'm not immune to the rocks or twigs scattered about like nature's shrapnel. I bite down on a yelp as something gouges a hole in my heel. I force my eyes to stay forward, not allowing them to stray down and check my injuries.

Move, Noah! Move! I scream at myself, my inner voice just as hoarse and raw as my actual throat.

More screams sound off in the distance, and I push myself even harder as I weave through the tree trunks. I'm somehow both numb and overwhelmingly terrified, but there's something else underlying it all, something fucked-up that just might scare me worse than being run down by wolves.

I think I like it.

There's a tiny thread of elation. A sliver of insanity. A minuscule broken piece of myself that's enjoying this.

I have no fucking clue why or what it means, but it's there, and it's freaking me out.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I push aside a bush, grasping the branches the same way I'm grasping onto my sanity.

There's no way this is real life.

People don't just attack you and then drop you off in some horror-filled Little Red Riding Hood role play.

Wild wolves don't attack humans unprovoked.

None of this makes any sense.

As I run for my life, I scan the forest floor, looking for anything I can climb or hide in. A river to jump into. A hill that might show me a road that leads to safety. But all I see are endless trees and stars, the full moon, and looming mountains that are too far away to help me.

My lungs start to scream as panic tightens my throat. A barely-there snarl sounds off somewhere behind me, and that's when I know.

I'm being hunted.

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid,” I chant angrily at myself.

Why did I run?

I’m smarter than this. There’s no winning in a foot race against wild animals. I let myself get spooked and, like a doomed deer, I gave these hairy bastards exactly what they crave. Unlike the deer though, I *know* I’m fucked.

“No. *No!*” I snap at myself as I skid to a stop.

I’m no defenseless doe and I’m not going down without a fight. Desperately, I look for a rock but spot a branch that’s about as thick as my arm and twice as long.

Yes, finally!

Hope surges in my chest and I blink back the tears in my eyes that threaten to cloud my line of sight. I snatch up my weapon and swing around, the branch clutched in my hands, just as a massive gray and black wolf skulks through the shadowed trunks surrounding us. It stops less than ten feet in front of me and stares.

I look for any outward indication that the fucker is rabid, but it looks entirely too calm and calculated. Eerily so.

Three other wolves stalk from the shadows to join the first. Are they stalking me because they smell the blood on my head? From where I was hit?

My heart pounds and my hands shake as I take them in. They’re massive. Their heads are almost even with my chest. And their movements are so deliberate. I’ve never seen anything like it, and my gut is screaming that this isn’t normal.

Instinct tells me to keep eye contact and try to scare them away with loud noises, but there’s something in the way they’re watching me that tells me that isn’t going to work. There’s an unnerving intelligence in their multi-colored eyes, colors that wolves don’t have in the wild.

A wolf with glowing cobalt-blue eyes, a white coat, and one slate-colored ear creeps closer. Its head is low and its gaze focused. A deep growl rumbles from the beast, and I tighten

my hold on the branch and get ready to swing for all I'm worth.

"Fucking try it and I'll bash your ugly face in!" I snarl as the huge wolf prowls confidently closer.

My head pounds and my legs shake, but I promise myself right here and now that I'm going to make it through this. It might not be all in one piece, but I *will* survive...no matter what.

The other three wolves move to flank me on either side, and I tighten my grip on the branch, stepping back to try and keep them all where I can see them. This elicits growls from each of the beasts, and the white one tenses and crouches like it's about to leap for me.

This is it.

With a determined glare, I swing up into a batting position, ready for the fucker.

A thunderous crash sounds from my left, and I whip around, suddenly terrified that a wolf I didn't notice is about to sink its teeth into my throat.

My entire nervous system pulses like a strobe light, and I yelp in shock when an even bigger wolf than these four lands less than five feet away from me. I have no idea where he leapt from, though I see the bushes surrounding him tremble when his paws hit the ground. He towers over the other beasts, which should be impossible.

Holy shit, he's a monster.

All my gratitude toward the universe shrivels up like a raisin in the heat of the sun as the massive wolf springs forward. I flinch but brace myself.

At this point, my only hope is that my end is quick.

To my utter astonishment, the new monster doesn't aim for me.

No.

The colossal red and gray wolf slams into the encroaching white wolf, and all hell breaks loose.

A cacophony of snarls bounces off the trees all around me. And like an idiot, I stand there completely dumbfounded as I watch the giant wolf bite the white one. He doesn't shake his head like a natural predator would. No, he throws the white wolf, sending it sailing through the air, farther than should be possible. My horrified awe at his strength doesn't even have time to kick in before he's spinning just in time to meet an attack from another wolf.

A gargantuan black and gray beast charges me from the right, and I scream as I swing my branch at it. Anger fuels the hit, and my makeshift bat slams into the wolf's muzzle. The contact jars me, but I hold tight to my weapon, satisfied that I showed it I wasn't going to make this easy.

Take that, you fucker!

Instead of whimpering or flinching at my attack, the wolf turns its head and snaps at the branch, its powerful jaws breaking it in half like it's nothing more than a matchstick.

No!

For a millisecond, I panic. I didn't knock the bastard's head off like I was hoping. I swing again with the smaller branch, not doing much damage but throwing it off balance. Which means it plows into me instead of immediately ripping me apart.

A jolting sting shoots up my spine when I land on my ass, making me suck in a pained breath. Despite the ache radiating through me, I kick at the wolf, nailing it in the leg, as I scramble to get back on my feet. An ungodly growl rips from my lips as I desperately try anything to keep the fucker away from me.

Out of nowhere, three more colossal wolves spill into the fray. The new arrivals attack the original pack. Flashing teeth fill my vision and when the wolves collide the very air seems to vibrate. Growls bombard me and a shiver of terror burrows deep into my chest.

Yes! Fight each other! That's it!

I scurry to my feet, ready to make another run for it, but one of the fighting pairs crashes into me and I go down again hard. Smashing to the ground on my side, I wail as the menacing creatures tear and claw at each other on top of me. They're over my legs, jumping, snarling, biting. Saliva flings onto my ankle and I can see every single one of their dagger-like teeth.

There's no chance I can run now.

I was so close.

Despair slides its fingers over my body as if it relishes every defeatist thought going through my mind.

Covering my head, I try to squeeze into a protective ball while paws and fangs flash, slash, and snap terrifyingly close.

Mom, I'll see you soon—

Teeth clamp down on my calf, and I scream as agony abruptly rips through my leg. A sharp, crushing pressure shreds through muscle and compresses my bones. It feels like my leg is being dipped in fire.

One of the wolves has me.

"No-no-no-no." I scream, but all that comes out is a ghost of a sound as my voice abandons me.

A strong tug hauls me out from under the fighting wolves, and I claw desperately at the ground to keep the mongrel from dragging me to my death. My nails bend back painfully until one rips, but I can't stop the powerful beast from taking me. There's nothing to hold on to. There's nothing to stop this thing from ripping me apart.

I flip over to try to kick it with my good leg as I'm yanked away. My cloak is a bloody-looking smear on the ground, as if it's foreshadowing what's about to become of me.

Panic rattling every bone in my body, I lash out. With my good leg, I kick at the pitch black wolf, which thankfully makes it let go of my leg to snarl threateningly at me.

Desperately, I throw dirt in the animal's face and then shock the hell out of myself when my fist connects with the wolf's head. Terror and rage pump wildly through me, and I hardly feel the impact of my punch, though I see it and hear it.

The wolf yelps, I think more in surprise than pain, because it just stares at me, and I swear I can see approval in its gray eyes. The wrongness of that once again shrieks in my mind like a wailing alarm. I know these things look like wolves, but there's nothing natural about them.

After a tense beat where the black wolf just watches me, it starts to back away.

For a moment I'm too stunned to do anything other than pant shakily. I lean up on my elbows to keep the retreating wolf in sight. Confusion blasts through me as I watch the wolf retreat more.

How the fuck did that work?

There's no way that I just punched a fucking monster into submission. Behind him, the other wolves still brawl, teeth slashing. All threats and action.

The bite on my leg throbs in time with my racing heart. I look down to see that my calf is bloody, but it doesn't look completely mangled like I was afraid it would. Survival instinct slaps me across the face, and I roll to my stomach and start crawling away. I've barely managed to go half a foot when the burning ache in my leg morphs into a full-blown inferno.

I gasp at the sudden change in sensation, but that's all I can do before I'm engulfed in white hot agony.

I scream—or at least I think I do—as pain shreds me.

My muscles feel like they're tearing away from my bones. And my bones feel like they're snapping apart, only to be fit back together so they can break again.

Mindless and lost to the anguish, I beg the moon and the stars, every god I've ever heard of. I even beg the four colossal wolves themselves that are now standing above me watching...waiting.

Stop! Please make it stop!

I plead and keen and writhe, but it doesn't stop.

Inside my chest, my heart blasts off like a missile, rocketing faster than it ever has—until it feels like it will break the sound barrier.

BOOM.

My chest bursts apart and suffering seizes my voice, contracting my throat as torment tugs at every part of me.

The forest all around me is suddenly gone, and flashes of confusing images strobe behind my eyes. I blink and I'm walking up the steps of my first foster home. Then I'm pulled further back in time—making pancakes with my mom in our kitchen.

Pain flares, searing me from the inside out, and the vision of my memories is replaced by a dingy warehouse. I search my strange, fuzzy surroundings for anything familiar, but all I see is a large man angrily striding away. He yanks a door open, and the sunlight blazes in and swallows his silhouette.

Torment flickers through my limbs, and I'm strangely aware that even though my mind is focused on this dreary warehouse, my body is elsewhere suffering. It's as though I've fractured somehow—and I'm terrified I'll never come back together.

A whimper pulls me from my frenzied, agony-filled thoughts, and I turn to see a group of kids huddling in a far corner. They're dirty and thin, and their fearful gazes toggle between the door the man disappeared through and me. My eyes land on a boy who has his back to me. I think he has bruises running up his side, but it's hard to tell under the grime layering every exposed inch of him. His hair looks dark. Black maybe when it's absent of dust and debris.

My heart aches for him. I feel it deeper than the ripping misery currently attacking my body.

I need him to turn. I need it more than I need this agony to stop. I need it in a way that doesn't make sense, because this seems like a memory, though none of it's familiar. None of

this...except for him. The longing inside of me expands and grows, blooms into a thudding ache of its own.

The boy's head tilts. I'm desperate to see him, like his face is the key to my salvation. He pivots. I stop breathing, holding it in against the crescendo of physical pain.

Then suddenly it stops.

Shocked, I look down at my body, but it's not mine, it belongs to a child. Before I can look up to find the boy again, before I can discover who he is or why he feels so important to me, I'm hooked through my middle by some unseen force and yanked away from the memory.

I drop back into myself, and everything is dark. I'm leaden, dead weight, and I think I'm being carried. A tiny whimper slips out of me, and I'm pulled tighter against something warm and hard.

"It's okay, we've got you. You're going to be just fine," a deep, soothing voice comforts.

I don't know what's happened to me or who *we* is, but for some reason I believe him.

I'm going to be just fine.

NOAH



Consciousness slowly trickles in, little droplets of sensation seeping into my mind as I realize I'm warm and more comfortable than I think I've ever been in my life. The cottony softness of a perfect dream seems to cloud my mind as I press deeper into a downy pillow and lush bedding. I feel dazed, kind of out of it, but I can't find it in me to really care. I'm too comfy. I snooze, half awake, half not, as I try to recall what my perfect dream was about, but it slips through my fingers like strips of silk.

I hear low male voices mumbling words that are far too hazy for me to make out.

Maybe I'm still dreaming?

This might be one of those dreams where you know it's not real and yet you're stuck until your subconscious ejects you. The voices are deep and decadent, the tones dripping over me like warm candle wax. I want them to be closer, and the dream suddenly responds to my desire.

The muffled thud of footsteps draw nearer, and a delicious baritone floats in the air somewhere above me. "Ellery was called in for an emergency, but he said to stay close and watch for any signs of Fading." The voice has a rich soothing quality to it, like warm honeyed tea, and I want to sip on it.

"Not a problem," a gravelly voice agrees from behind me, and I slowly become aware of a large, hard male body that's

pressed close to my back. “I’ve never been happier to lay around in bed all day.”

An arm tightens around my waist, pressing me closer to the person spooning me—someone with very defined pecs. As much as I like it, something about the sensation gives me pause. I try to work through what’s pinging my instincts, but my soggy brain is lagging. My entire body feels like mushy cereal that’s sat in a bowl of milk for too long. There’s something I should be paying attention to, but I can’t figure out what it is.

The mattress dips in front of me, and a gentle hand brushes a lock of hair from my face. My dozing sense of safety and security trills happily, but I’m starting to think all of this is too vivid to be a dream.

Who are these guys? Why are they in my bed? Not that I’m really complaining. I just wish I knew what was going on. Did I go out last night and fall vagina-first into a threesome?

“Don’t get too possessive, Perth, she might not like that,” the honeyed-tea voice advises, and the big spoon behind me nuzzles my neck.

Perth? That’s an unusual name, one that doesn’t stoke the tiniest ember of recognition.

“That didn’t stop you from holding her for hours,” Perth points out, clutching me closer.

Fuck. How drunk did I get last night?

The weight of another warm and hard body presses against me from the front, and soft chest hair grazes my rapidly hardening nipples. I realize then that I’m not wearing anything. I’m naked.

The man behind me shifts a little and the cotton of his pajamas—which I mistook as my own clothing—slides against my ass. Along with something else. Something large and thick and quite hard.

A small mewl of appreciation slips from my lips, and a deep growl suddenly responds. That sound slashes through my nerve endings. It’s as jarring as a set of cymbals crashing

together. Something about it sends alarm blaring through me, and just like that, I'm fully awake.

My eyes fly open, but the sight of the most delicious, intimidatingly hot guy I've ever seen fries my immediate need to bolt.

Bright green eyes stare down at me from a very masculine face. He has a jaw boasting a five o'clock shadow and messy, unbrushed brown hair that adds to his appeal. His handsome face alone is worship-worthy, but his body? This man's body was sculpted by a master. I swear that someone must have revived Michaelangelo from the dead and told him to do one better than his sculpture of Hercules. The bicep propping up this guy's head as he leans on the pillow has to be the size of my thigh. His arms are huge, and every delicious inch of them is covered in black tattoos.

I suck in a breath as his hand touches my bare hip, fingers wrapping back around me until they're most definitely on my ass.

"Oh shit, you're awake! How do you feel?" he asks, surprise ringing in his voice, and worry glinting in his green eyes. He offers me a warm smile and it makes him look so soft and sweet that my heart instantly turns to butter. The grin is a complete contrast to his badass appearance. This man looks like he was meant to be a soldier, a general—no, a gladiator. But he's staring down at me with this sort of tender pride that makes my lungs forget how to function.

I don't think anyone has ever looked at me quite like that.

"Good, I think," I answer, wincing at the dry rasp in my voice.

Damn, they must have had me screaming last night.

I return the gladiator's smile and try to kickstart my brain. I tug at the threads of memory, trying to recall what happened. I only find frayed strings that I can't seem to tie together to help me make any sense of things.

I'm no stranger to an occasional one-night stand, but when I do need to scratch that itch, I don't usually stumble across

men who rightfully belong on firefighter calendars. I also don't usually drink a lot.

If the look this guy is giving me is anything to go by, we had a very, very good time. In my experience, a guy doesn't give a girl soft doe-eyes and argue about cuddle time unless he's looking for a repeat performance.

But this can't be real, right? That level of adoration doesn't happen after one night. Especially not a wild, no-holds-barred drunken threesome.

I must have been good. Like, really good.

Drunk off my ass but serving Os and showing these two what my throat can do. That has to be it. I'd high-five myself but my arms feel heavy and I'm too comfy to worry about moving.

Although, what the hell did I do with my hands that has my arms feeling like I went too hard at the gym?

Shit, I hope I didn't try to prove how flexible I am. I can rock complex yoga moves with the best of 'em, but letting someone fuck you in crow pose is never a good idea.

Come on, brain, don't fail me now. These are the kind of memories that will sustain us in our old age.

I try to push past the fog in my head and remember what happened, but it's all annoyingly blank. Did I fuck them both at the same time? My ass doesn't feel sore... Damn, what did we do?

I mean, it's not hard for me to imagine falling for a bad boy's smile and some tender touches. But the thing is, I can't pull up a memory of any of that, or drinking, or even going to a bar.

Nothing.

At all.

It's as if last night has been erased from my mind completely.

Worry starts to invade my afterglow. Why is there nothing in my head about either of these guys?

Warm pillowy lips press against my bare shoulder, and my attention is immediately drawn to the trois of this menage who is still snuggled against my back. I shudder, not because it feels wrong or scary or intimidating, but because it feels so utterly right. And yet, my mind is completely devoid of any knowledge of how any of us got here.

What the hell?

“How’s your wolf feeling?” Perth asks, nuzzling the juncture where my neck and shoulder meet.

I look back at him, and my eyes practically bug out when I take him in. If the other man is biker-level intimidating contrasted by soft smiles, then Perth is the naughty boy-next-door with the panty-melting grin.

Although *boy* is a massive misrepresentation of the man behind me.

I’d pin him at thirty maybe, just a few years older than me. He’s got reddish brown hair, a trimmed mustache and beard of the same color, and a face full of freckles that somehow add to his allure. I’ve heard of freckles being called angel kisses, but that title never made sense to me until now. Perth and his gorgeous face have most definitely been blessed by the heavens.

His eyes are a striking amber color, and the look banked in the warm hue tells me that this guy is deliciously dangerous. He stares at me as if he’s familiar with every bit of my body and currently planning to reacquaint himself with several prime inches of it.

I smile dreamily at him, and then what he asked me hits me like a Mack truck.

How’s your wolf feeling?

Your...wolf?

That one word trickles out of him so innocently, and yet it’s the key to unlocking the vault in my head. With a clang,

the door swings open.

Memories of wolves, red cloaks, and pain inundate me. A terrified whimper tears out of my throat, and I scramble to get out from between these two psychos. I clamber to the foot of the bed before falling off in my rush to get away.

Both of them sit up in a snap, reaching for me like I need help. As graceful as a newborn foal, I manage to get my quivering legs under me. I pop up, holding out my hands as if I'm trying to ward off an attack that neither man is currently rallying.

Regardless, my senses are on high alert, my knees quaking, and my arms covered in goose bumps as though this is an actual life-or-death situation. The terror of the memories that just surged through me is so intense that bile creeps up my throat.

I risk looking away to take in my leg. I was bitten. A wolf attacked me last night and tore into my calf...but when I look down, my skin is smooth, and my leg is completely intact. There's not even a mark there.

How the hell is that possible?

Bewildered, I look back at the two men and then take in my surroundings, as if somehow that will help make sense of whatever the hell is going on. There's a soft gray rug beneath my feet and white-blond planks running the length of the room. A wall of windows to my right overlooks a forest with snowcapped mountains in the distance.

Did I fall into a postcard? Is this a Hallmark movie-induced delusion?

Ridiculous notions fill my head as tears creep to the brim of my eyes. Something strange is going on. My hand comes up to cover my mouth as I try to puzzle out when and how I completely lost my mind.

"It's okay. You're okay. You're safe," Perth, the big spoon from my fucked-up cuddle session, reassures me.

"Where am I, and who the hell are you?" I demand, my voice scratchy and brittle from disuse.

The big, gentle gladiator dude scoots closer, the sheet falling down to his waist and revealing the fact that he has perfect six-pack abs and a tattooed chest to go with his massive inked arms. He holds his hands up in a manner that suggests he means no harm and speaks in a tone I'm very familiar with—one I often use to soothe scared animals. "I'm Ruger. And this is Perth. Our den claimed you during the Hunt," he tells me evenly, his honeyed-tea tone trying to calm me against my will.

Shaking my head, I back away toward a dresser, which happens to be closer to the door I just spotted in my periphery.

Neither of the men try to stop me, but they do shoot confused looks at each other. Looks laced with something else, some other emotion that passes too quickly for me to decipher.

"I don't know what the hell that means," I snap. Pulling in a deep breath, I try to rein in my overwhelming fear and frustration; neither is helping me right now.

"The Hunting Ceremony," Ruger offers, his brow furrowing as he studies my face. "You ran in it last night. Our den claimed you," he repeats, but it doesn't make any more sense this time than it did the last.

"I didn't run in anything," I argue. "I was assaulted in a parking lot, woke up naked in the woods, and then I was attacked by wolves."

I look down at my leg again as if the bite I know should be there will have magically shown up to verify my story, but my calf still looks perfectly fine. I even check my other leg just in case I'm confused from all the pain and madness, but there are no bite marks on that one either.

There is no way that was all a dream. I've had nightmares before but not for a long time and nothing like that.

It was real. It had to be. I lift my hand to feel the wound on my head, but it's gone.

Right?

Perth rises from the bed, and I jump back, slamming into the wall behind me at his sudden movement. He looks

disconcerted but thankfully doesn't move any closer.

“What do you mean?” he demands, and there's an angry bite to the question.

“Is this some kind of cult?” I ask instead of answering him. “Did you drug me? Did I imagine the cloaks and the wolves?” I question, but I can't tell if the last query is aimed at them or myself.

I should feel more terrified than I do right now, standing naked in front of two strangers in a house I don't recognize that's surrounded by a vast expanse of land and big-ass mountains. For some reason, I feel less scared and more baffled. It's like the biggest issue here is putting the pieces of the puzzle together and not that these two had their hands all over me and are using words like *claim* and *hunt*.

Maybe it's shock, or maybe I'm still high on whatever hallucinogen they dosed me with. Somehow, I don't feel like I'm in immediate danger, which makes no sense because I was attacked in a parking lot and now, I'm here.

I didn't see either of these two around town before I was attacked though. They certainly weren't in the diner or at the coffee shop. I would have remembered faces like theirs.

I study them, waiting for my sixth sense to ping and warn me away. Nothing happens.

Carefully, I run my gaze all over them, but no ick surfaces or red flags start waving. It's stupid—because what can anyone really tell about a person just by looking at them? But something in my gut is giving me an all clear, and my heart starts to slow while warmth pools low in my belly.

“What the hell is going on?” Ruger asks as he rises from the bed, a pair of maroon sweats hanging low on his hips. “Did you hit your head during the Hunt? Are you feeling okay? She's awake, so it can't be the Fade, right? She shouldn't be awake this soon, though. Could it be?” he asks, turning to Perth.

I knew these two were big, but seeing them both on their feet instead of their backs makes the word *big* feel puny.

Ruger has to be a foot taller than me, maybe more, and Perth looks like he's only a few inches shy of his bed buddy.

Ruger looks back at me. "You're in Howling Rapids. Home of Pack Arcan. Last night was our Hunt. You ran in it. Gannon bit you, which means our den claimed you and freed your wolf," Ruger explains, as though everything he's saying should make perfect sense.

I knew it—a twisted sense of validation winds through me at the mention of a bite...but then the rest of his words start to trickle through to my unhelpfully lethargic brain. Words like *pack* and *your wolf*.

It's a good thing he's pretty, because he's clearly unhinged.

I study him for a moment, my gaze roaming over his wide shoulders and tapered waist. The way his dark red sweats skim the V of his hips. The dusting of hair on his chest is the exact shade of brown as the hair on his head.

"My wolf?" I challenge, swallowing down the hysterical laughter that tries to bubble up my throat. "I'm just a woman. There's nothing wolflike about me, unless you count the winter months when I don't shave my legs. As for your *den*," I tell him, the word spilling from my lips more like a question than the title he used it as, "thank you for your interest in *claiming* me, but I'm going to have to pass."

What medieval motherfuckery is that? Claiming women. No thank you.

These guys *have* to be in some sort of cult. I look around the room for any sign of red cloaks, but I don't spot one.

Doesn't matter. What happened last night was not me joining whatever the fuck they're a part of.

Or was it?

Shit.

Someone needs to call animal control on these assholes because forcing wolves to chase after people is fucked. Of course, I can't say that aloud. I'm also not one-hundred-

percent sure it happened. I think they drugged me, but I don't know.

Fuck. This is so messed up.

"I just wanted a burger," I protest, "not whatever this is..." I gesture between us and then around the room. "Last night was...um...interesting, but I start a new job in a couple weeks, and I really need to get going."

Am I good to drive? Yes, I have to be. I don't have a choice, because staying here is not going to happen.

I inch closer to the door, hoping against hope that these two will somehow let me go.

"You can't leave," Perth decrees, and I pause my advance to shoot him a glare.

"You can't keep me here against my will. That's illegal," I warn, the reminder filled with false bravado. I don't know what I'm going to do if these two behemoths decide they don't care.

"I don't understand," Perth lobs at me, his gaze shooting to Ruger in a silent plea before he looks back at me. "What are you doing here in town if you didn't come to run in the Hunt?"

The accusation in his tone that I've done something wrong here—that I've injured *him* in some way—shocks and angers me.

"Are you kidding me?" I challenge. "Do you honestly think you can *claim* every stranger who drives into town? I was hungry and needed a break from driving. I didn't know that stopping in Howling Rapids meant I was signing my life away. You might want to put that on a sign outside town or something. Better yet, hang a notice at the diner. 'Free kidnapping with every meal.'"

Perth, the redhead, looks even more perplexed. "We don't need a sign, we have wards. You can't even cross the town's limits unless you're one of us. Unless you're an eerie," he counters, like it's something that should be obvious.

I stare at him completely lost. "What *the fuck* is an eerie?"

NOAH



Perth reels back like my question just cracked him across the face. He stares at me, one second slipping into another, and something dawns in his amber eyes.

“You don’t know what an eerie is,” he repeats, only this time it sounds more like a statement and less like a question.

Exasperated, I throw my hands up. How many circles around *I don’t know what the fuck is going on* do they want to make?

“I’m so over not understanding anything that’s being said in this backwards town,” I grumble as I shake my head and rub my temples, my mind drifting to thoughts of straitjackets and wings in a mental hospital. “I don’t know why you two think I’m playing some role in your weird-ass LARPing thing, but let me make this clear: I’m not. I want no part of whatever’s going on here. I want to leave.”

Perth opens his mouth, ready to argue with me, but Ruger cuts him off.

“Okay,” he chimes in. “You’re not our prisoner.” His green eyes are filled with calm assurance, and despite his intimidating gladiator-Viking-like appearance, I relax slightly. “There are some things I think we need to explain. Some details about what’s going on you need to know,” he offers. “Hear us out, and when we’re done, if you still want to leave, I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

Ruger's words make my heart hammer in my chest, and for the first time in the past twenty-four hours, it's not from fear, but relief. He might be a little cracked, but he's clearly not deranged. I can work with that...I hope.

"Now, let's start with getting you some clothes. Would that be okay?" Ruger asks, his brows lifting, concern etched into his bottom lip as his teeth dig into it.

Right, I'm still naked.

How the hell did that slip my mind?

Embarrassment colors my muttered yes in a thousand shades of bright, flaming reds.

I debate for a moment if I should awkwardly try to cover myself up with my hands, but decide against it. I've been arguing with both of them like this, and they've both managed not to make a big deal out of it, so why should I?

Ruger starts pulling clothes out of a nearby dresser. All of the shirts are way too big, but it's better than nothing. I look around and note that this room must be his. It's a surprisingly posh place for the mentally unsound. Then again, I haven't read about too many billionaires who are anywhere close to normal, so...

I try not to shift uncomfortably on my feet when he turns to look at me again, because his gaze is anything but salacious. It looks like he's trying to measure me with his eyes.

"Perth? Could you go grab some of Gannon's pants? I think they might be the closest fit."

Gannon...Gannon is a person? Why did I think Gannon was their pet wolf?

Wait. *A person* bit me?

I fight the urge to start checking over my body again, forcing myself to look calm even though I'm reeling inside. I need to get out of here, and pretending all of this is no big deal is the key to making that happen.

I could have sworn that I saw a wolf bite me. I felt it.

Fucking hell. Whatever drugs they gave me must have been next level. I've never even heard of anything that can make you hallucinate like that.

Perth leaves the room as Ruger tosses me a black T-shirt. I snatch the cotton garment out of midair and quickly don it, though it does little to soothe the chill scattered across my skin. The fall air up here is a different kind of cold than what I'm used to on the East Coast. It's drier, crisper, but also harsher.

"Socks?" I ask hopefully, because a nice pair of fuzzy socks would really help the freak-out that I'm attempting to tamp down right now.

"Catch!" Ruger must have anticipated my question, because he launches a pair of gray ski socks that wobble through the air. I catch them by the toe and notice they have a masculine little snowflake pattern on top.

"Thanks." I hope a bit of politeness softens these guys up so I can ease out the door when the time comes. Agreeing to listen to them was really my only bargaining chip, but I have absolutely zero intention of entertaining this ludicrous bullshit for much longer.

I had a foster brother once who was insane. He brought home five kittens and called them lions, insisting they'd be perfect for his fighting pits. Saving those little creatures from his clutches had taken six weeks and nearly all of my thirteen-year-old wits, but I did it then and I can do it now. I can tell these loonies whatever they want to hear so I can get out of here safe and sound.

I can do this. I can match energy and outcrazy the crazy.

Leaning against the wall, I pull the socks on to find they're long enough to end just above my kneecaps.

Ruger clears his throat and starts coughing. When I glance up, his face is red, and he glances away. Was he checking me out?

Warmth spreads across my chest at the fact that a guy as hot as him would ogle me, but I quickly shoot down that

nonsense.

He's nuts.

We don't get twitterpated over crackpots, I fiercely remind my pulsing vagina—sometimes, she can be a real needy cunt.

“So...this Hunt...it was in the woods right?” I ask, trying to fit the fragmented pieces of last night together.

Ruger gives a brief nod. “Yeah.”

“And there were wolves?” I press, keeping my tone casual, because this detail is the thing I can't make sense of. The part of all of this that's confusing the shit out of me.

Did it happen, or was it a drug-fueled hallucination?

His green eyes study my face like he's searching for something, but I have no idea what. “Yes,” he finally answers.

I'm not certain if his affirmation gives me relief or just heartburn.

It can't be drugs then. Multiple people don't just *share* the same delusion, right? I bite back a snort at that stupid thought. There are a shit ton of religions and other questionable groups that believe all kinds of things. Crazy can most definitely be co-opted.

“Red cloaks?” I continue hesitantly, and I don't know if I want him to agree or look at me like *I'm* the wacko.

“Yeah, but I'd really feel better if you'd let me sit down and explain it all,” he counters when I drop my gaze and try not to lose my shit.

What kind of person sets out innocent women and has wolves hunt them?

A brand-new toothbrush, still in the box, appears just below my chin, and I glance up at Ruger, who's holding it out with a friendly, almost painfully hopeful expression. I slide it wordlessly from his grip, very careful not to touch his skin. I don't really give a shit if my teeth are clean when I burst out of this house and drive like a madwoman for the horizon. But I

give him a placating smile of thanks as if he's being thoughtful.

At that same moment, Perth comes back into the room with five pairs of pants dangling from his arms. "I can't tell which of these is smallest, so—"

He holds his arms out like garment racks, and I reach forward to pluck a pair of drawstring pants from the pile.

"Thank you," I offer like the good little kidnap victim I am.

He nods and for a split second, I'm back in the content cloudy fog I woke in, nothing else visible but those amber eyes and the freckles surrounding them. There's this strange pull coming from him. I don't know what it is, but there's no point looking closer because I need to leave.

"Bathroom's just there." Ruger's big arm swivels to point across the room, and I break away from the trance Perth seems to have put me under.

Scurrying toward the bathroom, I close the door and lean against it like it's the only thing still keeping me on my feet.

"Meet us in the kitchen when you're done," Ruger calls through the closed door. "Go left at the bottom of the stairs. You've got to be hungry. We'll feed you and then we can talk, okay?"

"Okay," I squeakily lie, turning and catching my wild gaze in the mirror. Heavy footsteps move away from the door, and I stand there staring at myself as silence blankets the room.

Running my hand over my forehead, I study my reflection. I was bleeding last night, but just like with my leg, there isn't the faintest hint of any kind of injury.

I stride closer to the vanity and lean over the white and gray marble counter. Earnestly, I examine my eyes. My pupils aren't blown, the blue rings of my irises are clearly visible, so that's a plus. I suspect the flush in my cheeks is hot man related and not the result of some sort of substance working its way out of my system. My long deep brown hair is a tousled mess, and I don't know if it's from sleep or something else.

Actually, the one thing those guys didn't say is that we slept together. In my freak out about all the other stuff, I forgot to ask. I don't think we did, but I'm not sure, and that bugs me, though not in the way it should.

I spent a night in bed with two crazy hot—no, hot *crazy*—men, and no sex ensued? Am I relieved or insulted?

“What in the actual fuck is wrong with you?” I ask my reflection. The bitch doesn't answer.

Pulling up the massive black shirt I'm draped in, I inspect my ribs and the rest of my body. There's no evidence of the attack in the parking lot or any of the wild things I remember from the forest. The way Perth and Ruger were talking made it seem like my memories were as real as I thought they were.

Does their cult train giant wolves to hunt people in the woods?

It sounds ridiculous, but I don't know how else to explain everything.

You don't know a lot of things, girl, my brain snarks at me. As if I need that kind of attitude piled on top of this shit-show of a morning.

I quickly clean up, toss on the sweats Perth gave me, and try to figure out what the hell I should do. I know I said I'd hear them out...but I should just run. Right?

Or should I listen? They technically haven't done anything bad to me since I woke up. They haven't hurt me or threatened me in any way.

Noah, don't be a dumbass, I scold myself. I'm in a strange house with strange men, and I need to get the fuck out of here ASAP.

It doesn't matter how enjoyable they are to look at, I don't owe them shit. Least of all, any more of my time after everything that's happened. For all I know, they could have attacked me at my car.

Cracking the bathroom door, I listen for a hint that someone is nearby. When no one pops out to tackle and tie me

to the bed, I tiptoe across the floor and out into a wide hallway. I spot a wide set of stairs at the end of the hall and carefully slip down them, my socks helping me to move almost silently.

Maybe I can make it outside without them noticing. But then what?

I pause on a landing to peer out a tall window across from me. Warm morning sunshine filters in, but it doesn't do a damn thing to make me feel better. Just as I'd feared, I don't see the cute little rooftops of the town anywhere, only a sea of treetops.

Shit.

This house is in some remote location, and the chances of running outside and finding someone to help me are probably slim to none. My stomach sinks when I realize there's no chance that my Bronco is nearby either.

Fuck.

What the hell do you do when you're trapped in the middle of nowhere with two insane but very friendly and obliging men? This resembles the start of a Lifetime movie a little too much for my liking.

My chest tightens and I have to remind myself that I've lived through things I never thought I could before. Mom's death, dozens of foster homes, shit jobs, and a creeper landlord... I can do this. I take a deep breath and try to mentally find some grit before sneaking down the rest of the stairs.

Perth's and Ruger's voices drift out from the kitchen. Their conversation is muffled but it sounds a little heated. I reach the ground floor without them noticing and stare in awe for a moment before I get my shit together and focus.

Damn. Freakish cult members are clearly well paid.

I try to look beyond the two-story river stone fireplace, the wall of sliders that lead to a forest out back, and the lush but masculine furnishings. This place looks like it's ready to be photographed for some editorial about rich bachelors with exquisite taste.

The kitchen where Ruger and Perth said they'd be waiting for me is around a corner off to my left. But to my right, I notice a tidy little mudroom with a door that I hope leads to a garage. Next to that door—jackpot!—is a metal strip studded with a row of hooks. Keys and fobs dangle from them.

Fuck yes.

Silently, with terrified excitement crackling in my belly, I beeline for the mud room. I scoop them all up as quietly as I can, using my shirt as a basket to hold them and muffle their jangling. I cringe and peek over my shoulder as I carefully open the door next to me. I'm terrified that a squeaky hinge or alarm is going to give me away, but the door swings smoothly and soundlessly when I open and close it.

Turning, I release a deep breath when I spot several cars in a row. Their garage is bigger than my last three apartments combined. There have to be at least a dozen bays filled with sports cars, SUVs, motorcycles, a few trucks, and a handful of other toys like ATVs, snowmobiles, and some jet skis. I would be impressed if I wasn't so eager to get as far away from this place as possible with the hope that I never set eyes on it again.

I look down at the keys and fobs cradled in my shirt and try to spot a name or symbol on any of them that looks familiar. The name Jeep jumps out at me like a beacon, and I press the unlock button. A flash of lights summons me closer, and I pause as I round a massive truck and take in my escape vehicle. It doesn't look like any Jeep I've ever seen. I swear it looks like a big scary Transformer that might come to life at any moment and fight several of the other vehicles in this garage.

Not wanting to waste any more time trying to pick a more practical alternative, I swallow down my trepidation and climb into the tall SUV. I dump all the fobs and keys I stole in the passenger seat and look up just in time to see the door from the house to the garage swing open to reveal an angry-looking Perth.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demands, and my heart feels like it’s about to stampede right out of my chest.

Fuck.

The Jeep roars to life at the push of a button, and—pulse blaring like a radio in my ears—I start jamming other buttons on the visor above me until one of them opens the bay door behind me.

“Come on. Come on!” I shout at the slowly rising door as Perth darts toward me, and Ruger’s massive frame fills up the doorway behind him.

Oh god.

What’s worse than two hot crazy guys? Two *pissed* hot crazy guys.

Tires squeal as I put the Transformer into gear and slam my sock-clad foot onto the gas pedal. The Jeep peels out of the garage, leaving behind the thick stench of burnt rubber. Gravel kicks up around the tires as I dart backwards out of the bay onto the driveway. When I have enough room, I swing the Jeep around, shift into drive, and swerve forward.

If this situation weren’t so fucking dire, it might be fun.

Ruger and Perth chase after me as I speed down a long driveway. My chest jumps each time I check my rearview mirror, but after a handful of terrifying minutes, their determined faces and alarmingly fast strides disappear in my dust.

I can’t seem to stop looking for them though. For some irrational reason, I fully expect them to come tearing up behind me in something even more intimidating than this monster I’m driving. My imagination goes wild, and I suck in a breath as I picture a massive tank-of-a-truck overtaking me, riding my bumper, and then smashing me into a nearby tree.

Adrenaline has me leaning forward on the edge of my seat, leg muscles clenched all the way from thigh to toe. I forgot my seat belt and there’s no time now, since the road curves

precariously down the mountain, with turns so tight I can feel the Jeep leaning from side to side.

Fuck, I'm going to puke.

I glance back in the rearview mirror one last time.

Where the hell are they?

My eyes dart over to the passenger seat, and I realize that I'm an idiot. I swiped all their keys.

A relieved sigh sneaks out, turning into a chuckle at my own expense. I loosen my panicked hold on the steering wheel.

I can't believe that worked—that I actually got away.

I start to laugh harder, not missing the ring of hysteria in it.

Maybe I'm actually going to make it out of the worst night of my life.

I'm pretty sure I'll be in therapy forever, working through all the trauma from this, but who isn't a little fucked-up these days? Okay, maybe I'm a *lot* fucked-up now, but a win is a win.

And I'll take it.

NOAH



Fuck literal and metaphorical forks in the road—they can burn in hell—because I’m facing both of them right now.

“Dammit!” I growl as I slap the steering wheel in frustration and scan the Y shape in the road for the third time. Trees line either side of my two options, and today, I don’t appreciate the colorful foliage. Today, those leaves are an obstacle that prevents me from seeing what’s down either path. I don’t know if I should go left or right, and I’m wasting precious seconds sitting at this stop sign, trying to figure out what to do.

Go to town and report shit or take this car and drive as far as I can get? The problem is, I don’t know if I can find the right road to skip town. And I don’t know that I really want to risk getting arrested for grand theft auto.

Ugh. How is a felony my best option?

Think, Noah, think.

I’m lost on the run, and I don’t want to get more lost, or worse—*caught*—simply because I’m freaking out and not taking the time to consider things.

Fuck it. I have to make some kind of choice.

“Left,” I announce to no one as I turn the steering wheel and press on the gas.

A right turn is what brought me to this crazy-ass town so maybe left will get me back to my car. That is *if* my car is still there. Panic weighs down my chest as I try to think of the odds that my Bronco is waiting for me in the parking spot where I left it.

“Keys,” I groan with anguished realization. I have a fuck ton of them sitting in the passenger seat, but none of them are mine.

I also don’t have my bag, my wallet, or my phone. Fuck, they might as well have lopped off one of my hands. How am I going to manage?

What am I going to do?

My throat tightens as I realize that I absolutely need to find help. I need to find a police station or maybe even a fire station that would call the cops for me. I scrunch my nose and grind my teeth because, well, I happen to be in a stolen vehicle, albeit with a very good explanation. But I don’t know if the authorities will look past the stolen part long enough to hear my screwed-up side of the story. Plus, small towns aren’t known to be nice to outsiders.

Cops make me nervous, but I don’t think I have much of a choice here. I haven’t had a lot of run-ins with the long arm of the law, but the same can’t be said for some of the kids I lived with in the system. There’s just no fighting the cloying, throat-closing sense of paranoia that happens when a cop steps into your house and glares at you before they realize you aren’t the kid they’re looking for...

Get over it, Noah, I scold myself. This is different. I’m going to report a crime.

Shit, but what if they’re in on this? What if everyone in this town, including the police, is living their best cult life?

I think about that for a moment. It’s possible, but no matter how I look at it, *help* seems like the best option. I’ll have to risk it.

Deep breath. Find the police. That’s the plan.

A tinge of guilt settles in my stomach at the thought of Ruger or Perth getting in trouble. I don't want to think that they were the ones who attacked me in the parking lot...but I did end up at their house, and that makes it pretty hard to deny that they are involved in whatever is going down here. Regardless of how kind or earnest they seemed, I don't want to see another woman go through what I just did.

I've been very lucky. The next girl might not be.

I was wronged. Assaulted. I'm going to go report it and have a cop get a locksmith to open up my car so I can get the hell out of Howling Rapids. End of story.

Fuck their kind eyes and their muscles. They deserve whatever is coming to them for this shit.

Having set myself straight, I drive carefully down my chosen road. I take a bend that twists around a thick copse of trees and slopes downward and then—buildings! Thank fuck. It's the town.

The quaint structures almost glimmer magically in the morning light, looking deceptively like a fairy-tale village. Too bad I know all about the poison at the center of this shiny apple of a town.

I suppose I'm technically right about the fairy-tale part. Only this is a Grimms' fairy tale, which means there are no happy endings and it's full of all kinds of dark, lurking horrors instead.

The center of town is pocket-sized, so I'm confident I'll be able to find the police as soon as I pull onto the main road. Five minutes later, I see a sign on a flat-roofed building with the emblem of a shiny brass star surrounded by a circle, signifying a sheriff's office. It's right next to a gas station with a banner saying it sells its own pulled pork sandwiches.

My stomach grumbles angrily at me as I climb out of the Jeep and lock it. I vow to myself to never let my stomach lead me astray again. Grimms' cautionary lesson fucking learned. It's like *Hansel and Gretel* meets some fucked-up version of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Inhaling a sharp, brisk breath of fall air, I tighten the drawstring on my borrowed baggy sweatpants before marching, in socks, up the three steps to the glass-fronted office. It's more picturesque than any other police station I've ever seen, including the fake ones on TV. It's clean, the bricks are painted white, and the bushes out front are sculpted, their beds litter-free. Inside, the chairs in the empty lobby look like they have padding on the seats instead of the adult upgrade version of every hard-as-rock public school chair I've ever sat on.

A TV is playing the news on mute on the far wall, and the muffled thump of my sock-clad feet is the only sound as I walk in. The space is open and strangely inviting—there's an accent wall painted a warm almond color and several landscape photographs that look like they might have been done by a local artist. If it weren't for the sheriff's star outside, I probably wouldn't even know what this place was.

Strike that. I move in farther and the purpose becomes clearer. About ten feet inside, there's an abandoned welcome table with printed brochures on it with clever sayings like "Don't Do Drugs." There it is. Now I know I'm in cop-ville.

Behind that table are some empty desks that look like they might belong to deputies. Modern computers give off a slight electronic buzz as I move farther into the room and glance around. No one is here.

Maybe everyone's in a meeting?

I do see a couple of office doors shut off to the right. The tension that's been building between my shoulders moves up into my neck as I look around searching for a reasonable explanation for why this sheriff's office looks empty.

Zombie apocalypse? That seems like a reasonable option after the night I had.

Muffled chatter and laughter seeps around the edges of one of the closed doors, and I nearly heave a sigh of relief when one suddenly opens.

A short, balding man in a stereotypical gray police uniform emerges. He's carrying what appears to be a breakfast burrito and a steaming cup of coffee.

The smells of bacon, fried potatoes, and melted cheese waft over to me so strongly they're nearly visible in the air, almost like those curling clouds of scent in an animation video, those finger-like scents with come-hither gestures leading cartoon animal villains to their doom.

Immediately, my body screams for food as if I haven't eaten in a week. Maybe it's a trauma response? I stomp down the urge to rip the burrito out of the officer's hand, once again reminding myself of the vow I just took outside.

Bad stomach!

"Gosh, Karen, you know I love potluck day, though I have to warn you off my chili later; it's got five-alarm heat," the bald man calls back through the open doorway before taking a bite of his burrito, closing his eyes, and savoring it.

I wipe imaginary drool from my chin and debate clearing my throat while watching him chew, but I don't want to startle him and make him choke, so I wait. The few seconds it takes before he swallows has me checking over my shoulder once again, neck tingling with worry.

I don't think Ruger or Perth could have followed me here, but what about their accomplices or those roommates they mentioned?

Finally, the man swallows, turning back toward the door. "Can I just say these things are to die—" He cuts off mid-sentence when he spots me, his cheerful hazel eyes widening slightly when he takes me in. "Well, I'll be..." He looks at me almost as if I'm a mirage before shaking himself out of it. Maybe he's not used to people appearing in the early morning to report crimes.

Hopefully not.

Hopefully, what happened to me is not a common occurrence in this town.

“Good morning!” he greets me cheerfully as I read his name tag and see *Fife* written on it.

My throat dries out as I come to a stop in front of his desk. It feels like a burr has just been shoved into my windpipe—prickling and scratching and preventing me from speaking. It’s as though the reality of everything that’s happened since I pulled into this town hits me all at once and the weight of it is sitting on my throat.

The man stares at me, a compassionate expression coming over his slightly lined, middle-aged face as he absorbs the desperation I’m emanating in waves. “It’s a lot, I know. The girls around here all have their panties in a twist. Ellery’s quite a catch and they’ve been gunning for him for years. Rich, good looking, not a shit-for-brains boss like his uncle was, but you—”

My brows lift with confusion. I think this man must have mistaken me for someone else. I don’t know any Ellery... although why does that name sound unsettlingly familiar? “I need to report a crime,” I interrupt, finally dragging the words from my stone-hard vocal chords.

He stops and gapes at me with a mild sort of confusion that clearly doesn’t register the severity of this situation. But when I don’t budge and my face doesn’t crack a smile, he walks forward toward the sign-in desk. He sets down his burrito, right on top of a yellow pad of paper with zero regard for the germs probably crawling all over it.

“What kind of crime?”

His face becomes etched with concern and his brow furrows. He pulls open a drawer and grabs some kind of blank form.

I pull in a deep breath and blink back the tears that start to well in my eyes. “An assault and kidnapping.”

6

ELLERY



Sometimes, I wish I could toss people in handcuffs and leave them in cells the way humans do. Unfortunately, eeries don't operate that way, even for a serious crime—too many magical species have issues with metals.

So even though I should rightfully be home in bed right-fucking-now, waiting for my new mate to wake up, I've been called in to the station. I'm stuck in a conference room the size of a child's sandbox, with two warring factions on either side of a conference table who are making the space feel even smaller. At least they're warring with words now, not a magical brawl in the street. Of course, the power dampening crystals in the center of the table, which resemble glowing, blood-soaked shards of glass, help ensure that.

My chair creaks as I settle back into it, crossing my arms over my chest and stretching out my legs. Getting comfortable feels like surrender—it means I've accepted this bullshit isn't going to be over anytime soon. But if I have to keep listening to this bitching while my back and legs scream at me, I'm going to shift into my wolf and start ripping out throats.

I'm getting fucking old. I never used to get sore after Hunts. Of course, my den and I never claimed anyone before. Never had to fight another den for our mate.

My back throbs from a swipe the Bianchi den got in last night, and it makes me want to do some swiping of my own at these screaming eeries at the table. Luckily for them,

aggravation isn't a justifiable reason for murder in Howling Rapids. And being that I'm the town sheriff and the pack celestial, I can't go around breaking the law, no matter how tempted I might be. Plus, the fucking crystals affect me too, so my violent daydream is just that—a dream.

I sigh and let the buzz of arguing and sniping fly around me like angry wasps. Taking a sip of my disgusting but necessary burnt coffee, I let them get it out of their system. As irritating as the squabbling is to listen to now, it'll be better in the long run.

A fist smashes into the wooden table, creating a hairline fracture. "I'm not going to tell you again, witch! I did *not* kill your familiar," Luisa Monroe snaps, the arrogant glint in her red eyes blazing.

The middle-aged vampire might look like a sleek businesswoman, but she's the opposite of an upstanding citizen. My lips cinch in disbelief as her rant continues. I don't know why she thinks anyone in this room is falling for her shit, but I keep my mouth shut and let her dig herself deeper into the hole her nonsense has already started excavating.

"One more accusation about it and I'll consider it an attack on my clan's honor." Luisa's tone grows smug when she glares at the witches seated across from her. "We both know your coven isn't going to go to war because *you* can't keep your animals in line." She flips her platinum blonde hair off her shoulder and crosses one knee over the other as though this conversation is officially over.

If only.

The witch across from Luisa straightens in her seat, adjusting her patterned shawl embroidered with runes. "I was hoping you'd say that," Shauna Beauchamp declares haughtily, a tinge of her Southern roots apparent in her voice. The eighty-year-old woman doesn't look a day over forty. "I'm not making an accusation, vampire. I'm reporting an act of aggression committed by the Keoh Clan against the Rubenna Coven. And I'm demanding *reparations*."

“Either prove it or get burnt, witch!” Luisa snarls, her fangs dropping in warning.

Shauna stares at her, utterly unfazed by the apex predator’s move. The witch stands slowly and dramatically, ensuring every eye in the room is on her before she speaks.

“Typically, familiar issues are hard to prove,” Shauna starts, a gleam in her deep brown eyes telling me Luisa just walked into a carefully laid trap and doesn’t realize it yet. “But because it’s so hard to train a familiar to channel excess magic on command, the coven values them highly. And after the last time one of us lost a familiar, we all took precautions.”

Luisa’s cocky smile dims infinitesimally.

I set down my coffee mug and slowly roll back my chair. Drawing my legs up underneath me, ready to vault forward if needed and stop the violence I feel brewing. Adrenaline slides down my spine in delicious waves, and I watch closely, just waiting for one of them to give me a reason.

“We’ve all been feeding our familiars hawthorn berries. One quick spell and I can track as little as a pin drop of his blood, even after death.” She pulls a clear chunk of quartz out of the pocket of her dress and sets it on the table. “Permission to perform a tracing spell?”

Shauna looks first to her coven leader, Erica, seated next to her. Erica is younger than Shauna but far more powerful. Unlike the older, more traditional witch, Erica has blue hair and runes branded down her cheeks and encircling her throat like a necklace. Her stare at Luisa isn’t fiery like Shauna’s, but ice cold. She gives a slow, measured nod. And then Shauna turns to me for my approval.

The law is clear. She should have a chance to prove the other woman’s guilt if she can. I nod and reach for the call button to get one of my deputies to remove the bowl of dampeners. But I pause when I notice Luisa go preternaturally still.

“Her familiar attacked me! I had no choice,” Luisa cries.

Shauna's arm shoots out as she points an accusing finger across the table. "I knew it!"

Indignant rage turns her gaze scorching, and her wrinkled features crumple in pained anger as she tries—and fails—to cast a spell.

"Enough!" I bellow, slamming a hand down hard on the table, eliciting a loud crack that stuns the room. "Not another word out of either one of you," I snarl as I stand, my wolf far too close to the surface.

The desire to take their necks between my teeth is hard to resist. I want them slumping and submitting to my authority. Even their utter stillness doesn't feel like enough. Not with the wildness rolling through me even more than normal because right now every instinct in my body is pulling me home, back to my mate. And that makes my rage all the more volatile.

Both the coven leader and the clan representative lean away from me, sensing my aggression, and I take a deep breath to calm myself. Then I glare at Luisa. "Self-defense claims don't work against a tabby cat who was all of eight pounds and had no ability to cast magic on her own. You took advantage of a Hunt night and killed a protected beast. Your disregard for the Accords, the laws of this town, the sacred magics, and the other members of your clan is deplorable. Your actions carry heavy consequences, the least of which is death," I tell the vampire, more than ready to rip her head from her body if that's what the coven decides should happen.

I turn to the coven leader and wait for her to name the terms of their punishment.

"The Accords decree death or equal payment. We call for equal payment," Erica announces, and Luisa gasps, her wide red eyes turning to the clan representative as if he's going to stop what's about to go down.

He isn't.

The vampire sits stock-still in his suit and tie and avoids eye contact with her.

“Done.” I accept the terms. “Luisa Monroe, you are now the property of the Rubenna Coven. To serve as familiar to Shauna Beauchamp for the term of...” I look back to Erica.

“One hundred years,” the coven leader answers.

“For the next century,” I declare, pushing out of my chair at the same time that Louisa wails in outrage.

I press down the call button because now we’ll definitely need the dampeners out of here.

Karen walks in with a grin. My deputy’s been watching the exchange via a video feed from a camera set up in the corner of the room. She looks tickled by the outcome. As tickled as a dry-as-the-Sahara, unfailingly sarcastic witch can be. “Play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” she declares.

I meet her hazel eyes. “Make sure the coven applies all necessary binding magic to their newest familiar before they leave.”

Karen nods, and I turn to the clan representative who’s currently pinning a kicking Luisa to her chair.

“If anyone from the clan so much as breathes a word of retaliation, I will bring the full weight of the Accords down on your heads. Do you understand?” I demand.

The clan representative nods fervently. Honestly, he’s probably glad to be rid of Luisa for a century. I would be.

With that, I leave.

Thank fuck that’s over. Just a few more loose ends...

The second I hit the hallway, another deputy appears. Bucky must have been watching the video feed too. I roll my eyes at the crow shifter and his natural attraction to chaos.

“Crisis averted?” he asks, a hint of amusement in his tone as he falls into step beside me, his hair a rat’s nest of curls.

“Assign a few extra patrols to all vampire and witch properties and businesses in town. Things will be tense for a bit, but they’ll get over it. Fucking feuds,” I grumble.

I need to warn my dad that things are popping off between the clan and the coven, but I can do that on my way home.

How long have I been here already? It feels like ten hours, but that can't possibly be right, it's still morning. Either way, I'm beyond ready to be done, but I'm not quite there yet.

Bucky follows me into my office, leaning against a wall as I sit down to start the paperwork for this clusterfuck.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he offers, a cheeky smile stretching across his slightly scarred face. "I can't believe the prince is off the market. The celestial has been bagged and tagged. Ladies everywhere are weeping into their coffees right now," he goads.

I roll my eyes and shake my mouse until my monitor comes to life. "Don't you have something better to do?"

Bucky shrugs. "No, not really." He walks over to one of my windows and opens the blinds so that light stripes the back wall lined with maps of the town and a landscape portrait my mother took of the mountains. Ignoring his presence and his constant need to move, I start documenting everything that just happened.

Normally, Howling Rapids is a pretty peaceful place. Maybe not quite enough to be termed paradise, but it's a lot calmer than the other eerie strongholds I've been to, especially considering how we've got a mix of magicals as flavorful as an everything bagel.

Most days I love this job, but right now a pulse of longing is tugging me toward the front door of the station. I wish I could walk right out. But the vampires poke at rules the way human hackers prod at computer code. If I give them an inch, they will sink their fangs into it and try to take a mile.

Honestly, the covens in this town aren't much better, but that's the eerie way. We're just a bunch of power-packed predators all playing nice until we don't have to.

"So, what do you know about her?" Bucky asks. "Word on the street is...well, that you're mated, but no one seems to know who the lucky girl is."

I stop what I'm doing and stare at him for a moment. His black eyes flit everywhere around the office, never quite landing on mine.

"How much is riding on you getting some answers?" I press, knowing him entirely too well. Not to mention that I've never met a crow shifter who didn't thrive on a little mischief or the chance to make a quick buck.

He chuckles and makes eye contact, an eager glint now in his beady eyes.

"Go bug someone else," I order, turning back to the report I need to get done so I can get out of here and back home.

Bucky throws his hands up in defeat. "Come on, Sheriff. Give me something. Karen will owe me if I get even a few small details, and I've been trying to get her to go out with me for years."

The snort that sneaks out of me is loud and incredulous. I look at him like he's well and truly lost it.

"Karen would eat you alive," I tell the younger man, completely serious. "If you have a death wish, I can assign you bridge patrol during troll mating season. They'd be downright gentle compared to what Karen would do to you on a good day."

It's clear my warning misses its mark when Bucky just sighs longingly.

"I know. It'd be worth it though," he dreamily admits, and I bark out a laugh. "Come on, Ellery, help a guy out," he pleads.

"For your own safety, I can't," I deadpan. I try to fight the smile twitching at my lips, but I lose the battle all too quickly when he gives me a petulant glare. "Besides, there's nothing to give you because I don't know anything. The Hunt isn't exactly the place to cuddle and chat. It's all primal instincts and taking. She's not awake yet, but when she is, I promise you'll be the *last* person I call."

Bucky huffs and gives me his disappointed dad look. Given the fact that he looks like he's a teenager, the guy just

can't pull it off. I chuckle as he starts to stomp out of the room. Like the petty ass he is, he knocks over my pen holder as he goes, which just makes me laugh even harder.

“Stay away from Karen,” I call to his back. “Oh, and make copies of Louisa’s confession and email them to the covens, clans, and various alphas. Please and thank you.”

Bucky gives me a half-assed salute and, with a pout, shuts the door behind him.

I lean back in my chair and run my hands through my hair, simultaneously tired and wired all at the same time.

My thoughts automatically drift to her. To my mate.

Mate.

The word circles like buzzards in my brain, pecking at me in a way that feels foreign but good.

Funny how if someone had asked me yesterday my thoughts about mating, I’d have said, with a casual shrug, it’ll happen if it’s meant to be, while not really believing it.

Today, my attitude couldn’t be more different. There’s a taut sort of tension in my belly, a fierce need, along with a jumble of other emotions that are about as easy to read as a tarot card for a blind man.

“Damn,” I whisper aloud. And that word sums it all up. Damn—this is crazy. Damn—I can’t believe it. But damn—it feels amazing.

I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t know anything about the stunning woman who’s recovering back home. I don’t know her name, who she is, or where she comes from.

I haven’t gone to the lockers where the runners drop off their things before a Hunt. I could pick out her belongings by smell, but I don’t know if she’d like that. Maybe I should though. She might want to have her stuff or at least her phone charged and waiting for her when she wakes up so she can call her family.

Unbidden, her delicious scent floods my senses like she’s here.

Silky sandalwood, night blooming jasmine, and a splash of spiced musk. It played through my head like a melody the first time I pulled it into my lungs during the Hunt. I couldn't get enough. She smelled like strength, determination, and...home. It was like drinking the elixir of life. My whole world shifted its axis in a moment, and I knew. We all did.

There were over a dozen beautiful, eager potential mates in red cloaks just waiting to be plucked like wildflowers in the forest. Yet there'd been no question about which one was ours.

My eyes had locked on the gorgeous brunette, whose delectable body and soft curves were obvious through the scarlet material draped around her. And that was it. Right then and there, she became the center of our den's orbit.

Now we just need to be patient and wait the week or two it takes before she wakes up.

What the hell am I doing here?

My mate is home, fighting to transition, and I'm here doing paperwork?

Fuck the witches. They got their confession. They can wait for the rest.

I clear my throat and reach for my intercom. Fife and the other deputies can manage everything from here. I press the call button on my desk phone when a knock at my door interrupts me.

"Yes?" I ask, letting go of the button, already knowing exactly who's there. Only one person knocks around here.

Perfect timing.

"Sir, um, I'm sorry." Fife pushes the door open hesitantly, his expression almost confused, like he's unsure exactly what to say. He moves to tuck hair behind his ears, a nervous gesture I'm guessing he's had all of his life, since he's bald and there's no longer anything to tuck.

Why is he nervous?

"Don't be sorry. I was about to call you and ask for help. I need to leave ASAP," I tell him as I stand up.

“Oh. No. Um, please don’t leave right now, sir,” he stumbles over his words as he knots his fingers together. “Something strange is going on.”

I pause and cock my head as I walk around the desk to stand by him. Fife’s a good-hearted guy but he’s definitely not the yellow crayon in the box. He’s a...much duller color.

“Okay. Did the vampires do something else?”

“If only,” Fife awkwardly chuckles before clearing his throat. “I...um...have a Noah Lupescu here, and she’d like to report a kidnapping and assault. I...well...I thought it might be best if she...uh...spoke to you,” he tells me, his volume dropping with each syllable until he’s practically whispering.

What the fuck was in the air last night? Another crime?

Fife’s eyes dart nervously over his shoulder, and all my thoughts of leaving immediately evaporate. “I think you need to talk to her.”

Shit.

I nod and a professional mask slides into place as I follow Fife’s anxious eyes in search of the new eerie who’s been wronged on Pack Arcan territory. Because if there is one thing I pride myself on, it’s the ability to protect the supernaturals who call this place home. As sheriff and pack celestial, I have a dual responsibility to law and order. Howling Rapids is our haven inside the harsh human world. I don’t take anyone messing with our hard-earned sanctuary lightly.

Fife pulls my office door open to reveal a woman standing behind him.

I freeze when my gaze lands on a pair of familiar greenish-blue eyes. Confusion crashes through me as I take in the soft skin, long eyelashes, dark brows, and lush lips of...my mate.

Her eyes widen when she sees me, her pupils dilating in a promising way. But there’s a strain and worry etched in her features. She looks pale, and she’s dressed in clothes that are far too big for her and smell like my den brothers.

What the hell is she doing here? She shouldn't even be awake yet.

Fife moves further into my office, motioning for her to follow him. I look past her, expecting to see Ruger or Perth, but neither are with her.

The back of my neck starts to prickle.

“Sheriff, this is Noah Lupescu,” Fife provides in a hushed, hesitant tone as he studies the confused look stamped across my face.

No.

My stomach drops. Her name and Fife's prior statement swirl together with the force of static electricity and explode like thunder inside my chest. The opposing revelations mess with the frenetic scale of my emotions. Tender joy at hearing her name. *Noah*. Accompanied by a whirlwind of fury because someone hurt her.

Assault and kidnapping—that's what Fife said.

I bite back the sudden snarl that tries to claw its way up my throat.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears and I close my eyes for a millisecond so that I can control the livid wrath writhing inside me.

When I open my eyes again, she's still standing there, hurt and vulnerable. It's heartbreaking.

Fife motions for her to sit down, but I can't seem to make my feet move because a war has been unleashed inside of me. My wolf howls for blood, demanding that I hunt down and attack any and every threat. My neck burns as my entire face grows hot with the need to shift and protect her.

Questions rush me as I temper my emotions. Is she okay? Are my brothers okay? Were they attacked?

I try to quiet the cacophony in my mind and slow the rapid pounding of my heart using a breathing technique that Perth swears by. It takes a few deep breaths before the raging alpha

energy inside of me is reined in enough to let me absorb what Fife is saying to my mate.

“Sheriff Arcan will take care of you. Just tell him exactly what you told me,” he encourages, and Noah nods once and threads her fingers together before setting her hands over her right leg.

She looks so small, so fragile. I battle the urge to scoop her up and pull her into my lap so that I can soothe the line of worry currently marring her brow. Every wolf-driven instinct riding me morphs from vicious outrage to careful protector in zero point two seconds. I want to wrap my arms around her, nuzzle her neck, and assure her that everything will be okay.

Instead, I pull in a deep inhale of her scent and use it to ground myself. I need to make sure that I don't do anything right now that could traumatize her further. And I don't want her to shut down. I need answers and she needs to know that she's safe, that her mates will never let anything bad happen to her again.

I force my feet to move, striding around the desk and taking my seat. I've never had to fight this hard to maintain calm composure in my life.

Fife walks out the door and shuts it behind him, but not before he shoots me a worried glance, one that lets me know he'll be nearby if I need him.

I fucking might. Depending on the words that come out of Noah's mouth, I might.

“Are you okay?” I ask Noah as I settle in my seat and scan her for any injuries. Thank god I don't see anything, or my simmering protective anger might make me shift into my wolf despite myself.

I breathe deeply again and feel immediately calmer when I catch little hints of Ruger and Gannon's scents, with an undertone of Perth, mixing with hers. I don't smell any blood or other wolves, which baffles me even more.

If she smells like my denmates, who could have hurt her?

“Yes? No? I don’t even know,” she answers, sighing before she slightly slumps in her chair like the weight of what’s on her mind is too much to bear.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask, the need to fix whatever has gone wrong pressing hard against my sternum. “There’s an award-winning breakfast casserole in the break room, or maybe a cup of coffee? Full disclosure. Bucky made the coffee, and it sucks,” I add, trying to lighten the tension radiating off of her.

Noah worries her bottom lip, her eyes nervously darting from me to her hands. “I stole a car,” she blurts in answer, a flash of shock flickering through her gaze before her eyes jump back to mine nervously. “I didn’t do it on purpose, I mean, I *did* take it, but it’s not because I’m a criminal. I had no choice. I had to escape,” she rushes to add.

A flush rises in her cheeks as confusion settles over me.

Escape?

“I stopped in town last night for dinner...and some coffee,” Noah goes on, and I find myself leaning toward her without making the conscious decision to do so. “The next thing I know, I was attacked in the parking lot outside of the diner and woke up in the forest wearing a red cloak and nothing else. Or at least, I think that’s what happened. It’s possible I’ve been drugged and the whole thing was some vivid hallucination.”

Noah reaches down and rubs absently at her calf through a pair of sweatpants. My gaze follows the movement as I study the frustration and puzzlement in her eyes.

Her tone ranges from indignant to outlandish and her blue-green eyes snap to mine as though she’s gauging my reaction to what she clearly thinks is an outrageous statement. “I woke up this morning in this fancy-ass house. And these two huge guys tried to convince me that *I’m a wolf*.”

Oh fuck. Oh, fucking fuck. My eyes widen as her statement wallops me.

“That’s when I stole the car and drove straight here. I’ll give it back, I promise, just as soon as I can get into mine and get the hell out of here.” Her voice wavers, like she might be on the verge of tears.

My heart feels as heavy as a compacted lump of metal. All the hope and excitement I had this morning turns from gold into lead.

I grip the arms of my office chair, trying not to rip them off as the reality of this situation becomes crystal clear. I don’t know which part of her statement shocks me more.

Attacked?

Drugged?

Hallucinated?

She thinks she hallucinated the Hunt.

No, even worse...she didn’t call it the Hunt. She called it a wolf attack.

She sits across from me, unaware that every word from her lush mouth is now a piercing arrow. My pulse hammers loudly in my ears, and an invisible, gaping hole opens in my chest.

How is this possible?

She has no idea that she’s an eerie, a shifter, someone with enough magic in her blood to become a wolf.

Which means...she doesn’t know what my den has done to her, what we’ve roused in her blood, or that she’s supposed to be mine...ours. Perth’s, Ruger’s, and Gannon’s faces flash through my mind, and panic churns my stomach.

Fuck.

We finally found our mate, and...she could reject us.

7

NOAH



I try not to stare too hard at the gorgeous man sitting across from me. But *try* is a mile away from *don't*.

A large desk and the last dregs of my dignity are the only things separating me from the sheriff, though I sort of wish they weren't.

Heat crawls up my throat and settles into my cheeks as I spill everything that's happened in the past twelve-ish hours. He doesn't cringe at my confessions or accusations, as wild and unhinged as they sound.

Does that mean he believes me or that he's got a lot of practice dealing with crazy people?

I don't ask because I'm not certain I want an answer.

Instead, I let my eyes glide down from his handsome face until they get stuck, for the third time, on the veins near his wrists. For a second, I catch a flash of black, but then I blink, and it's gone.

Great. Now I'm seeing tattoos that aren't there? And what in this office smells so damn good?

I would question what's wrong with me, but at this point it might be easier to tabulate what's *not* wrong with me.

"The two crazy guys this morning didn't hurt me or anything, but still..." I trail off, annoyed that I feel compelled to add that detail.

A pained look crosses the sheriff's face at my last words. It's there and gone so quickly that I don't have time to analyze it or suss out a cause. He frowns as he runs his strong fingers through his dirty blond hair, and I watch the strands fall back into a perfect wave.

He could easily be a hair model. Then again with his full lips, bright blue eyes, high cheekbones, and the sexy scruff dusting his chiseled jaw, the term *model* in general is no stretch of the imagination. I could totally picture him laid out on a billboard in nothing but boxer briefs and a devastatingly gorgeous smile.

The sheriff clears his throat, and I blink away my ridiculous thoughts.

What is wrong with me? I'm here for help, not to perv out all over the hot cop. Was there Ecstasy mixed in with my hallucinogen?

I try to mentally shake off the hormones wreaking havoc on my system as Sheriff Arcan pulls open a drawer to his left. He extracts a notepad and then plucks a pen from a knocked over cup on his desk. Staring at them a moment, he finally lifts his baby-blue gaze to mine. The compassion banked in his stare makes my breath hitch and my eyes start to sting.

"I'm so sorry that you were hurt, Noah. You should have been safe here." His fist clenches on top of the legal pad, and his voice grows tight when he says, "And I'm so damn angry that someone did this to you." Breathing carefully, as if he has to take a moment to calm himself down, he gives me a regretful smile before he gently adds, "I promise I'm going to do everything I can to make this right."

There's a deep rumble in his declaration that encourages goose bumps to crawl all over my arms. I know it's his job as a police officer to reassure me, but for some reason I believe what he's saying. I can almost taste his pain and anger on my behalf as if they're floating through the air.

"Did you get a look at whoever attacked you outside of the diner?" he asks, pen now poised over the notepad as his intense gaze studies me.

“No. They hit me from behind and knocked me out. But...”

“But?” he repeats softly, coaxing me to open up.

I chew my lip. “I mean, I know accusations are serious. And I don’t know for sure. I need to preface things by saying that. But I had some weird encounters with a few people here last night.”

He nods, concerned. “Tell me about them.”

I hesitate, but he smiles and nods encouragingly. This inherent need to please him rises, and words spill from my lips. I tell him about the cowboy and his friend by the coffee shop, and then explain the strange guys at the diner. I feel like a complete and utter dumbass as I speak, because everything I tell him centers around people staring at me or accidentally scaring me and apologizing for it.

I sound like a second grader who’s tattling on her classmates because they looked at her too long.

For a split second, I consider retracting all my statements, ducking my head, and leaving the room. I mean, I don’t have proof of my head injuries, the bite—any of it. It’s all gone, along with my purse. But...I woke up in a strange house with two men. And everything I saw was so vivid that even if I was drugged, I honestly believe some of it was real.

Studying the sheriff as I speak, I look for any indication that he’s judging me. Or humoring me. Or worse, that he’s a secret member of this weird cult I swear I’ve stumbled into. A cult he should know about if he’s good at his job.

Maybe that’s unfair of me. But I really don’t see how a bunch of cloak-wearing crazies are running naked through the woods nearby without *someone* noticing. But what do I know?

I look around his office, observing the gray-blue walls, the long navy sofa off to the right, and the large oak desk that the sheriff sits behind. There’s a huge map that takes up the wall behind me and a pretty black-and-white picture of the mountains hanging to my left. I don’t spy a red cloak or

anything red in general. That doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it does help me relax a little anyway.

"I know you didn't see who attacked you, but what about your other senses? Any sounds or smells that stood out to you? Did it feel like it was one person, or did you get the sense there were more?"

Focusing my thoughts, I search for answers in my fragmented memories. I try to sift through everything, looking for flashes of clothing or any other little details that might help, but distress and fear have corroded everything. My pain and panic are all that surge to the forefront. I attempt to push, to demand that my brain give me more, but a spiking ache drives through my scalp like a pickax.

Hissing, I grab my head. Sheriff Arcan shoots up from his chair, and the next thing I know, he's crouched in front of me, his strong hands circling my wrists.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

"It's okay. Just breathe."

I pull in a deep breath of his crisp, musky smell. Shit. Someone should weave his cologne into blankets and sell them. I'd wrap myself up in one like a Snuggie and never take it off.

I wince as another flash of pain travels through my skull like a Plinko chip bouncing unpredictably from peg to peg. "I think something is wrong with me," I admit, a moan sneaking out as I rub my temples to try and keep the ache in my head at bay. But my head's inflating, puffing, bloating, and it feels like it's going to pop.

Fuck, it hurts!

The next thing I know, I'm being scooped out of my chair and held tight to the sheriff's chest. A sliver of shock invades the pain because, with my height, men don't just pick me up like I weigh nothing. But that's literally what Ellery does. Worry, and I think a flash of fear, fills his eyes, and he brushes a strand of my dark hair from my face. I resist the urge to lean

into those strong fingers as he carries me over to the couch and sits down with me on his lap.

Before I can ask what the hell he's doing, his head turns and he's shouting toward the door, "Fife! Get in here!"

Less than a second later, as if he was waiting next to the door to be summoned, Fife pops his head in. His eyes go round when he turns to see us, almost as if he's delighted, before it quickly dims to concern.

But Sheriff Arcan's shout to his deputy is frantic. "Call the healer. Call my father. Call Gannon and tell him to come now. I think she might be Fading."

NOAH



If someone else's declaration that you're dying doesn't shoot some fucking adrenaline through your system, I don't know what will. I'm aware that I currently look like something a raccoon would fish out of the garbage, but I must look way worse than I thought for the sheriff to think I'm on death's door.

He better never catch me on day two of my period if a headache freaks him out this much.

Fading?

Something about that word niggles at the back of my mind, but it's quickly buried beneath the throbbing in my head. The sheriff adjusts me on his lap, so the arm of the couch isn't digging into my back, and then lifts his hand to my forehead.

I bat it away like I would a bug.

"What are you doing?" I ask, the ache in my head dulling slightly as I straighten on his lap.

"Checking for a fever," he answers before he lifts his hand to my forehead a second time.

I slap it away again and meet his frustrated and slightly panicked look with a glare. "Do you mind?" I demand, pushing at his shoulder so he'll let me go. "You can't just lug people around like they're dolls because your panic button has a hair trigger."

My ire is undermined by a wince, and this time, when the sheriff cups my cheek, I'm too focused on the pain to put him in his place. Under other circumstances, I might be into this whole caveman shit. The sheriff is a tall guy and I feel dwarfed by his presence in a *holy crap, he's big enough to pin me to a wall and fuck me* kind of way. But he thinks I'm dying, so this is weird.

"Can you tell me what's happening? Is it just your head, or are you hurting anywhere else?" he asks in that calm, professional tone that first responders have.

Too bad *professional* flew right out the window the moment he scooped me up like I was ice cream and he was the cone. I move out of his arms.

He seems to resist for a second and then lets me slide off his lap and land on the couch beside him. Of course, the move only makes the pounding in my skull worse, and I grimace.

"It's just my head. Can I just get some aspirin please?" I half whimper.

"That won't help," he states, his forehead creased with concern as he looks down at me.

Both my hands come up to press against my forehead. I brace my elbows on my knees and curl down, closing my eyes. "How do you know? Is this a side effect from being drugged?" I ask. Drugging is the most logical explanation, considering I don't have any injuries, none I can see anyway.

"Something like that."

His words and tone give me pause, but I can't see past the pressure in my head to figure out why. I squeeze my eyes and press my palms deeper into my temples to try to find some relief.

"Help will be here soon," he assures me before clearing his throat. "I...um...I know some pressure points in your neck and near your temples that might help. Would you like me to...?" He trails off, letting me decide instead of swooping in and grabbing me like earlier.

My yes is desperate. I'd consider letting him taze me right now if I thought it would help. I drop my hands from my head and sit back against the couch, resting my head on it.

His starched gray uniform creases as he reaches over and presses his fingertips to the sides of my head. He massages small circles against my temples, and almost immediately the contact soothes me, and I feel my muscles loosen. I sigh as the pain slowly dissipates, his touch some kind of magical painkiller that has my entire body melting like a popsicle on a midsummer afternoon.

"Where are you from?" he asks casually, probably to keep me distracted and focused on something else other than the ache his fingers have already chased away.

If only he knew how distracted I already feel.

Now that the pain has calmed down, I'm very aware of how close we are on the couch. Our thighs are pressed together, and he looms over me as he rubs relief into my temples. His hands slowly press into my hair, massaging a point above my ear that has me swallowing down a moan. I clear my throat in hopes it will dislodge any inappropriate noises that want to sneak out, and focus on his question.

"Most recently I was living in Paterson, New Jersey. Do not recommend. Great farmer's market, mostly friendly people, but my car was broken into every other month," I ramble.

"Good to know," he tells me, his hands moving to the base of my skull. "Is that where you grew up?"

"No, I grew up all over Michigan. I moved a lot as a teenager, and I guess it's kind of become a habit as an adult too. Although Ashwood Springs will be my first foray into a small town. Any advice?"

"We're not that small. With the outskirts, Howling Rapids is pushing just over twenty thousand."

I wolf-whistle. "I think that's how many people were in my graduating class in high school."

"I said twenty thousand, not two."

“I know,” I mock with a grin. “You’re still in bumpkin territory compared to what I grew up around.”

He laughs and the sound explodes like warm sparks through me. Holy shit, that laugh needs to go on the nuclear warning list. Code orange, or whatever the dangerous one is. That chuckle could take out an entire town, wipe out a city. I feel my chest warm up and grow velvety soft in response to the sound bursting through the air. That laugh might literally be melting my bones.

A loud knock sounds at the door, and I look up, expecting to see the deputy I first spoke to who was just in here. Instead, I find an older man decked out in jeans and a green buffalo-plaid flannel, who bears a striking resemblance to the sheriff, or what the sheriff might look like in another twenty-five years. This man’s hair is darker and has a few prominent streaks of gray in it. His blue eyes are a little less bright than Sheriff Arcan’s, but there’s no mistaking the resemblance.

He scans the room, expression drawn tight. When his gaze lands on us on the couch and he does a quick scan of me from head to toe, everything about his posture softens and a distinct twinkle of excitement enters his expression.

The sheriff drops his hands from my head and stands up. I look down at the now empty cushion next to me and note the loss of warmth and comfort his closeness seemed to offer.

“Ellery,” the older man greets the sheriff. There’s a soft strength in his eyes, the lines etched in his cheeks hint he smiles a lot, and somehow a sense of safety radiates from him.

Ellery? Why do I know that name?

“Hey, Dad,” the sheriff answers, striding over to what I assumed was a filing cabinet. He opens it and I realize it’s a mini fridge when he pulls out a few waters.

“Noah, this is my dad, Morgan Arcan. Dad, this is Noah—who I just learned is a naif.”

Morgan Arcan’s smile drops from his face so fast I almost look for it on the ground. His shocked gaze darts from his son

to me and then back again as though he's trying to understand what Ellery just said.

Unfortunately, I'm in the same boat because I have no idea what a nay-f is. Maybe it's cop lingo?

Ellery hands me a bottle of water, and I stop caring about whatever he just called me because I realize I haven't had anything to drink since coffee last night. I open it and take a deep pull and then desperately drain the whole thing in four large gulps. So good.

Damn, I guess I didn't realize how thirsty I was.

Swiping at my lower lip with my hand, I remove any remaining water droplets. Ellery smiles and hands me the other bottle he's holding, the one I assumed was for his dad.

I stare at him in awe for a moment, as though he's proposed instead of simply offering hydration. Then I force myself to blink and look away before I blurt out something utterly inane, like "I'll have your babies" or "Is that a water bottle in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

"Well, this definitely isn't Fading. Not sure what it is though." Morgan addresses the first part of his statement to Ellery before looking right at me. "Have you had anything to eat or drink since you woke up?"

I shake my head as I drain bottle number two.

My brow furrows and I watch the sheriff's dad more pointedly. He could have just been showing fatherly concern, but something about the question seems odd. I am relieved that someone here doesn't think I'm on death's doorstep though.

"Thank fuck it's not the Fade." Ellery gives a sigh of relief. "Noah, does your leg hurt?"

Before I can answer, the door unexpectedly swings open again.

I jump to my feet in alarm and then gape when a drop-dead gorgeous man strides in with purpose. His T-shirt and jeans hug every decadent inch of his tall, well-built frame. The light gray color of his shirt matches the hue of the man's eyes

perfectly and complements his warm skin tone and dark brown hair. He moves toward me but stops when the sheriff steps forward and blocks his path. They stare at each other for a moment, but I'm distracted by the fact that the man who just strolled in here isn't wearing any shoes.

Dove gray eyes find mine over the sheriff's shoulder. Strangely, they're swimming with relief, and I suddenly find it hard to breathe as I dumbly stare back at him.

"You're okay?" he asks, somehow sounding both stricken and grateful.

He smiles at me when I continue to just stare, and holy shit, that smile is nothing short of resplendent. It's the rays of sun breaching the darkest clouds, warming and illuminating the world despite the storm.

Ellery clears his throat, and the gray-eyed god's stare flashes from me to the sheriff. The new man's smile dims and then drops completely.

I practically watch him build a wall, brick by brick, and shutter his reactions behind it.

A strange part of me protests the loss, as though something vital and precious was just stolen from me and hidden away under lock and key. I don't understand what just happened or my reaction to it, but I want to take a sledgehammer to this man's defenses and crawl through the cracks to find *him* again. I feel like I need to.

"Noah, this is Gannon. He's...had some experience with what you're going through, and he's going to help us explain some things," the sheriff tells me, gesturing to his father and then to himself.

I look back to the barefoot guy and find his expression is now glacial. A shiver runs down my spine as I fit the name Ellery just gave me with the man's face.

Gannon.

Wait.

My head snaps to Ellery and my eyes go wide with shock, my heart suddenly hammering in my chest as dread creeps down my throat and spreads through my chest.

He just asked me if my leg was okay. Except, I never told him where I was bitten. I mentioned the wolves and that I thought I'd been bitten, but I never said where.

Fear seeps into my limbs as I look from Ellery to Gannon to Morgan Arcan. They're blocking the door, so I start backing up to get closer to the windows behind Ellery's desk. All three men take a concerned step toward me at my alarmed reaction, and I stumble back until my shoulder blades smash into a wall.

Wedging myself into the corner of the office, memories bombard me from when I woke up this morning. Ruger and Perth were talking about an *Ellery*—who'd just left before I woke up—and a *Gannon*—who...bit me.

Holy fucking shit.

Betrayal swarms me like cloying jellyfish, stinging me relentlessly for not making the connection sooner.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

They're in on it. They're part of the cult, and I'm trapped.

NOAH



My breath hitches and my pulse flutters in my neck so rapidly I can feel it. A prey animal captured by three deadly predators, my heart rattles my ribs.

Ellery raises his hands and gentles his voice, bending until he's eye level with me as he moves behind his desk, blocking my access to the windows. "It's okay, Noah, you're safe. We're going to explain everything. No one is going to hurt you, I swear it."

Panic claws at me because he has to be fucked in the head if he thinks I'm going to believe him. Then again, *of course* he's fucked in the head; he's in the same cult that attacked me last night. And now I'm cornered in a room with him and two other big-ass crazies I couldn't fight on my best day.

Doesn't mean I won't fight though. I will not go down easily, and they're not going to catch me from behind this time.

A bestial snarl fills the room, the sound a vicious warning. It isn't until I feel a strange rumble moving through my chest that I realize the sound is coming from *me*.

Shocked, I slap my hand over my mouth to silence the hair-raising noise, a terrified squeak sneaking out of me as the growl abruptly cuts off.

Morgan Arcan chuckles like he thinks whatever the fuck I just did was adorable.

Bastard.

I level him with a cold glare, which only seems to amuse him even more.

A strange cloud of *relax, it's going to be just fine* blows over me and muddles my thoughts the longer I stare at him. I can feel an unwelcome sensation of *warm fuzzies* constrict around me, and I mentally bat it away like I would a swarm of mosquitos.

“What the actual fuck is going on?” I demand, removing my eyes from the older man and training my scowl on Gannon and then Ellery. At least they look appropriately remorseful right now instead of amused.

“Just let us explain,” Ellery hedges, and I scoff.

“You sound just like the other two cult crazies from this morning,” I snap at him.

“But of course, he does, they're all somehow in on this... whatever this even is.”

As if he can hear my wild thoughts, Ellery holds up a placating hand. “Nothing bad is going on. We're not a cult. I promise everything is going to make sense if you'll just hear us out.”

“So, get fucking talking!” I bark at him, so fed up with all of this I want to cry.

The drumming in my head starts again, and color seems to leach from my vision, making everything look strange. Hysteria surges inside my body. It squeezes my throat, making me feel like my veins are expanding and contracting, compressing so tightly that my blood can't get through.

I'm dying.

Is that what this is?

A dizzy sensation ripples through me, and I don't know if I'm fading like Ellery thought earlier, but I can feel that my body is on the edge of collapse, because my heart suddenly stops its rapid beating and gives a thick, sluggish throb.

Holding myself upright suddenly seems far too difficult. I reach for the walls behind me, fingertips skimming the paint on either side of the corner I've tucked myself into. The texture of the wall feels like sandpaper against my fingertips.

"You're special, Noah," Ellery says softly.

No.

No!

That's what cult leaders or psychopaths spout—right before they peel off your skin and wear it as a shirt.

"In fact, everyone here is special because we can do something that humans can't," Morgan adds reassuringly, but I feel anything but reassured right now.

"Humans?" My voice cracks on that word, which barely gets out before my throat snaps shut and I suddenly can't breathe.

"You're not human. And what you're feeling right now is the first sign that you aren't. You're eerie. You're a wolf shifter," Morgan Arcan continues. His voice is placid and soothing, reminding me of a smooth lake, though his words gouge a hole through my entire reality.

Ridiculous.

Insane.

It can't be.

But goose bumps ripple and rise, and the back of my neck tingles as if someone's blown on it—because a tiny part of me believes...he might be telling the truth.

Before I have time to fully process why, the door behind Gannon swings open, and an older woman in pink scrubs carrying a black medical bag strides confidently in. I whimper at the sight of her.

How can I possibly take in anymore right now? I'm hemmed into a corner and considering the possibility that everything I saw last night wasn't a hallucination. I can't take anything or anyone else—

She sets down her bag on the desk and raises her hands as if to show me she's not a threat, but that only sets off all the red flags, because every damned person in this town has tried to disarm me this way, and I keep ending up hurt.

"Hello. I'm Imogen. I'm a healer." Her gaze sweeps over me, assessing me clinically before she turns to Ellery. "This definitely isn't the Fade. But she looks like she's about to shift for the first time and can't quite get there." Turning to Morgan Arcan, she asks, "Alpha, permission to assist her magically?"

Morgan Arcan nods just as Ellery adds, "She's a naif," repeating the term he used earlier.

Imogen grimaces in response and it looks like she's biting back a string of expletives. Or I might be projecting, because right now I'm filled to the brim with curse words and fear and anger.

When she turns a pitying expression my way, I want to smack her.

All I want is for someone to tell me none of this is real and let me leave.

I just want this to be a vivid nightmare.

But, instead of telling me what I want to hear, Imogen says, "I'm here to get you through your first shift, okay?" The woman's voice has the low tone of a chain-smoker. And everything she's saying sounds as unappealing as a cigarette.

"First shift. What the motherfuck?"

"You're about to shift into your wolf for the first time. It's going to hurt, and it's going to be confusing, but we'll be right here with you. We'll get you through it. And we'll show you how to be the shifter you were always meant to be," Morgan Arcan speaks steadily.

I start to shake my head, but Ellery chimes in gently, "Noah, the process has already started. She's just here to help."

Process. What fucking process?

“Unfortunately, you’re too far in right now, so the discussion will have to come after—” Imogen cuts herself off and hastily chants a few words I can’t understand. Then a pearlescent mist glimmering with blues and yellows rises from her palms and starts to fill the room.

Holy fucking shit!

I stare at it, gobsmacked, completely at a loss about what I’m seeing.

The mist crawls closer but, as much as I don’t want it to touch me, there’s nowhere for me to run. A warm tingling sensation washes over me when the strange haze makes contact. Befuddled, I remain frozen until the warmth morphs into a blaze, and the blaze becomes scorching.

I scream as I start to burn from the inside out.

The mist immediately rips away from me like some beast on a leash, and the pain ebbs. I swallow a sob.

Panicked shouting fills the room, and everyone rushes toward me. I raise my arms to try and stop them from coming any closer, and that’s when I notice something sliding beneath my skin.

Horrified, I lift my hands only to see my veins darken from pale bluish green to jet black.

“Why isn’t she shifting? What’s wrong?” someone demands.

“She has a block on her. I can feel the magic woven into her aura. I didn’t even think to check. We have to stop the shift, or it could kill her,” Imogen states.

Snarls fill the room, and the black inside my veins starts to rush up my arms. I scream again and it morphs into a drawn out, yowling note.

Oh god, what’s happening to me?

“Calm her down to stall her shift. I have a spell, but I need a few minutes,” the woman orders, moving to the desk where she starts pulling things out of her medical bag.

“Noah. It’s okay. Just relax...” Ellery encourages, and if I could stop freaking the fuck out long enough, I’d show him exactly what I think about being told to relax while I’m fucking dying.

“Let’s take a deep breath and calm down a second,” Morgan tells me, only I can see him right in front of me, and his mouth hasn’t moved.

No, instead, it’s as if he’s crawled into my head, his intense gaze never leaving mine as the echo of his words plummets under the weight of my other panicked thoughts. He didn’t mutter those words aloud at all, and yet I heard them crystal clear inside my mind, which is *not* possible.

Nothing in this room right now is possible.

“Breathe with me. In and out. In and out.”

Those warm mental fuzzies from before are back, buzzing around me, and I try to hit them, claw at them, bite at them, but there are too many. In a great swarm, they land, covering me and somehow wrapping me into a cocoon, holding me tight.

“Feel that? You’re safe. This town is a safe space for people like you and me. Like my son and his denmates. I need you to trust me...trust us. We’re here to help you.”

But something about this extra presence inside my head, the calm that’s not my own, the uninvited voice trailing across my synapses, and most of all that phrase, “I need you to trust me”—it all lights a fuse that I didn’t even know existed. A short one that leads to a bomb I had no idea was buried inside my brain, but then it detonates, and I screech, “Get out!”

“Shit,” Morgan Arcan gasps, stepping back like my words were a physical blow.

“What’s happening?” Ellery looks at his dad.

“She shut down the mental link,” he answers, seemingly shocked. “And she’s too strong for my alpha influence to work when she’s not connected to the pack yet.”

“Noah,” Gannon calls to me at the same time Ellery swears and turns back to me. “Noah,” Gannon commands again, and something in his tone has my frantic eyes snapping to him. “Look,” he tells me, lifting his hand so I can see.

At first I don’t know what he’s trying to show me, but then I see the black line moving over the hard muscle of his forearms, and I’m thunderstruck by the sight.

“That’s right,” he assures me, his voice confident and calm. “I have them too.”

I stare at him, dazed, not sure what to think about anything. Somehow, Gannon feels familiar and comforting. It’s the look of a long-lost friend even though we’re strangers. A strange swell of security overtakes me, and it’s different from whatever Alpha Morgan pushed at me earlier. The calm doesn’t seem to emanate from outside myself, but from within. Or maybe it’s just shock kicking in. Perhaps my body’s worn itself out and my well of panic has run dry. In any case, my turmoil recedes for a second, and I blink at him, wondering what the hell is wrong with him. And with me.

“I was seven when I got into a fight on the playground at a human school,” he admits stiffly. “I got so mad that I could feel it through my entire body. My heart started racing. It was hard to breathe—thought I’d puke. I was holding a basketball and suddenly, it felt like it had grown spikes. My skin was so sensitive it hurt to touch the ball, so I dropped it. Then black lines appeared on my arms. On my face. Kids started screaming, and I ran.”

His words somehow manage to navigate through the debris-field my mind has become; they hit home with startling clarity. He’s describing my symptoms exactly.

But face?

My hand goes up to my own cheeks, and I wonder if they’re marred by jagged black lightning bolts. A choked sob erupts from my throat as I picture everything Gannon’s saying. A wave of sympathy somehow manages to shove its way into the turbulent sea of other emotions and sensations currently

swamping my senses. I can't imagine experiencing this as a child. I hate that I'm feeling this way now.

"I don't want this to be happening. I just want it to stop."

"It will stop soon," Ellery promises, like he just heard my thought. "Imogen is almost ready."

I look at Imogen and notice she's mixing liquids together in bowls on Ellery's desk. Those do not look like medicines. She's using fucking mortars and pestles, and one of the liquids glows like it's radioactive. Immediately, I start to freak out again.

Tension rockets back through me, and three pairs of intent eyes stare at me as a wild, volatile scent permeates the space. It's a bitter smell that makes my shoulders curl up closer to my ears.

"Shit. She's panicking again. We need to do more. Show her, Gan. She needs to see that it's okay. She needs to understand what's happening," Ellery barks, the command layered with an undertone of undeniable power that has Gannon's features twisting with frustration.

He looks at me, anger now brimming in his gaze. "Watch, Noah," Gannon orders. "Watch me." His dove-gray eyes once again meet mine. I swear I see sorrow banked in them before he blinks, and his human eyes disappear altogether.

Astonishment seizes the air from my lungs as a glowing gray, animalistic iris fills Gannon's socket from one blink to the next. The muscles in his face and neck tense and grow taut with strain before the veins beneath his skin blacken as though a shadowy poison is moving quickly through his system.

Oh my god.

The temperature in the room drops before the horrifying sound of cracking bones fills the room and Gannon starts to somehow fold in on himself.

Everything I thought I knew about the world—science, humans, and animals—vaporizes in my mind as I witness the man before me shatter, shift, and bend until he's no man at all.

He rips through his clothing and emerges as a massive black wolf whose head is level with my shoulders.

Wide-eyed and aghast, I stare into the light-gray eyes of the beast before me. Eyes that are the same color as Gannon's. My knees give out as I take him in, his thick dark coat, the flash of white teeth in his mouth, and the long pink tongue that stretches out to lick his muzzle as though he's trying to convince me that there's nothing to fear. Torn scraps of what was once a T-shirt and jeans hang from his lithe form and pool beneath his paws.

Flashes from last night bombard me. Running through the forest. The unusually large wolves tracking my every step. The fight. The bite...from a huge black wolf.

Holy fucking shit, it was real. All of it.

GANNON



If Perth were here, he'd call this a full circle moment, one of those times in life where you revisit something that haunted you and make your peace with it. Ruger would grunt his agreement, Ellery would offer a neutral shrug at our denmate's statement, but me...nope. Nothing about this scenario helps me make peace with anything I've been through as a naif.

There's nothing warm and fuzzy about the way Noah is looking at me. The fear in her blue-green gaze, the sorrow, the distress... It's all aimed at me.

This is a fucking disaster.

Imogen dips her finger into each of the mixing mortars and draws runes on the surface of the liquids there. Each symbol glows a different color before dissolving into the liquid and changing the hue until it matches the runes. She reaches in and grabs a plastic cup from a sleeve in her medical bag before pouring the contents of each mortar into the cup. The healer looks like a human bartender layering some cocktail.

"Here, take this, it will dissolve what's left of the block on you. It'll take a few days to fully break down the binding magic, so don't attempt to shift until then."

Noah doesn't take the cup from Imogen's outstretched hand. She's too busy staring at me. And the look in her eyes is a lethal mixture of terror and disgust.

Fuck.

“Are you kidding me?” Noah asks, the retort is shaky but so loud it fills the room. “Why the hell would I do anything you say? I don’t want this. Any of it.” She gestures to herself and then to me.

The slice of her hand through the air might as well be the slice of a knife right through my chest.

“I understand that this is a lot,” Imogen counters, her eyes sympathetic but her voice firm. “But whether you want to be a shifter or not, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s happening.”

“Fuck. You.”

Noah’s thought is a yell that echoes painfully inside my skull, and I can see Ellery and Alpha Morgan both tamp down their reactions to it.

Imogen continues serenely because she didn’t just get a brainful of Noah’s pure hatred. “If you try to shift with that block still on, it *will not* be good. If by some miracle it doesn’t kill you, it will irreparably damage you. Don’t be stubborn. Don’t let your fear make bad decisions for you.”

Noah looks from Imogen to the cup in her hands. “And how do I know *that’s* not going to hurt me?” she questions, gesturing to the cup. “And don’t ask me to trust you, because I don’t trust a fucking word out of anyone in this room.” If she could light us all on fire with a look, she would.

“You weren’t drugged, Noah,” Ellery interjects calmly. “I know you thought you were, and all of this probably seems weird as fuck, but last night wasn’t a drug-fueled hallucination. It happened. We’re not trying to trick you. You were attacked and we’re going to find who did that to you. Everything after that was a massive misunderstanding. We’re trying to fix it, but we can’t do that until you’re safe.”

Her face is pale, plump lips sucked into a thin line, and her fingers keep clenching and unclenching in front of my eyes. Her agitated alarm gives off a scent like iron, sharp and cold, and it burns the rims of my nostrils.

She’s petrified and pissed.

Dammit all to hell.

I can't help but feel like we may have lost Noah before we ever even had her.

I walked in here so worried, worried but hopeful. Now, it's all slipping through my claws, and there isn't anything I can do about it. I shove aside the wistfulness tightening my throat to ask myself the more important question.

How is Noah going to accept a mate claim when she's a naif?

"How? How is this happening?" Noah asks, the anger in her voice leaking out like a sieve and leaving a hollow ring to her tone, one I feel in my gut.

I drop my head, hoping to communicate that she's safe, that I'm still me whether I'm wearing fur or skin. But I don't miss the way she tenses at my movement instead of relaxing and sensing my intention.

Logically, I know her instincts are going haywire. I remember all too well the war that went on inside me as my new wolf battled with every human urge and impulse I had. Terrifying was an understatement.

I try to picture last night from her perspective. Running, screaming through the woods, from wolves snapping at her heels. It must have been her worst nightmare. *I* must have been her worst nightmare.

I bit her.

Shit.

No wonder she punched me.

Like a fucking fool, I didn't stop to question anything. I simply gave in to the driving need to claim her as ours because that's what she was supposed to be. I knew it from the first second I inhaled her scent, familiar and yet foreign.

That moment—for me—was victorious. I felt everything click perfectly into place when I sank my teeth into her calf. It was everything, knowing I was the first to mark her. We were destined to be connected from that moment on—god, that

sounds stupid, and it turns out it *was* stupid. I thought I was making all our dreams come true.

Instead, I've ruined her life.

A dark, burning taste creeps up the back of my throat as I realize what I've done. I've pulled her into a world she knows nothing about and hung a timer around her neck that's counting down to something even worse than the beast I've just shown her.

"One of your parents must be an eerie," Morgan explains to Noah, our alpha's voice low and steady, trying to push serenity on all of us, not only with his cadence but with an alpha's magical ability to affect mood. "It's the only way to pass the ability on. Some of us can access our eerie faculties naturally, while others require a propellant. Like for witches, there's a ceremony. For shifters, it's a bite."

For me, it was a goddamned feral neighborhood dog who turned out not to be a dog.

"A bite? You mean an attack," she challenges.

"No, just a bite. What wild animal do you know that would stop after a single bite?" Alpha Morgan counters.

Noah's lips twist and her eyes glance away because she doesn't like the truth of his point.

"If your eerie blood is strong enough, a propellant bite unlocks your true power. That's what's happening to you," Ellery expounds, building on his father's words.

They don't explain further even though there's a hell of a lot of difference between a propellant bite and a mate claim bite. Maybe they think it's too much for Noah to handle. Maybe it is.

Noah stares at the cup in her hands and shakes her head as though she wants to argue, to disagree, to cling to human reality instead of accepting this strange new world. Who could blame her?

The seconds tick by with painful slowness.

Each moment makes me more certain she's powerful. She's holding off her shift and resisting what I'm certain are mental commands from Ellery and Alpha Morgan to drink the potion in her hand. Plus, I've never heard of a wolf recovering this quickly from a bite, whether it came from a mate claim Hunt or not. It took me eight days to recover from mine. Whatever bloodline she has, it must be strong.

I'm about to mindspeak that tidbit to Alpha Morgan when the door behind me opens right into my tail.

Dammit!

The smack makes a sting crawl all the way up my spine as I scurry to one side to make space for the newcomer.

I notice Noah sliding farther behind Ellery, using his body as a physical shield to avoid me. She doesn't trust me, but clearly—on some level—she trusts him.

A bitter feeling crashes into me, the kind I thought I'd set aside a long time ago. Jealousy makes my lip curl and reveal a fang, though as soon as I realize what I'm doing, I tamp down on the instinctive wolf response. I don't want to scare Noah any further. But screw Ellery for making me the monster in her eyes.

Fuck. I need to leave.

She's scared and I can tell I'm only making it worse.

Fife pokes his head in and looks at Ellery. "Sheriff, the rest of your den is blowing up our phones."

"*On it,*" I mindspeak to Ellery before he can say anything. It's the perfect excuse to get the hell out of here.

I turn and nose past Fife, who steps aside to let me out. The scents of the hallway come flooding in, a million different little strings of scent that pull at my wolf senses. But all I really smell is relief.

I don't want to be in there.

I don't want to see what happens next.

I know exactly what Noah is going to do—tell them all to go to hell—and I don't need to witness it.

Stepping out into the hall, I weigh my options. I could shift back to my skin. There's a locker room on the other side of the precinct where I grabbed a T-shirt and jeans when I first got here. There are always extra uniforms and back-up clothes available, but I don't head there. I don't want to have to put on a calm face and fake smile at Ellery's deputies as I pass. And Bucky would try to talk my ear off. The urge to punch him might be too strong to resist.

So, instead, I run down the hallway, skirting around people. I bolt past Karen's office and the sharp scent of nail polish. The break room smells like a microwaved lunch and regret.

And damn if I don't have some fucking regrets right now too.

My nails scrape against the polished cement floor, clicking as I speed toward the massive flap cut into the door at the end of the hall for deputies who return to work in shifted form. I crash through it.

The breeze outside slaps against my fur, ruffling it, clearing away all the muddled scents from indoors and quelling some of the jumbled feelings in my gut. I smell the electric buzz of an incoming storm in the air, the refreshing scent of the clouds building up their arsenal of water droplets, crisp grass, the whiff of clay from the earth.

I start to run.

All my worries and fears stream out behind me and fall away as I put on a burst of speed. I get into a rhythm, where the tightening of my muscles is the only thing I concentrate on. I avoid people and head deeper into the forest, letting the run wipe away my confusion and concerns. The faster I go, the deeper into the woods, the better I feel. But I should've known where I'd end up.



I stand on the patio in front of our double front door, panting as I stare at it, my heart pounding a steady rhythm in my chest from my long hard run. Giving myself a moment to catch my breath, I take in the massive, modern cabin.

The doors before me are twice as tall as normal doors and covered in raised rectangular wooden panels. I lift my paw and press the panel near the base. It slides over and a camera lens appears, scanning my face. Thank fuck facial recognition software can be programmed to work on wolves. I stand perfectly still and seconds later, I hear the slide of the bolt and the snick of the latch as the lock disengages. I use my forehead to nudge it open and walk inside.

All the smells of home accost me as I make my way up to my room. I would normally find the combined scents of my denmates and the things we love to do inside the walls of our space comforting, almost like an embrace every time I walk through the door. The kitchen always has some lingering scent from Ruger's concoctions. Perth's plants under the living room windows and in the dining room always smell like a friendly hello. Ellery is always tracking in different scents from the cars and toys he tinkers with in the garage. Those are the smells of home. The smells of my den.

On another day, I'd enjoy them. Today, everything feels suffocating. It's all gone wrong so fast. and I'm reeling, trying to determine what this means for us.

After I bound up the stairs and through my doorway, I pass the hunter green comforter on my bed, noting that some of my dresser drawers are haphazardly cracked open, a pair of sweatpants spilling halfway out of one. My nose twitches, not liking things to be out of order, but I realize quickly what happened. Noah had on my favorite pair of sweats.

Well, this is just great. I'll probably never see those again.

My eyes close for a second against that painful reality and open again, staring at the dresser my denmates felt comfortable enough to rifle through.

We're so fucked. Losing Noah is going to destroy everything. And we *are* going to lose her. The ice-cold fear

and revulsion in her eyes told me everything I need to know.

Shifting back into my skin, I try not to think about how Noah's face would look if she were here to watch the transformation from monster to man. I try to clear away the scent of her anxiety, the tang of which still burns my nose, as I head for my shower. I need to scrub her alarm and torment from my skin, banish the despair that flooded her gaze from my mind.

I'm halfway through my shower when Perth and Ruger push through the door.

Shit. I forgot I was supposed to update them.

Perth's freckled fist pounds on the glass shower door, and I don't react other than to roll my eyes at the redhead as I continue soaping up my legs.

Perth pays absolutely zero mind to his invasion of my privacy as he yanks open the door and rubs his beard in a distressed manner while he asks, "What the hell's going on? I thought you were meeting Ellery? Is Noah okay?" Though he's asking questions, they come out as barked demands as I step under the spray and wash soap from my hair and body.

"What's going on is our mate is a naif. She has no fucking clue about shifters or eeries or anything."

"Yeah, we kind of gathered that," Ruger snarks, and I shoot him a glare.

"She tried to shift but couldn't," I tell them, and I watch their frustration bleed into dismay. "She has a magical block on her somehow. Which means there's more going on than any of us knows. But none of that probably matters because Noah is freaked the fuck out and she's going to bolt the first chance she gets."

"You don't know that," Perth argues.

"I do, and if you had seen what I did in Ellery's office you would too."

Ruger leans against my countertop, the mirror fogging up behind him, his face ghost pale. "Do you think it was the

Bianchi den that put a block on her? That's who was after her when we stepped in and claimed her."

"I don't know," I admit, smacking the dial and turning the water all the way to scalding. "Did you two scent any other dens nearby? Anyone else hunting her?"

"No," they both answer in tandem, their gazes now far away as they wrack their brains for any detail that might help all of this make sense.

"Like I said, it doesn't matter though. Noah is a naif. She can barely accept what she is, let alone accept a mate claim by the next full moon. And we all know what that means."

Silence billows and swells like the steam from my shower.

I shouldn't have come home. I should have kept running until my legs collapsed under me from exhaustion, leaving me too tired to think.

"She's just in shock. Once she accepts things—"

I shove my face out of the spray and wipe my eyes clear so that I can glower at Ruger. His posture might be defensive as he leans against the counter—ankles and arms crossed—but his expression is hopeful, because that's who he is.

I need to strip him of those delusions quickly, or he's going to end up more broken than any of us knows how to fix.

"It's not going to happen," I tell him outright. It's up to me to rip off the bandage, because apparently I'm the designated asshole around here. "When she saw me shift..." I trail off as the phantom scent of her fear hits me once again. "She's not just terrified of all this, she's disgusted."

"But you know what that's like," Perth states, standing off to the right and blocking my access to the towel rack. "You can help her."

Fuck me. He sounds just as optimistically blinded by Noah as Ruger is. "It's not the same," I counter as I smash my hand into the knob and roughly twist it until the water turns off. So much for the shower easing some of my tension; my denmates have just brought it all raging back. "For me, the shifting was

the biggest issue. But she has the shifting to contend with, our claim, pack dynamics—”

“You had to deal with pack dynamics.”

“Not at first. By the time I got to Pack Arcan, I was fucking *grateful* to deal with them,” I burst out, frustration leaching out of every pore as I stomp out of the shower and roughly gesture for Perth to move aside. He does, his lips pursed and his eyes defiant as he goes. I whip a towel off the rack and start vigorously drying off, not even bothering to be careful of the scar on my right knee or the way the joint stings. “Joining this pack was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

They don’t get it, even though I’ve told them that, more or less, for years. How could they get it? It’s like trying to describe debits and credits to someone who’s never even seen money. Im-fucking-possible.

I wrap the towel around my waist as I turn to deliver the worst part of the news to them. I lay it out point-blank. “What I saw in that room today was the polar opposite of excitement. She almost wolfed out twice despite Alpha trying to shut it down.”

“What?” Ruger’s brows shoot up as a tattooed hand comes up to swipe the humidity beading on his brow from the shower. “That’s not possi—”

“She booted him out of her head like he was nothing more than a pesky fly. Alpha implied she had no connection to Pack Arcan despite our mate claim running. That should have created a tether to the pack. It didn’t,” I interrupt him, waving off his disbelief, because improbable and impossible are very different things. “Whoever she’s related to was no joke, and there’s something seriously fucked going on here.”

“Was?” Ruger asks. Of course, focusing on that insignificant detail instead of everything else I just pointed out.

“If she’s a naif, they’re obviously dead. Even the worst of our kind wouldn’t let their kid run around with no idea about

what's lurking in their veins," I say, explaining things that really should be utterly obvious as I walk to the second sink, on Ruger's left side, and grab my toothbrush.

Wolf shifting sometimes leaves a disgusting film on the tongue after the fact—probably because it's hanging out in the air half the time. I slather on as much toothpaste as I can fit onto the bristles and start vigorously brushing while Perth and Ruger stare at me, unfazed.

I take a break to spit and add, "We just destroyed everything she's ever known. She's lived her entire life as a human. She's going to reject our claim—"

"Whoa!" Perth holds up a hand and gets the calm voice, the one he uses for his students, the one that annoys the absolute shit out of me. "You're jumping to all kinds of fucked-up conclusions. You don't know that."

"She is," I assert, giving him a hard look.

"A mate bond would give her stability though. Protection. She'll feel the connection." He's so superior but screw him.

I can logic with the best of them, but I can also absolutely see the abyss where logic falls away and emotion runs rampant. That woman? She's in the freaking abyss right now.

I rinse my mouth and wipe my chin as I glance between my denmates, taking in Ruger's green eyes and Perth's golden-brown gaze. Both of them are so damn hopeful it makes my throat tighten uncomfortably. But they need to face what's coming. They were born and raised here in Howling Rapids. They haven't known anything else. I have. I've seen shifters who can't handle the truth and run out into traffic or off a cliff. I've seen others reject the pack and try to go lone wolf.

If the panic is too strong when a shifter's senses awaken... sometimes they can't break free of the fear, they can't bond with a pack properly, let alone accept a mate claim.

Noah's future?

Finding out about shifter life when you aren't born into it is like tossing a penny down a well. Foolishly optimistic

people—those who haven't lived through the experience—smile as they tell the new person about eeries, naively believing *happy wishes* and *dreams come true* will emerge from that moment. But the reality is that tossing a coin into a well does jack shit other than destroy the coin. It gets a green patina and crusts over and transforms in order to continue to exist in the water at all. If it tries to leave the water? It will corrode. Its reality has changed forever.

“I know you've been through some shit,” Ruger interjects, his gaze overflowing with a tenderness and empathy I don't want aimed at me right now because it makes my skin prickle uncomfortably. “But you can't write her off after just twenty minutes. You witnessed what has to be one of the hardest moments of her life. She reacted badly, okay? Not everyone is team fucking Jacob. That doesn't mean crap. She deserves our help, our support. She needs all our faith and patience.”

I'm about to snarl at him and ask what goddamned inspirational poster he stole that bullshit from, but both of their phones ping with a text alert. That's when I realize my phone is still in the pocket of my shredded jeans on the floor in Ellery's office. Great.

Perth pulls his phone from a pocket and glances at the screen, his forehead freckles sliding upward as his eyebrows rise at whatever message he's gotten. Ruger continues to stare at me, his unwavering regard imploring me to change my position, to look at things the way he does. But I can't. If he'd been in that room with her, he'd know I'm right.

“Ellery needs us to bring food to the inn; he's getting Noah settled there and she needs to eat,” Perth pointedly announces, moving for the door.

When I don't follow, he pauses at the threshold and glares over at me.

“All of us,” Perth orders.

I glower at his stubborn compliance. Such a fucking Boy Scout. “You're setting yourself up. That's your choice, but I'm not a masochist,” I warn him.

How do they not see it? Ellery's putting her up in a hotel? She doesn't want anything to do with us. If they show up all moon-eyed and hopeful, it's just going to freak her out even more.

Ruger looks like I just stole his favorite spatula. For such an intimidating bastard, he's perfected the kicked puppy look, those green eyes big and blinking beseechingly as he says, "Don't do this, Gan. Don't give up before we've—"

"You don't get it," I snap at him, fuming. My chest heaves with angry, shallow breaths, and I study first Ruger and then Perth, beyond frustrated that they aren't hearing me, trusting me.

What's worse than watching a train speeding closer, knowing it's about to crush you? Watching it speed toward your family and knowing there's nothing you can do to stop it from crushing *them*.

This girl is going to annihilate them. Decimate us.

They're going to go to her with open arms and just stand there until she mows down every hope for the future they've ever had.

"Fuck this." I throw up my hands one second before shifting back into a wolf and darting from the room. I should have gone for a longer run.

Ruger and Perth don't want to hear the truth. They can't see past their own blind optimism and eagerness. But I'm not going to sit around and watch the train wreck. I can't.

I exit the house the same way I came in, using the panel, ignoring my shifter brothers as they call after me. I run until their voices are drowned in distance, until the air grows thinner and crisper and my thoughts are lost to the exertion of my wolf. I run until I can't run anymore, but there's no outrunning what's coming for us. No matter how much I wish there was.

NOAH



I don't know how it's possible for time to pass faster than the speed of light while also moving slower than a sloth taking a shit. Somehow, I experience both simultaneously. One moment I'm a woman, a vet tech on her way to a new start and new opportunities. Next, I'm a shifter, watching an unnaturally massive wolf slink out of the sheriff's office while three other strangers, other *eeries*, talk among themselves about how all this is possible.

I stare down at the cup of rainbow juice that Imogen made. I don't know that I trust her, trust any of them, but she's right. I won't let bullheadedness be my downfall. I survived last night. If I'm wrong about what's in this cup or their intentions, I'll survive that too, and then I'll make them pay.

I reel back at that thought. Disney villain isn't my default setting, but all of this shit has me thinking *they will rue the day* thoughts. I see people joke about it all the time, but maybe this really is my villain origin story.

I shake my head at myself and, without justifying it any more than I already have, I bring the cup to my lips and drain the contents. I can't help feeling like I just swallowed either my damnation or my salvation and—whichever one it is—it tastes like sour apple.

I look into the cup when I'm done, the dregs mixing into an ugly brown that matches how I feel. I really hope I don't see *you've been poisoned* float up through the last remaining drops like a Magic 8 Ball message of doom.

On the upside, I don't keel over immediately. And then the chill in my veins slowly warms. The volatile rage bubbling within me cools. Finally, the pain throbbing through me disappears altogether. My vision sharpens instead of blurs, and I feel stronger, more steady. They weren't lying, the spell didn't hurt me.

That doesn't mean any of them are off the hook though.

I set the cup on the desk and look up to find Ellery, his father, and Imogen steadily watching me. Ellery offers me a warm smile, but it dims when I answer back with a glare.

"You let me walk into this office and tell you all about this terrifying thing that happened to me last night, and you knew the whole time I was a shifter and it was real?" I snarl at the sheriff.

He drops his head a little and regret fills the room, as fragrant as a bouquet of roses, but the contrition floating in his eyes isn't enough to calm the anger I feel surging.

I pull in a deep breath, worried that if I get too mad, it will trigger the black veins and the...the...shift—*fuck, that's weird to even think.*

"You're right. I should have tried to explain everything better when you first walked through the door. I was shocked. You shouldn't have even been awake, let alone walking into my office. And then you said you'd been attacked, and I needed to know what you were talking about. It's no excuse though. I should have handled things better. I'm sorry."

I'm taken aback by his immediate apology and how sincere it sounds. But I'm not ready to hear it or forgive and forget. I need to revel in a little rage because *what in the actual fuck* just happened?

"How are you feeling?" Imogen asks, and I turn my anger on her.

"I'd be feeling better if you hadn't magically misted me into a world of hurt," I grumble while aiming a fiery glare at her.

She grimaces, though her regret is far less potent than Ellery's. "I thought you needed help shifting. That spell has been foolproof in the past. We're all just trying to help."

I scoff. *Yeah. Trying to help me right off a cliff maybe.*

Undeterred by my indignation, Imogen turns and crisply starts to pack up her supplies. Somehow, all of the mortars and pestles she used are clean in an instant, ready to be stacked away in neat rows. I stare at her hands rather than make eye contact with anyone else, since I'm trying to keep my anger at a reasonable four hundred degrees Fahrenheit right now instead of melt-the-building molten lava, which my intuition is rooting for.

As she zips up her bag, she states, "You need to make sure you eat and stay hydrated. The transition is hard on shifter bodies. And the dissipation spell you just drank for your block will require energy too. You need to rest, eat, and drink as much as you can."

I throw my head back, breathing hard as I stare at the ceiling and wonder how the hell I got here. A nap and food are the least of my problems right now.

"I know you're mad, and you have every right to be. But no one expected you to be a naif. It took us all by surprise," Morgan Arcan defends.

"And what the hell is a naif?" I demand, rounding on him. "You all keep using that word but haven't bothered to explain what it means."

Morgan Arcan nods and offers me a small smile. "Someone who doesn't know about their origins, who doesn't know about eerie life, but needs to."

"And what do I need to know about eerie life?" I counter, desperate for answers.

"That it exists, first and foremost," he answers, waving around the room. "In Howling Rapids alone, we have a variety of shifters, witch covens, vampire clans, brigades of trolls, and a donsy of gnomes."

“What, no fairies and unicorns?” I mumble, reeling at the literal out-of-this world list.

Ellery’s lips press together, and his eyes grow worried, before he slowly says, “Unicorns are extinct.”

My eyes go wide at the insane revelation, and I slap a hand over my mouth.

I don’t know if I want to laugh or cry.

My impending breakdown chooses hysterical amusement and, despite my efforts to trap it inside, a wild laugh erupts from my lips. Everything about this situation is so far from sane that the fact that unicorns once existed is just the cherry on top.

Who knows what else exists that I never believed in...

I dig my hands into my scalp, partially to ensure my skull doesn’t explode from the shock of it all. I was attacked by wolves. It really happened, and now I’m one of them.

It took one bite for everything I’ve ever known to shift and become entirely unrecognizable. In one blink, I went from feeling like my body was going to rip apart to being told by a literal witch doctor to get lots of rest, food, and fluids—like turning into a whole-ass wolf is the same as recovering from the flu.

Pinching my arm seems too cliché, but I’m sorely tempted to do it.

“Noah?” Ellery calls, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts.

His voice makes me blink and my senses suddenly flick back onto high alert from the muted, shocked state they’d been in. I realize I’m just standing here with my head in my hands. I look up to discover Imogen’s left, and it’s just Ellery and his dad watching me like I’m a ticking time bomb.

Shit. Am I?

“I know all of this must be a lot and you probably have a million questions,” Ellery starts. “I promise to answer each and every one of them. I know we got started on the wrong

foot, but from here on out, we'll answer anything you want to know."

He's leaning toward me again so he's at my eye level even though he's still giving me space. I stare, irritated that I still think he's handsome, and then I remember the other hot crazies from this morning. Only they're not crazy. And I stole their fucking car.

Fuck me.

I'm the bad guy there.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment because it's all too much. I'm about to explode out of my own skin from all the questions and chaos mounting inside me. I'm beyond confused, and I can feel myself careening into a mental breakdown. All I want to do is get out of this room.

I don't like feeling cornered. And I don't like that something inside of me wants to soothe away the worry and discomfort I can see in the sheriff's face. I shouldn't want to comfort him—and why the hell does it bother me that Gannon left?

He waltzed in here with his hotness, turned into a fucking wolf, and then just peaced out like it was no biggie.

What was that? And why do I fucking care? He's a goddamned stranger. He fucking bit me!

I groan. I don't know how to deal with any of this. I just want to rewind, drive past this town, and eat a shitty protein bar for dinner.

"What do you need, Noah? How can we help?" Ellery asks. I open my eyes and look up at him.

What do I need?

"I need a break," I confess. "I have questions, sooo many questions, but I need a minute to process all of this."

Ellery's blue eyes soften, and he nods in understanding. He looks over at his dad. "Can you stick around? I'll get her settled over at the inn, but we need to talk about how Noah

ended up in the Hunt, and you're going to want to call the betas in for that conversation."

His dad nods and pulls out his phone before turning to me. "I know Ellery's already told you, but I want to reiterate how sorry I am that this happened. When you're ready, I'd like to talk to you about the pack and your place in it. I know it won't make sense yet, but I want you to know we're your family now. Pack looks after each other, and that now includes you. Anything you need, we're here. Okay?" His eyes are solemn and steady, and a warm feeling surrounds me but doesn't invade like it did previously. No warm fuzzies fly forcefully into my mind. They just hover nearby, like a person holding their arms out for a hug, waiting for the other person to embrace them.

My eyes prick with emotion at his words and the look on his face that tells me he genuinely means it.

I've never had a family, not since my mom passed. When I was younger, I thought maybe I could create one with friends and co-workers and other people who mattered in my life. The problem I'd run into over and over again, was that those people weren't like me. They had loved ones. They had that elusive thing I was so desperate for, and they didn't need me the same way I needed them. They cared in their own way, but I was always the outsider looking in. I was always left in the cold, hand on the glass, staring through the window at the glowing love, support, and acceptance they had. I was always left *wishing*.

I gave up on the idea of a family a long time ago.

Morgan Arcan stares at me like he can see all of this written on the inside of my soul. I want to believe him. Despite everything that's happened, his words tug at pieces of me I've ignored for so long. But I've been broken by this hope before.

I know all too well where desperate dreaming leads, and there are never any pots of gold or happily-ever-afters found at the end of that rainbow.

I don't say anything as Ellery leads me out of his office. Following his steps on autopilot, I don't really see anything as he guides me past offices, deputies at desks, and Fife—who's once again sitting at the front of the station. I feel Fife's eyes on me as Ellery holds the door and I walk out into the arms of the warm sun and a cool breeze.

I pull in a deep breath, immediately relieved to be out of that building.

"The inn is just a couple blocks away. You want to walk or drive?" Ellery asks.

I look toward the parking lot and grimace when I see the Jeep I stole is still parked there.

"Walking is fine," I answer, a squeak of guilt in my tone that I hope he doesn't notice. I'm pretty sure I have a valid excuse, but maybe it's best not to remind the sheriff that I was living that *grand theft auto* life this morning.

"How long should I wait to tell him all their car keys are in the passenger seat?"

Ellery offers me a smile, and there's a strange glint of amusement in his eyes before he turns and starts to walk down the sidewalk, pausing after a few steps and waiting for me to follow. I decide a couple of keyless hours won't hurt anybody. Looking around, I try to take in this unfamiliar town through the eyes of an eerie. Nothing looks strange or unusual, the air doesn't sparkle, and I'm not bowled over by scents, but everything about this place—and now my own body—feels foreign.

How can people be smiling and walking down the road with coffees in hand when my life is falling the fuck apart? But that's how it always is, I remind myself. The worst day of one person's life is someone else's average Tuesday.

Breathing deep, I sort through a few of the questions rattling around in my head and pick out the most important one.

"So...am I, like, safe in public?" I ask as we amble casually down the sidewalk between planters filled with

orange and yellow mums. “Do I need to be chained in a basement or something until I can keep my monster from ripping people apart?”

Ellery looks over at me pointedly. “Your *wolf*. Not your monster,” he corrects gently.

To-may-to, to-mah-to.

“You’ve been perfectly fine till now. What makes you think that will change?” he asks evenly. “Have the sudden urge to rip into people’s chests and eat their hearts?”

“Is that a thing?” I demand, my tone squeaky with shock, heartbeat skipping. I see a couple pushing a baby in a stroller a few hundred feet away, and I glance around, prepared to cross the road and spare them if need be.

Ellery rolls his eyes and chuckles as he shakes his head at me. “We’re not cannibals, just wolf shifters. We’re bigger than our canine cousins, we live longer, our instincts lean a little wilder than the average human, but we still have feelings and rational thought in both forms. If you weren’t a homicidal maniac before, it’s not likely you’ll suddenly turn into one. You weren’t, were you?” he asks, his brow rising in faux suspicion, but his tone is clearly joking.

“No homicidal leanings, just a craving for raw meat and the urge to start marking my territory,” I snark back, needing the easy banter to chase away all the other things that feel too dark and heavy right now.

Ellery laughs, and again the sound does things to me, things I’m adding to the list of shit I’m *not* thinking about until I’ve had a shower, a good cry, and several bottles of wine.

“Already?” he mocks with faux shock. “Usually that instinct doesn’t kick in for a few more days. Just remember, if you pee in public, be sure to do it in fur form. Otherwise, I’ll have to give you a ticket.”

I snort out a laugh despite myself, but then his words nip me in the ass.

Fur form.

“Fuck my life, I have a fur form now thanks to bite and run Gannon.”

Ellery’s grin quickly falls as he seems to sense my change in mood.

“This isn’t something you’ve been infected with, Noah. I just want to make that clear. The bite didn’t...change you. You’ve always been an eerie. You needed a propellant to activate your shifter, but you were one of us from the day you were born. Your instincts might have been dormant, but they’ve been a part of you your whole life.”

Ellery’s words sink into me like weighted lures, enticing me to consider them like a fish does bait.

Is this why my metabolism is so high? Have I been feeding a dormant wolf all this time and didn’t know it? Could this be behind my need to wander? Is it the eerie part of me that’s always been searching for something I can’t name but know I need to find?

Have I unknowingly been searching for a pack my entire life?

We round a corner and come to a colossal, deluxe cabin. It boasts a standing seam steel roof and two levels of wrap-around balconies overlooking a beautiful babbling brook.

Behind the inn, pines rise up with the mountains until the peaks stretch beyond the grasp of the evergreens. Deciduous trees give pops of orange here and there, as if they were planted by an artist instead of Mother Nature.

Focusing back on the large building in front of me, we leave the sidewalk and start up a stone path to the front door. That’s when I spot a mirrored, gunmetal gray sign that reads *Howliday Inn* glinting just above a wide front door, and I bark out a laugh.

Looks like the people of Howling Rapids have a sense of humor. The No Skin, No Service sign that was hanging on the diner door sure makes a hell of a lot more sense now.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp, clutching at my chest as a revelation hits me.

Immediately, Ellery spins like a ninja, maneuvering me behind him and growling protectively.

He's slightly crouched, his eyes scanning our surroundings, his body primed for action like he's ready to rip apart a threat. "What's wrong? What happened?" Ellery snarls, one arm reaching behind him to keep me close...safe.

While he's overreacting, I appreciate the fact that he immediately jumped to defend me. It helps ease the disgruntled side of me—the side that still feels like he should have told me everything the minute I walked through his office door.

Glancing down when his hand reaches for mine, I realize that the sheriff's utility belt doesn't have a gun clipped to it. And now I'm pretty sure I know why.

Who needs a weapon when you are a weapon?

I take a step back because, though Ellery's protective instincts are comforting, his strange need to touch me—and the fact that I don't hate it—is too unnerving right now.

"The guys this morning said their den claimed me."

He turns to me slightly, his blue eyes running over my face and taking in the way I'm anxiously threading my fingers through my tangled hair.

"Okay..." he trails off, waiting for me to continue, but I can somehow sense he's a bundle of nerves, almost as if I can smell the unease coming off of him.

"What's a den?"

He licks his lips like he's searching for the right words. "It's...your family. The family you choose, not your family by blood."

I silently absorb his answer while I mentally fit together the bits of strange conversation I've heard up to this point like they're pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. "They said your name. And they said Gannon bit me."

Ellery gives a terse nod.

Holy shit.

“You’re in their den?”

Another nod. The gesture hits me with the force of a headbutt to the chest, and I take a deep, gasping breath. The tips of my fingers are tingling. My bones feel hollow.

The sheriff is part of the den that hunted me. That bit me. That—per my conversation with the not-so-crazies this morning—claimed me.

“There are four of you?”

He nods.

“Four guys?” I confirm, because I just can’t seem to wrap my head around this.

“Four male shifters, yeah.”

“But—” I blink.

What the fuck is this place?

“So...no monogamy. All four of you claimed me?”

Ellery’s expression confirms my theory.

“How...”

I shake my head and stop asking the question as I hold up a hand to prevent an answer. I am officially done. This revelation is the final straw, and now I’m broken. I can feel myself growing pale, the blood receding from my cheeks even though my heart starts to pound.

“Look, we don’t need to talk or worry about any of that now. We just need to get you taken care of. Let’s get you a room, get you comfortable and fed; we can worry about the rest later.”

We? I question, but I swallow it down.

“I have no money.”

“You’re pack now,” he responds, as if that reply explains everything.

The sheriff strides toward the front desk, and I follow him in a daze. I see but don't really take in the bright yellow walls or modern chairs and couches set out for visiting. I don't glance over at the attached bar and restaurant even though my stomach gurgles longingly. Staring into space, I don't pay any attention as a flurry of activity and a fair amount of fawning occurs. My mind races as we ride up the elevator to a suite, but I don't know what to think about any of it. Not the inn or the thoughts and questions whirring around in my mind like a cyclone.

When the elevator dings and we step out into an upscale hallway lined with ornate oil paintings of landscapes, I finally feel as if I slide from astral-projection mode back into my body.

I'm a shifter.

Four fucking guys think I'm their mate.

And everyone else here thinks this shit is goddamned normal?

The manic laughter I released before almost hits me again, but I choke it down. Not yet. Not yet. I can melt down in just a minute.

Chewing on my cheek, I debate if I can handle one more question that's gnawing at me. I need a break. I need space, but I also can't continue to ignore pieces of today that I'm starting to put together.

Fuck it.

"Can you explain what went down last night?" I ask Ellery, turning to him as he strides down the hall to one of the four doors located on this floor. "I know you and your dad said that some eeries need a propellant, but the whole red robe and being chased through the forest thing...how does all of that fit? Why was I literally thrown to the wolves?"

Ellery slows a little, the subtle change in his pace is the only indication that my question rattles him. He scans the key card and pushes the door open for me. I tentatively step inside without glancing around, but Ellery doesn't follow. He stays

outside in the hall, like he knows I need this space to be mine and not his.

It's surprisingly thoughtful.

“Last night was our annual Hunt. It's when lone females and males ready to bond are hunted by eligible dens in search of a mate. It's supposed to be a consensual thing, or at least it has been until now.”

His head drops a little, like the weight of what's happened is heavy on his shoulders too.

“The red cloak is an old tradition. It signals your interest in a match. You run because your wolf demands that a den proves their worth, their skill, their...”—he clears his throat and avoids eye contact—“stamina. The dens hunt for their match, biting their mates if they find them. The mark starts a mate claim and acts as a propellant for any dormant wolves that need it.”

I lose a deep breath as I try to remove my own emotions from the situation and see things from his perspective for just a second. “So, whoever threw me into the Hunt not only fucked things up for me, but also for you and your...den too?” I ask, because his den clearly bit the wrong girl.

Ellery hands me the key card and sighs, running his hands through his dirty blond hair. “This won't make sense to you right now, because you've barely peeked into our world...but my instincts tell me you're ours. My den's claimed you, and we stand by that claim.”

“And if I don't want to be claimed by you and your den?” I challenge, my tone fragile and raw. “If I don't want to belong to anyone else, if I only want to belong to me?”

Ellery offers me a sad smile and steps back from the entryway. “Then you'll only belong to you.”

His gaze is soft and reassuring, and we stand there for a breath, just watching each other before I slowly close the door.

I press my back against the heavy wood and slide down it until I'm sitting on the carpet. Overwhelmed and choking on all the revelations, I struggle to catch my breath as my ribs curl

tighter and tighter. Then I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them, dropping my head to the cradle of my arms.

I was bitten by a monster, and now I've become one.

The tears start to drip steadily down my cheeks, and I let them.

I let myself crack and splinter.

I let myself grieve and hurt.

And I let myself cry for the life I've lost, and the new life I'm now forced to live.

NOAH



WEDNESDAY

I peel my eyes open, which is a feat because my lashes are crusted with dried tears. Staring up at the hotel room ceiling, which is crisscrossed by wooden beams and fancier than anywhere I've ever stayed before, I sigh. The cotton sheets are lush; the pillows and bed are heaven. But I'd trade all this luxury in a heartbeat for some sense of normalcy.

Unfortunately, I think *normal* got into a T-bone accident with *impossible*, and my life's never going to be the same again.

Fucking hell.

I grumble as I glance over at the clock and see it's seven fifteen in the morning. I crashed hard after my cry and shower last night, and I can still feel the aftereffects in my aching skull. Dragging myself up, I stumble into the bathroom, gulping down a glass of water and glancing over at the toothbrush and hairbrush that were delivered last night, along with a bag of new clothes.

Nope. Not ready to human yet, I decide, leaving the brushes on the counter before I make my way back to the bed. My stomach argues with me though and, instead of falling back asleep, I call for room service.

All of me is tender and sore and, if I weren't starving, I'd pass out for three days straight.

When a knock sounds at the door, it's a fucking effort to drag the comforter off, sit up, and pad over to it. I pull it open with a relieved sigh, ready to stuff my face with the five different breakfast platters I ordered.

Strawberry fucking pancakes, here I come.

But instead of a bellhop standing in front of me, Ruger—one of the hot crazy guys—stands next to a rolling cart of covered plates, looking like a wet dream. His light brown hair is parted on the side, he's wearing a deep blue shirt that makes his cheeks glow pink, and I can see the edges of a tattoo

peeking out from beneath his collar. His hand is raised like he was just about to knock, but when he sees me, he steps back a little.

I gape at him, then remember my morning breath and slam my mouth shut.

He gives me an awkward, tentative sort of grin, and my brain stalls for a moment. “Hey. I was hoping we could talk —”

With a jolt, I reboot and yank the food cart into my room. I stare at the Viking of a man for a long beat. Then I shut the door.

Leaning forward, I watch through the peephole as his head sags, and he rubs the back of his neck. I expect him to leave, but he just leans against the wall opposite my door and pulls out his phone.

What? What’s he doing? Why’s he here?

I watch him for a few more seconds and then walk away. I’m not ready to listen to anything he has to say. Not yet.



The wheel of the food cart gets stuck on something as I’m pushing it out of the door two hours later, my stomach deliciously full. My head snaps up in surprise when Ruger comes from around the corner and grabs the other side to help me maneuver it out of the doorway. With a little wrangling, we get it set next to the wall and leave it there for the staff.

“Thanks. You’re still here?” I ask, confused and more than a little put out. “I looked out the peephole...” I trail off, not finishing with *I thought I was in the clear.*

Ruger rubs the back of his neck again and shrugs. “I was...” He also doesn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he waves an arm to point down the hall where a chair is angled against a window with a plant and a little side table next to it.

“Oh,” I mumble. *This is fucking awkward.*

“I’ll pull the chair over here if it helps you feel better to see us,” he offers, gesturing to the chair again.

Us? I question internally as I take him in. I look around the wide hallway, but I don’t see anyone else. I can guess who *us* is though. His den. They’re here watching over me.

Does it make me feel better if I can see them? Or should I try firing my free bodyguards? Can you fire free bodyguards?

I shake away that stupid question and turn to shut the door, but a tiny scratching in my mind stops me mid-swing. I grab the door, stopping it from closing all the way, and poke my head out.

“What’s a pack?” I ask.

Ruger’s bright green eyes flash up, surprise pooling in them, probably because I’m still standing here talking to him after our uncomfortable exchange earlier. Surprise and a strange little expression that might be hope.

Glancing to the side, I clarify, “I mean, I know what the definition of the word *pack* is, but how does it work in relation to...shifters?” The word feels like sticky peanut butter in my mouth. I manage to get it out, determined to come to terms with this new reality no matter how odd or overwhelming it seems. Because it’s real and happening, and denial is a river in Egypt, not a place I want to live.

His hands dive into his pockets as he explains. “A pack is a group of shifters. It’s almost like a big extended family who all work together for the good of the whole.”

“So, like the mob.”

He chuckles. “You could say that. We have a territory that’s led and protected by an alpha, who’s in charge of all the wolf shifters. You met Alpha Morgan yesterday.”

This time, my eyes are the ones widening in surprise. “Ellery’s dad?”

“Yeah, we call him Alpha Morgan, but most of the pack calls him Alpha or Alpha Arcan out of respect.”

My brow furrows in thought. “You know, the Alpha Wolf theory was debunked over fifty years ago,” I point out, thinking of the researcher who made the term popular and then was haunted by it for the rest of his career.

Ruger snorts out a laugh, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“*Damn, he’s pretty.*”

His gaze drops down to the floor for a second as he bites back a grin. Then he looks up, takes his hands from his pockets, and leans forward conspiratorially. “I’m not saying that Dr. Mech had a colleague who discussed a pack of wolves he’d stumbled upon. A pack of wolves he didn’t realize were shifters. Shifters who didn’t *immediately* notice they were being watched. I’m guessing it was near Hunt time because the aggression kicks in.”

A fly could buzz into my mouth right now. Holy crap.

“It could’ve been a whole disaster if he’d seen anyone shifting. Thank fuck he didn’t. Anyway, *that’s* where the alpha dynamic was first discovered. Dr. Dave Mech listened to his friend and ran with it—until he realized it was wrong for natural wolves. Like I said, I’m not saying shifters are to blame for that whole misconception, but I’m not *not* saying that either,” he tells me cheekily.

I grin and shake my head as I try to digest this new reality. Younger me would have thought this was a dream. Present-day me is fascinated and freaked the fuck out. “So, alphas don’t exist in natural wolf packs, but they exist for shifters. Got it.” Dammit all, if I’d seen this in some animal documentary, I would have rolled my eyes and cursed them for going downhill and pandering. Now? Well, fuck. I have to believe those kooks on TV who track ghosts and stuff.

He continues, because apparently the revelations aren’t done. “Other kinds of shifters have different titles but, typically, we all have a leader. The alpha and his den are mated to the luna, who also helps lead and guide the pack. And then there’s the celestial, which is the wolf next in line to become alpha, an alpha-in-training, so to speak.”

Well, if that isn't drinking information from a firehose...

I lean against the wall, crossing my arms in front of me as I absorb everything Ruger is saying. "And who's the celestial here?"

"Ellery, uh...the sheriff," he clarifies, his gaze searching mine when he reveals that tidbit.

I reel back a little in surprise. But I guess I should have seen that coming based on the interactions yesterday in the sheriff's office and what I know of animal dynamics. Strong parents yield strong offspring.

"Do you want me to keep going, or is it getting overwhelming?" Ruger questions, and I nod, offering him a small encouraging smile.

His face lights up a little, and at first I don't understand why. His eyes drop to my lips, and as soon as I realize I'm still grinning at him, I wipe the expression off my face. This is an information-gathering session only.

His eyes drop, and when they meet mine again, they're sadder.

Immediately, I hate that. I don't want to dim the flash of happiness he just had. But my regret makes zero sense, because I don't know this big warrior-looking wolf shifter in front of me. I shouldn't care if he's disappointed. We're neighbor-level—I know your name and accidentally-saw-your-ass-through-the-window-when-you-were-changing—acquaintances. Nothing more.

That thought carries the taint of bullshit, but I wave the imagined reek away.

I don't care if he had his hands on my body and I woke up really liking that. I have too much other life-altering crap to deal with. I'm at maximum chaos capacity.

"No, keep going," I tell him. Despite my internal confusion, my need to know has me feeling like a dry, brittle plant that's finally getting water and is eager to drink it all up.

“Under the alpha, luna, and celestial, there is a group of shifters who help manage the pack. We call them betas. They take on various tasks: protection, infrastructure, pack relations, et cetera. Under the betas are gammas. They are more like ambassadors who strengthen relationships with other packs and territories, and help secure resources as needed.”

“Sounds like a really intense frat,” I razz lightly.

Ruger shrugs and gives a grin. “We definitely party and fight like one.”

“And the dens, how do those factor in?”

“Dens are chosen family units that make up the pack. We’re really social by nature. Shifters will group off with people when they feel a strong bond. Dens also have a leader that’s called an alpha. It goes to the most dominant wolf in the group. They’re basically a team captain for lack of a better description. Outside of the den, all positions revert back to the hierarchy of the pack.”

“And are all dens male?” I question.

“No, some are female. Or a mix. But it’s less common. In general, there are fewer female shifters. That’s why you’ll see more matings with one female to a den of males than the other way around. There are female alphas and male lunas in other territories, and same sex alphas and lunas. It’s a big hodgepodge. Shifters will follow instinct and strength. Always.”

I nod, my eyes far away as I think through everything he just told me. The word *instinct* has set my spine tingling. It’s the same word Ellery used when he said his den claimed me and that they’d stand by that claim. I don’t know how I feel about that word.

One thing is clear though. The celestial for this pack—the celestial *and* his den—want to claim me. I feel like a cartoon character strolling down the street, the innocent one who gets a piano dropped onto her head.

Fuck. This is a lot.

I step back into my room.

“Uh...thanks,” I offer, stilted and a little awkward.

Ruger doesn't protest or say anything else as I close the door on him again.

“Fuck off, butterflies. You show up for new starts only. Not men. Not...shifters.”

This time when I stand on tiptoe to watch him through the peephole, he has a small smile on his face. One I definitely don't find adorable on the big beast of a man.

I watch him disappear down the hall, only to reappear dragging the chair that was next to the window. He sets it off to the side, not directly in front of my door, but close enough I can see it. That goofy little grin is still wide across his cheeks as if he's perfectly content to be here.

I sigh and step away from the peephole as he sits down. Slowly I back up, my thoughts spinning once again, because *why* does him sitting out there make me feel better?



“Sheriff,” I greet Ellery Arcan at the door of my hotel room but don't invite him inside. My empty pizza boxes sit open on the coffee table, pizza crust bones on display like bloody bits of savagery. He doesn't need to witness my carnage, so I hold onto the door and block his view as I scan the hallway for Ruger, who's gone.

Ellery stands in front of me in his full gray uniform looking like a goddamned strippergram. That enticing smell of his hits me with the force of a sledgehammer and does uncomfortably sexy things to me—things I don't want to have happening. Especially not after that last look at Ruger had me feeling all kinds of twisted and confused.

For a millisecond, I wish he'd sent someone else from his station to check on me—like Fife—but I toss that thought aside the moment I have it. Part of me knows I'd have been disappointed if he didn't come himself. God, I'm a fucking mess.

While I'm calmer than I was yesterday, the sheriff hasn't quite scratched his name off my shit list, so my next words are curt and a little bit stiff. "Thanks. For the clothes and stuff."

"Of course. You need anything else?" he asks, taking half a step forward, his hand moving toward me before he realizes what he's doing and checks himself, pulling it back and tucking it into his pants pocket.

Or maybe he sees my eyebrow shoot up in skeptical warning and that stops him.

Whatever the case, he doesn't touch me.

A sliver of disappointment glides down my spine and over my inner thighs. I ignore it and shift my weight onto one foot, waiting for him to speak.

"You coping alright?" he asks.

I shrug my shoulder that's not leaning against the doorframe. "Been thinking a lot today. I had this annoying boss who always used to say, 'Life's a joke and it's supposed to make us laugh.'" I give a sigh. "Pretty sure yesterday was my punchline. I didn't see any of that shit coming."

He gives me a half grin, and those pretty eyes of his grow soft in the frame of their long lashes. "If it helps, it was mine too."

We stare at each other in the moonlit hallway, tender regret painting both our faces before we inhale at the same time.

"I'm sorry this sucks for y—" I start to say.

But at the same moment, he says, "I wanted to give you an update on your case." His words snap my jaws shut and make me shove off the doorframe, standing at attention.

My heartbeat speeds up and my palms grow sweaty as every other thought falls right out of my head.

"Yeah?" My question comes out breathily.

An apologetic look crosses his face. "It's not good news. Your car's been stolen. And none of your stuff was ever put into the lockers at the Hunt. Everything's gone."

NOAH



THURSDAY

The peephole is becoming my new must-have room accessory. I spy Perth sitting in Ruger's chair today. He looks just as good as the last time I saw him—maybe even better. Sunlight streams in from the window down the hall like it rose today with the sole purpose of being his personal spotlight. The golden glow highlights his red hair and beard and makes his amber eyes appear even lighter. He's wearing jeans, and a T-shirt with a paw print is stretched across his muscular chest.

His attention flashes to the door when I swing it open and glower at him.

“Did we have sex?” I demand, my question wiping the lazy smile right off his face.

He sits up, coughing a few times like my question has him choking on his own shock. He slaps a large fist against his chest a few times to help.

“What?” he rasps, clearing his throat.

“Did we have sex?” I ask again. “The other morning when I woke up in bed with you and...Ruger,” I tell him, pretending like I can't remember Ruger's name. I'm overcompensating for the fact that I woke up with it spilling from my lips because I dreamt about him last night.

Perth's eyes widen with horrified dismay, his head shaking before he answers, “Noah, I'd never, I mean *never*, take advantage of you. And Ruger would kill himself before—No. No, we did not. You were asleep. We were there because skin-to-skin contact helps bond a newly bitten shifter to their den.”

His adavance eases something sharp that I didn't even realize was stuck underneath my ribs until it pulls away, like the tip of a dagger had been poised just there, waiting for its opportunity to hurt me. I let out a sigh of relief that makes my shoulders relax, though it's accompanied by the tiniest sliver of disappointment.

What the fuck?

“Don’t get me wrong,” he continues, almost as if he realizes his insistence might come across as rejection. “I would fucking love to. You’re gorgeous and obviously capable and strong, but I’m a big proponent of enthusiastic consent.”

I start closing the door, but he whispers, “...bordering on begging.”

Wait. What?

I reopen it and stare at him. He looks at me evenly, steadily, as though he didn’t just mumble something under his breath. Something that has unwelcome heat flaring between my thighs and a slight blush tinting my cheeks.

“Why are you guys out here? Are you making sure I don’t escape? What is this?” I demand, suddenly flushed. I wave at where he’s sitting, all casual and calm-like, whispering dirty things and staring at my closed door like it’s the most riveting thing ever.

“No, you’re free to go wherever you want. I won’t stop you. Neither will anyone else,” he answers warmly.

My scowl doesn’t seem to faze him, and I’m not sure if I like that or find it annoying.

Annoying. Definitely annoying.

“So, I can skip town and it’s no big deal?” I challenge.

Perth shrugs. “If you want. I haven’t been on a trip in a while, so I’m game,” he counters nonchalantly.

I smile smugly like I’ve caught him. “So, you’re a designated babysitter, or should I call it naif-sitting.”

He scoffs and leans back in the chair, crossing his ankles and pressing his palms to his thick thighs like he’s getting comfortable. “Just keeping an eye out and making myself available to my *mate*.”

I go stiff at the term, and it seems to make his smile stretch wider across his stupidly handsome face.

Is he trying to unsettle me? Crap. Is it working?

I straighten my spine and refuse to take the bait, or try not to anyway. The glimmer in Perth's eyes makes me think he's not going to make it easy.

“The thing about a mate claim is that it brings out certain instincts. It's hard to be apart, hard to even consider leaving your mate alone, vulnerable, unprotected,” he tells me, his tone lowering more into a growl with each word. His eyes start to glow slightly, and his posture grows tense.

I barely breathe as he shows me a peek of the monster lurking underneath. But what catches me off guard is there's a part of me, one I've never felt before, that's responding to it... and it's not fear I'm feeling. There is a distinct heat in my lower belly that has nothing to do with fright. Except for the fact that I'm scared of having that feeling in the first place.

Perth gives his head a small shake, and the tension bleeds right out of him and he relaxes back in the chair.

“That's all this is,” he continues airily, like all of that is no big deal. “We're here if you need anything.”

I study him and try not to fidget.

“Do you need anything, Noah?” he presses, a wicked smile stretching across his face and highlighting the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

I shut the door without answering and immediately walk away, needing space.

So much space. And maybe a cold shower.



He has a Red Hots smile, I realize as I watch Ellery from the spyhole in my door. He's got the kind of grin that burns the inside of your mouth while still tasting oh-so-sweet, just like the candy. It's unfair. How am I supposed to ignore him when he looks like that?

Giving a defeated sigh, because I already know I've lost this battle, I move away from the peephole.

Opening my door to greet him, I quip, “You always make nightly house calls, Sheriff?”

A hint of a smile starts at one corner of his mouth. “I do when it involves my mate,” he retorts.

Shit. There’s that word again. And why do I feel like that statement was loaded with double entendre?

Preemptively, he holds up a hand before I say something to refute the mate part.

I hold my tongue only because I want more information. Yesterday, when he said he couldn’t find any of my things, I felt hopeless. Pissed. I hate that someone stole my things. I don’t like thinking about someone in my car. Using my phone. What if they hacked it and are looking at all my messages? And without my Bronco, I feel trapped.

I’ve been fighting that feeling by ignoring it and watching reruns of *The Office* all day as I try to bury my head in the sand like an ostrich. I could really use some good news tonight.

But the second his expression turns serious, I know I’m not going to get what I want.

“We pulled video feeds from all the nearby stores. I had vampires review them—their night vision is unmatched—but we couldn’t get an ID on the driver. There’s footage of your car leaving Main Street, but it’s only from behind.”

He sounds disappointed.

Me? I’m far more than that. I’m all over the place. I feel like I just hit a massive drop on a roller coaster at Six Flags. And I hate roller coasters.

Even if those videos didn’t show a face, they caught someone driving off in my car. Someone who has taken everything from me, now in more ways than one.

The wood of the door creaks and groans in protest, and I realize I’m squeezing it. I let go and fold my arms over my chest.

“They stripped me down and tossed me in the Hunt, and they robbed me...why?” I ask, and the sheriff’s eyes cloud with anger.

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll get there, Noah,” Ellery promises, stepping closer, his eyes growing dark.

The scent of violence seems to engulf me, and I drink it down eagerly. It’s violence on my behalf and I want to glut myself on it until we find the fucker who did this to me.

The sheriff’s gaze caresses me as he adds, “We’ll catch them and, in between their screams, we’ll find out why they dared to fucking touch you. Then I’ll make them sorry they did.”

NOAH



FRIDAY

The shower is where I come up with all my brightest ideas. I stand underneath the warm jet of water, musing over the guys and how they always seem to bring me just what I need. Are they seriously in tune with emotions? Did their mothers raise them that fucking well? Memory and intuition niggle at me.

And then I have a revelation. It's not a good one. "Oh, *shit.*"

Scurrying to scrub the shampoo out of my hair, I towel off quickly and toss on whatever clothes are left in the bag Ellery brought me. Morning sunlight is barely seeping in through the windows when I yank open my hotel door, a question already spilling from my lips as I pull my wet hair into a high ponytail. "Can you read minds?" I ask. But I stop short when I don't see Perth or Ruger lurking in the hallway with my breakfast.

No, instead I see Gannon. He's avoiding the designated babysitter chair, leaning against the far wall—sans food—and he does not look happy to be here. His gray eyes are narrowed into slits and his arms are crossed defensively, a jacket dangling from one of them. The pose only helps emphasize the way his shirt pulls tight against his frame. Today, he's in a black Henley with black jeans that would normally make me sit up and take notice—that is if he wasn't currently radiating a whole lot of irritated asshole.

Why is he mad? Is he pissed about being here? Something else? His anger makes me miss a loop on my ponytail. Instead of restarting, I give up on the ponytail and pull out the band, playing with it. "Hi. I didn't realize it was you." He hasn't shown up here before, and his mood leaves me hesitant.

Immediately, his frown turns into a full-on glower. "It's me," he agrees.

"Who spit in his coffee? Geez. With his stellar personality, I bet he works at the DMV."

“What are you doing out here?” he snaps.

I pull in a deep breath and immediately mirror his posture and tone. If he wants to be a dick, I can match that energy. I should probably just close the door and wait to ask one of the others my questions, but I don't.

I haven't seen Gannon since he slinked out of Ellery's office the other day. He's part of their den and yet he hasn't been here like the others have. A little piece of me is rubbed raw by that, but I don't want to think about why.

Instead, I'm going to focus on making him as annoyed as he makes me, by asking questions when all he wants is for me to disappear.

“Can you read minds or project thoughts or something?” I press again, not willing to let this go.

When I was scrubbing my hair, I was running through everything that's happened, and I remembered that weird thing with Alpha Morgan in Ellery's office. I'd forgotten all about it until now, and I'm itching to know what the hell that was.

Gannon's nostrils flare and he stares at me like he's not going to answer. But then I hear—inside my head—“*It's not mind reading, it's called mindspeak. The alpha can do it, and denmates can too,*” he answers, his tone utterly put out, like having to explain any of this to me is the height of annoyance to him.

I gasp and take a step back, my eyes never leaving his lips, lips that stay perfectly still despite his voice ringing loud and clear in my mind. Just like with the alpha.

“*Mindspeak? Fuck a duck on Tuesday, they can mindspeak.*”

“*I can hear you,*” Gannon points out.

“*How the hell did he—*”

“*You're still doing it,*” he grumps, switching his weight from one foot to the other, like his body is about to fall asleep from boredom.

“*You're a dick. Did you hear that?*” I think.

Gannon doesn't answer, but his scowl is answer enough. Fuck him for being a hot scowler.

"If you don't want to hear me, help instead of just standing there pouting," I snap.

He stiffens. "I'm not pouting. I just don't see the point. You're not staying. The others might not know it yet, but you and I do." His jaw works and though his thoughts are hidden from me, something about his expression looks almost hurt before he glances away down the hall.

"And you know I'm leaving *how*?" I challenge. "I've never even talked to you. You shifted into a wolf in front of me and then ran off the second things got a little chaotic. If anyone has a track record for bailing, that'd be you, asshole."

Gannon's eyes light up when he turns back to me and pushes off the wall. He stalks closer and his indignant presence brushes up against my own. His energy is volatile and wild, and the air between us sizzles and spits.

I face him head-on. *"I'm not going to let him intimidate me. He can take his little temper tantrum and shove it up his tight ass."*

"Thinking about my ass?"

"Fuck you."

"Only if you mean it."

"I mean it. Just not the way you want me to mean it," I retort, heart racing.

He stops inches away from me, forcing me to look up at him as he grins down at me, the arrogant bastard. This close, I can see that his eyes aren't just gray. There's a starburst of gray-blue strands emanating from the black hole of his pupil. He could suck souls in with those eyes and crush them.

"See, that's the problem. They think you're here because you're giving the den a chance," he rumbles, waving a hand between us. "But you want information...not them. You're not interested in accepting a mate claim. I guarantee you haven't even considered it."

I blink rapidly, taking a step back from the words he uttered so softly they were a whisper. How can a murmur pack all the power of a punch?

“Look, I’m trying to figure this all out.”

“Trying?” He tilts his head, and his no-nonsense stare cuts right through me. “You open the door each day and ask a question or two about this world and how it affects you. What do you know about Perth or Ruger? What personal questions have you asked Ellery, who’s working his ass off day and night on your case?”

Heat crawls up my neck as I stare at him, his words clawing into me and leaving gouges of shame.

“They’re setting aside their entire lives to be here for you. And you haven’t bothered once to ask about their day. Or anything else about them for that matter. You don’t care about us. *That’s* how I know you’re leaving. That’s how I know we’re fucked.”

Silence.

I try to think of something to say, but there’s nothing. His cutting stare and barbed rebuke left nothing but gaping shock in his wake.

“That’s what I thought.”

Tendrils of guilt spread through my chest.

His expression becomes flat as he finally answers my question. “The alpha can mindspeak to anyone in their pack at will. Outside of that, mindspeak requires a connection or bond. That typically only exists between denmates and family. Sometimes close friends.”

I clear my throat in an effort to stop the way his accusations are clogging it up. Taking a second, I process his words and when I finally speak, my tone is much quieter and more subdued. “So how can I hear you, and you me?”

Stoically, he answers, “When I bit you and initiated the mate claim, it forged a link with my den. We’ll all be able to mindspeak...until you sever that link.”

“Stop.” For some reason, I hate the sound of those words aloud. I hate him presuming I’m some fucking villain.

He gives me a look and just continues, “It would be great if you could keep your thoughts to yourself until then.”

I glare up at him, a deep rumble resonating from my chest in response. “And how do I do that?” I ask, pissed that I’m in a position to have to rely on him for answers, that he wants me to feel bad about it.

Of course I’m asking questions; I’m trying to make sense of this chaos. The other guys have been nothing but kind and patient. They’re okay with waiting for me to find my way through all of this shit. Right?

Doubt starts to seep in through the cracks Gannon just hammered into me. As much as I want to deny it, he might be right. Even so, being a dick isn’t the way to go about convincing someone.

“You don’t want us to hear your thoughts? Shield them. How you do that is up to you. I don’t know what you’ve got going on in that pretty little head of yours, so you’ll have to figure that out on your own. Until then, you’re never going to be alone in here. We’ll always be right there with you.” He taps his pointer finger against my temple.

I slap his hand away and pull in a deep calming breath to keep myself from punching him.

“Any other questions, *kitten*?” he asks, stepping away from me and leaning back against the wall again, resuming his original position.

“No, you’ve been a great help, Gannon,” I snark. “I’m truly overwhelmed by your compassion and understanding. Just a thought though,” I add, leveling him with an incinerating look. “If you don’t like cleaning up messes, don’t make them. Or did you forget that the only reason I’m here is because *you* bit me?”

I turn away and slam the door so hard that the frame shudders...just like my shoulders. But I refuse to cry. I breathe through the rush of emotions that bombard me. Anger,

frustration, and outrage. Hurt and sadness because I don't know what the hell I did to deserve it.

You didn't do anything wrong, I tell myself firmly, squeezing my eyes shut. "I will not cry over an asshole," I chant like a mantra.

But a lone tear glides out anyway.



A soft knock sounds from the door, and I look over at the bright sunlight pouring through my hotel room's windows.

It's too early for it to be Ellery.

Pushing up from the sofa I've been sitting and stewing on for the last few hours, I check the peephole. Pink, white, and orange flowers greet me from the other side of the door. The bouquet is gorgeous, but I step back from the door and eye it skeptically.

Who'd be sending me flowers?

"Noah, you there?" Ruger's deep, honeyed voice asks from the other side of the barrier, and I unlatch the lock on the door and pull it open.

Astonishment flickers through me when I find him holding a massive cut glass vase of roses and peonies in one hand and several large bags in the other.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he hands me the beautiful arrangement. A flush of pleasure roams through me when I take in all the bright colors and fragrant scents. It's been a very long time since someone brought me flowers.

I take them and set them on the entry table by the door, a tiny grin rising on my face.

"The front desk said you hadn't called down to order lunch yet, so I thought I'd bring you some," he tells me, and my stomach loudly rumbles its approval.

“I was just thinking I was hungry. Are you doing that mindspeak thing?” I wonder.

With a soft chuckle, Ruger tries to hand me the bags, smart enough not to admit whether he’s been rooting around inside my head. Normally, I’d happily take his lunch offering, say thank you, and then shut the door and devour everything in the privacy of my suite. But I haven’t been able to get Gannon’s accusations out of my head all morning.

Instead of taking the food from Ruger, I debate inviting him inside. Part of me is nervous about doing that because it’s my private space and I’m still a little jumpy after everything that’s happened.

Ruger gives me a small grin. “Hey, you don’t have to—”

“One sec,” I cut him off as I lean sideways and snag my key card from the entry table. Then I step out into the hall.

“Whatchya got?” I ask as I take a seat on the ground.

Surprise shimmers in his eyes, but he blinks and it’s gone. He sets the bags down and sits across from me, his back to the wall and his long legs stretched out in front of him. With practiced hands, he starts pulling out to-go containers. All kinds of delicious scents overwhelm me, and my mouth instantly starts watering.

“I didn’t know what you liked, so I brought a little of everything that’s popular.”

My grabby hands are already activated, and I eagerly pluck a container from him and flip the top open.

“Oh my god, garlic bread,” I moan as I stare salaciously at half a loaf of what looks like freshly baked doughy bread smothered in herbs and garlicky butter. “Get in my belly,” I order and then practically shove a whole piece into my mouth.

“Fuck me, that’s better than sex.” I groan internally.

Ruger chuckles but shakes his head, making it obvious that I failed at shielding that thought, but I’m not even sorry.

“Not the right kind of sex,” he counters, but then he presses his lips together and looks down, like he’s worried he

overstepped.

Clearing his throat, he starts setting out different containers all around me, each one overflowing with pure deliciousness. There's pasta and meatballs, steak and potatoes, seasoned vegetables, and fish and chips. I take another bite of bread, not sure where to even start. Everything looks so amazing.

Noticing the name of the restaurant on the top of a container, I bark out a laugh. "Steaks and Stones?" I read aloud, noting the name of the place I will be ordering all future meals from. "Howling Rapids sure has a knack for naming their businesses," I point out as I slide the steak and potatoes closer.

"Thanks. It was a battle picking a name in the first place. It came down to this or *Lettuce Eat*, but the guys all voted for this, so I went with it," he tells me, tapping on the name of the restaurant on one of the lids.

I stop, a bit of garlic bread hovering an inch from my mouth, and stare at him.

"Wait. Are you telling me this is *your* restaurant?" I ask, completely astounded.

His smile is proud, and he nods. "Yeah."

Gannon's words snap up and bite me like a rattlesnake, but instead of venom, I'm filled with chagrin.

"Took me months to settle on the perfect bread recipe. I think the den gained ten pounds each when I was testing batches." Ruger laughs, and it makes me smile. I look around at all the food he's brought me, and a thought occurs.

"Did you...cook all of these dishes yourself?"

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck, suddenly bashful. "I did."

Something warm and fuzzy fills my chest because he didn't just buy the food for me. He made it. With his own two hands. *Who does that?*

I stare down at the garlic bread. "It's amazing."

“Thanks. It was good to get back in the kitchen today. I’m glad you like it,” he adds softly.

I try very hard to shield that thought and the resulting tumult of emotions in my chest. Awe and guilt mix together and have a terribly sweet taste—almost like arsenic. This man might literally be killing me with kindness.

My throat tightens as I study the feast, my eyes darting up to Ruger where I then study him. I totally pegged him wrong, thinking gearhead or military or anything but chef. I’m going to start fixing all those assumptions right now. “Which one of these is your favorite meal?” I ask as I precariously cut a bite of ribeye, trying not to slice right through the bottom of the to-go container.

When I put it in my mouth, I have to stop myself from closing my eyes and moaning. Damn. I want to shove my entire face into the to-go box and gorge. But I keep my shit together and manage to cut another polite bite instead of picking up the steak with my hands and tearing into it, which my body suddenly sees as a totally reasonable option.

He’s watching me eat—no, not just eat—he’s watching me *savor* every bite like its foreplay. Those eyes of his are on my lips, and I can see he’s stopped breathing. His hands tense with restraint as I lick away a tiny crumb from my lips.

My nipples pebble and a pleased hum vibrates inside my chest at his attention.

“I think I have a new favorite,” he murmurs.

A warm sensation starts to drip down my body, pooling in places it’s not polite to talk about while having a floor picnic with someone you barely know.

I try to breathe through this odd rush of attraction. It’s not like I’ve never felt attraction before, but never anything even close to this. I stare up at him and my eyes grow hooded. Some new scent in the hallway starts to mix with the delicious smell of the food, and I realize—with a start—that it’s the scent of desire.

How or why I know that, I have no clue.

Clearing my throat, I gesture to the food, trying to break whatever spell just bippity boppity booted all over this hallway. “You’re not going to eat?” I glance around at the food boxes, and what seemed like way too many when he first arrived now seems like it’s one short of filling me up. A surge of possessiveness comes over me, but I bat it down.

His heated green gaze flicks from my lips to my eyes. “No, you eat whatever you want, I’ll take what’s left over.”

I snort at his answer. “If I eat everything I want, there won’t *be* anything left over.”

“Good. I brought dessert too,” he tells me, gesturing toward a bag next to him that I hadn’t noticed was still full.

“Well, well, Ruger. Flowers, lunch, *and* dessert...you’re playing for keeps,” I tease, digging my fork into the fluffiest mashed potatoes I’ve ever had.

“Who’s playing?” he quips back, determination written all over his face.

I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. Instead, I keep my mouth plenty full with his creations, each one so good I couldn’t pick a favorite if I tried.

“What about you? Where does the story of Noah Lupescu begin?”

I chuckle at the dramatic question and do my best to sound like some library storyteller. Waving my fork, I say, “I was born on a moonless night, one so dark even the stars were afraid to shine too brightly. A clap of thunder is the first thing I heard coming into this world, and my life has been nothing but a raging storm ever since.”

Ruger laughs and I savor the sound of his amusement like I savor his food. My answering smile is undeniable, and I decide to get comfortable, stretching out my legs and mirroring his position. This is surprisingly nice. Intense, but in a good—if slightly intimidating—way.

I take a second and ponder my real answer to his question. “Honestly, there’s not much to tell. My mom died when I was

eleven. She didn't have any family, so I became a ward of the state."

"What about your dad?"

I shrug. "My mom would never talk about him, no matter how much I pushed. I—unfortunately—don't remember anything about the guy. I saw in a movie once the leading lady had this box she kept of love letters and pictures. I searched every nook and cranny in our house for a month and never found the box of answers I was convinced existed. Turns out, real life isn't a romance movie, go figure."

Ruger huffs out a chuckle. "Paranormal romance maybe."

"True. Guess I should have watched more *Supernatural*," I admit, cracking up.

"Any sign your mom was a shifter?" he asks.

I sigh and pull at a string that's sticking out from the hem of my shirt. "I've tried to think, to see if there was something I missed because I didn't know what I was looking at back then, but it was so long ago," I admit, and Ruger nods. "How does it work? Were both my parents..."

"At least one had to be, that's for sure. You're strong though, very strong, which makes this situation all the more curious."

"How so?"

"Well, it might mean that both your parents were shifters. Strong magic from both sides could explain your ridiculously quick transition. It normally takes two weeks. Or..." Ruger hesitates for a moment, his eyes contemplative. "Or your super speed might have nothing to do with bloodlines and everything to do with the block instead. Maybe you didn't need a propellant bite to wake up your wolf. Maybe you needed a bite to break the block and free it."

"Isn't that practically the same thing?" I question. "Whether it's a bite to activate dormant shifter genes or to break a spell, wolfing out is still the result."

“True, but the magic would be different. So would your reaction,” he counters. “Ellery said you grew up in Michigan?” Ruger asks, and I nod. “How far back do you remember?”

My brow furrows as I consider his question. I had just grabbed the fish and chips container, but I put it down and tilt my head, trying to recall. I tilt the other direction when I can’t think of anything past the year before my mom died.

“Huh,” I grunt, slightly puzzled. “That’s weird, I can’t really pull up any memories before we moved into our house on Kingston Street. I would have been ten.” I dig harder for anything before that. I see a few flashes of something, but they’re mangled, unidentifiable. “That’s so strange.”

“We wondered if that might be the case,” Ruger mutters, and my eyes snap to his.

“What do you mean?”

“We talked to Imogen about your block, to see if she could tell us anything else about it. Where it might have come from, what it was designed to do... She said that it had strong foundational magic, but it wasn’t put on correctly. She suspected that the witch who did it was either in a hurry or inexperienced. And that the bad application could have caused memory loss.”

“Hold on,” I interrupt, reeling and lifting my hands in the universal sign of wait-one-damn-minute.

I struggle to follow the maze of what he just said. I don’t know which part is more startling. Them talking about me is understandable. And clearly, witch doctors don’t have the same HIPAA laws as humans. They just go around blabbing your business to anyone who asks. It’s bad enough to find out you have some weird magical block on you. But mine’s botched.

What the fuck?

“Did she know what it was for?” I ask, homing in on the most crucial detail of that cluster fuck of a statement.

“Imogen wasn’t sure if it affected your shift, but she was certain that it blocked mind links and kept you from being

tracked.”

“Tracked by who?” I demand, completely baffled.

His eyes trace over my face as he pulls in and releases a deep breath. “That’s what we want to know too.”



“Holy shit, what happened to you?” I ask, covering my mouth with my hand to try and trap the laugh I feel bubbling up.

The sheriff drops his fist. My rush to fling the door open when I first saw him through the peephole prevented him from knocking.

I wasn’t waiting for him. Nope. I just know he stops by around the same time every night and updates me on what’s going on, and I just happened to be here hanging out by the door. Which is how I caught the hot mess posing as Ellery when he ambled up the hall and spent a second trying to tame his flyaway hair to no avail.

He stands there looking completely shellshocked and tired. His normally perfectly coiffed hair is sticking out in all directions. His uniform is untucked and ripped in a few places, and he has a streak of green goo on his collar and...his earlobe.

Yikes.

He leans against the doorframe, a tight smile stretching across his face before he releases an exhausted sigh. I’m almost tempted to invite him in, but the goo stops me. I really don’t want that anywhere in my space.

“I brought a wraith whisperer in to examine the spot where you were attacked,” he tells me, and immediately the lightness I felt at his appearance disappears. “Wraiths are spirits that are attracted to pain and violence, among other things,” he explains, knowing I need the Wikipedia summary of just about everything in this town. “I was hoping there might be a few remnants hanging around that a whisperer could commune with and it might give us a lead.”

I run my gaze over him. “I take it things didn’t go well?”

He huffs out a laugh and shakes his head, bringing up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“There was an incident on the street last night between a coven of witches and a clan of vampires. I had hoped it was far enough away that the whisperer could still get a reading, but the fight between the coven and the clan seems to have overpowered everything else with its echo.”

Disappointment trickles through me, but it’s not nearly as potent as it was a few days ago when he arrived with bad news. I feel a tinge of sympathy for the sheriff. He’s obviously working hard to figure out what the fuck happened, and I hate that we don’t know more—for his sake and mine.

“So did you go for a brisk walk through a swamp to let off steam?” I ask, trying to steer the conversation back to a lighter place, a place that doesn’t have me feeling defeated, or imagining things that might cheer me up, things involving naked Ellery and a good long scrub in the shower.

Shit. Rein it in, thoughts. He might be able to hear you.

He laughs and the sound is less hollow, much closer to that Code Orange laugh that I like more than I should. His chuckle sends warmth rippling through me and goose bumps crawling up my arms and legs.

“No, unfortunately a boggan showed up. It’s an underworld creature that likes a good wraith buffet, and last night’s fight pulled in a smorgasbord of wraiths. I spent the last hour exterminating that boggan and helping the whisperer cleanse Main Street.”

“It’s a glamorous life you lead, Sheriff,” I joke.

“You have no idea,” he lobs back, not missing a beat. “Do you need anything? I’ve got to go get cleaned up, but I wanted to check in and give you an update first,” Ellery asks as he pushes away from the frame of the door and steps back, ready to leave.

For a split second, I don’t want him to go. I quickly wrack my brain for a reason to keep him here and then realize how

ridiculous that is and stop. What's he going to do? He's not in any state to sit and visit. And there's zero chance I can let him strip down and use my shower.

No, brain.

Just no.

"I'm good," I tell him, withdrawing back into my room while gripping the doorknob like it's some kind of tether to sanity. "But I did want to ask...what's your favorite color?"

Confusion flashes in his eyes before his lips quirk. "Well, before tonight, it was green. But—" He points a finger at the slime dangling from his ear. "I'm leaning more to green blue these days. I'll let you know if it changes tomorrow."

I bite down on a smile. "Okay."

Ellery dips his head in an acquiescing nod and runs his eyes over me again, like he needs one more glance to hold him over until tomorrow. I feel a tiny bit crazy when I do the same, taking a deep breath and inhaling his patchouli scent while I mentally snapshot the way he's an adorable mess.

"Night, Noah," he offers as he starts back down the hall, eyes still locked on mine.

"Night, Ellery," I reply, waiting until he's disappeared around the corner before I close the door.

As Ellery's footsteps fade away, I turn and lean against the wall, staring up at the ceiling, and a little shaky sigh escapes me.

Because even though I know it makes more sense for him to leave...it was on the tip of my lips to ask him to stay.

NOAH



SATURDAY

I pace back and forth behind the couch in the sitting area of my suite. Early morning sun is starting to peek through the windows, and I breathe through the itch writhing inside me. The one I can't seem to scratch.

I think it's official, I'm going stir crazy.

At the butt crack of dawn, I stole some supplies from a cleaning cart and scrubbed my room from top to bottom. I hoped it would help this restless feeling buzzing through my blood, but it didn't. I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

Please don't be Gannon. Please don't be Gannon, I chant as I give up on pacing and stomp to my door. Something's wrong with me and I hope whoever is out there can tell me what it is. In a non-asshole, non-guilt-tripping kinda way.

Red hair and amber eyes greet me when I almost rip my door off the hinges. Perth takes one look at me and shoots up from his babysitter's perch.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's sitting in that room for three days with nothing to do but think, wonder, and watch reruns. Or maybe this is something wolfy, but I feel like I can't sit still. And not in a *there's so much to do* kind of way, but in an *it physically hurts not to move* way."

He steps closer, tilting my chin back and examining me with a discerning eye. "Is anything achy? Any changes to your vision?" he asks, but I shake my head no. He drops his hand to my arm, lifting it and inspecting it more closely. "Does your skin feel tight? Any black spots or streaks popping up and then disappearing?"

"No," I answer, my chest suddenly clenched, but that has everything to do with his proximity and the scent rolling off him and nothing to do with what's wrong with me.

Why does he smell like safety, and how does an intangible feeling have a tangible scent? That's the second time that's happened.

“It’s your wolf,” he tells me evenly. “I don’t sense a shift yet, but it’s definitely stretching and getting a lay of the land. What do you usually do to relieve stress or burn off energy?”

My mind immediately takes a screeching turn into the gutter, but I course correct and force myself to think of more appropriate alternatives.

“Running is probably my go-to,” I tell him, and his expression brightens, elated.

“Let’s run then.” He steps back and drops my hand. That’s when I realize he’s actually dressed perfectly for a run in a T-shirt and sweatpants. Gray sweatpants. My throat dries out.

Shit. I really need that run.

“Am I allowed?” I question when he turns for the elevator like this is a done deal. “I thought I had to take it easy, or the block could hurt me?”

“It’s been a few days already. Imogen said it will wear off naturally, and shifters need to burn off steam.”

I reach back into my room and snag my key card before closing the door. Then I turn to face him. “Lead the way.”

The streets of Howling Rapids are filling up with people as we jog down the sidewalk, and in the morning light, I can see all kinds of things I didn’t on my first night here. There’s a pair of women with red eyes and fangs picking out blooms at a flower stand and chatting about blood pudding recipes.

We pass a small, old-looking graveyard where a few witches encircle a tall headstone. I’m not sure if they’re meditating or chanting a spell, because we’re around the corner before I can rubberneck.

Perth sets an easy pace, and we both fall into a steady rhythm. The crisp morning air feels amazing as I start to warm up, and for the first time in days, I feel lighter.

We run for a while, winding through town, jogging past all kinds of unusual shops and a lot of normal-looking places too. It seems every town needs grocery stores, a hardware store, and a mechanic's shop.

Two streets later, Perth slows in front of a gym. I immediately wonder what it would be like to do CrossFit with a vampire, but when I look through the window, I realize *working out* must look very different to the eeries of Howling Rapids.

Inside looks like a dojo of sorts. There are mats everywhere and a massive agility course. I also notice what looks like bird perches up high and massive punching bags that look like they're used for biting instead of boxing.

"This is mine," Perth tells me, nodding his head to the front door where *Gym* has been hand-painted on the glass.

"Really? Are you a trainer or the owner?" I ask, looking around at everything a little more curiously. I've never been a big gym rat. I like exercising outside even when the weather sucks.

"I run a program for new shifters," he explains, and I turn to look at him with surprise.

"Like me?" I ask, pointing a finger at myself like he needs clarification. *Super smooth, Noah.*

Perth smiles. "Sort of. I don't get a lot of propellant bite cases after a Hunt, because newly bonded mates can be *very* territorial. But I work with all the kids who go through what we call a spontaneous shift—which means it happens on its own."

"Oh wow, that's pretty cool," I tell him, astounded. "You're a fancy gym teacher, only instead of playing dodgeball, you're showing them how to fur, fang, and four-leg it through life."

Perth laughs and starts jogging away down the street. "Yup."

We run in silence for a minute, but I can't help myself. "You're really letting the town down on the name front, you

know? *Gym* is the best you could come up with? I thought this place had a rep for clever business names to uphold.”

Perth’s smile is beaming when he looks over his shoulder at me. “It’s actually up for vote at the next town council meeting.”

“Wait. You vote on the names as a town?” I ask, laughing as I jog to catch up with him.

“Sure do.”

“So, what are the options?”

Perth looks off in thought. “I think the front-runners are Sweat Shop, Waist Management, Unawarewolf, and Cullen Killers—the vampire clans seem to really be into the last one.”

I lose it. Laughing so hard my ribs hurt, I have to stop and bend over so I can breathe.

“Unawarewolf?” I wheeze, cracking up even harder.

Perth chuckles as he watches me lose it, his amber eyes bright and happy. “Guess we know which one is getting your vote,” he goads, and I nod, wiping my face free from laugh-tears.

We start running again, my mind whirling with the new facets of my reality. I’ve been trying to wrap my head around this eerie business for days. But I’ve been so absorbed in the shock and strangeness of it all that I haven’t once thought about the normal aspects of it. Like the fact that they have jobs, responsibilities, civic pride. It makes it all feel less mind-melting, less out of this world, and more familiar.

I follow Perth to the edge of town, and I start to get tired. He ends up a few steps ahead of me, and he turns around to check on where I am. He hasn’t even broken a sweat.

When I’ve caught his eye, I wave a hand across my neck to signal I’m done, dead, kaput—he comes back to my side and jogs in place.

“Come on, Noah. You can do it. A little further. Let your wolf stretch.”

“She’s stretched.”

“Nah, she’s just getting started.” With a sparkle in his eyes, Perth leans closer to me and whispers, “I challenge you. Race me.”

He darts away as a flurry of eagerness erupts somewhere deep inside of me, and the exhaustion I just felt vanishes. Poof. My feet hit the pavement and I’m running after him with a giddy feeling in my stomach. It’s not long before I catch up and he glances down at me, pride shining on his face.

“That’s my girl.”

We veer off onto a dirt path that winds through the trees. The sun’s slow climb is starting to warm up the day, and I look forward to the shade of the trees and maybe picking up our pace and really pushing ourselves more when we’re not at risk of bowling over an unsuspecting pedestrian.

“Hey, how about a race—” My question is cut off when I feel a strange prickle on the back of my neck. I ignore it for a beat until the sensation starts to crawl down my back. I stop mid-stride and spin on instinct, fully expecting someone to be right behind me.

No one’s there.

An ominous shiver rolls down my spine, and I scan our surroundings, looking for the source of my strange feeling. Farther down the sidewalk, a couple walk side by side, the father pushing a stroller. A group of speed walkers are moving in the opposite direction of me and Perth, and a few cars drive slowly down a cross street. Everything looks perfectly normal, and yet I can’t shake the feeling that something is off.

Just then, I notice a man in a baseball cap that’s pulled low over his face. He’s up the street, standing between two buildings. He’s not moving like any of the other people on the street. Not going about his daily business. He’s standing stock-still and staring *straight at me*.

“What’s up?” Perth asks, and I jump when he’s suddenly right next to me.

“That man,” I whisper, even though the man’s too far away to hear me. “See him?” I take a split second to glance over at Perth as I point the stranger out. But when I look back at the space between the two buildings up the street, the man is gone.



“I heard you saw someone following you.” Ellery doesn’t even greet me when I open the door to my hotel room. He just steps forward with concern shining in his eyes.

His hand automatically comes out and I let him run his palm from my shoulder down to my elbow, knowing that he can’t help himself, knowing he needs that physical reassurance that everything is okay...because I need it too.

He holds my elbow gently, his fingers warming me through the long-sleeved shirt I’m wearing as I try to force a half-hearted grin onto my face.

“Yeah. But I could have made a mistake—”

He shakes his head, cutting me off with a firm, “No. Trust your instincts. Your shifter senses are expanding as the block fades. They’ll be heightened. If you think you saw something, you did.”

An ice cube glides down my spine, and I fight to stave off a shiver.

Fuck.

Why was I hoping he’d tell me this was all in my head?

I’m tempted to step into Ellery and let him fold me into his body, but I don’t give into that impulse. Gannon’s accusatory words slam into me, and I don’t want to make Ellery feel like I’m leading him on or using him.

But his hand squeezes my elbow, and he tugs me closer, pulling me into a hug anyway. The second his arms are wrapped around me, a soft warmth fills me, and my defenses falter. All the hesitation I’ve been battling seems to collapse

like a house of cards. I hug the sheriff back and let myself soak in the comfort he's offering.

When I pull away, he clears his throat and gets right to business. "Anything distinct about him that stood out?"

"Other than it felt like he was watching me, no. He had a dark blue ball cap on his head. I think he has dark hair, but it's hard to say for sure because he was standing in the shadow of two buildings. He had light jeans and a gray windbreaker that was zipped all the way up."

"Okay, I'll get people on it," Ellery assures me with a firm nod. "For now, I'd like to bring a deputy in to help keep an eye on things," he tells me, and I sigh. "I know our den is already looking out for you, but I think another pair of eyes would be good."

Our den. Like I'm a part of it. A shiver of surprise that's laced with elation comes over me as I realize I like the natural way he said it. How it didn't take him any effort at all. I'm not sure I've ever had that before.

But I'm getting sidetracked. He's talking to deputies when I'm caught up in semantics.

"You really think it's necessary?" It's a stupid question. I know I can't be naive about this, but I hate that I'm not done looking over my shoulder.

As a woman, I know that threats lurk around all corners. It's a fact of life. But being cautious of a potential threat versus staring down active, in-your-face danger is a different level of fight-or-flight.

Ellery gathers both my hands into his, and I can feel the tempest of his emotions brewing, swirling through the air around us.

"What happened to you isn't over. Whoever attacked you is still out there, and either they didn't get what they wanted the first time or there's more to all of this than we know, because they're still watching you."

His blunt words feel like pecking crows, swooping through my insides and cawing a sinister alarm. My ears pound with

the imaginary thump of footsteps following me. My heart booms faster and faster as menacing shadows crowd my periphery.

I've felt too safe holed up in my room, knowing Ellery, Ruger, Perth, and—fuck it—even Gannon were watching. Their presence chased the shadows away and helped me find my feet in this strange new world.

But...fuck...fuck...FUCK!

I want to scream now that it's all been ripped away. Just like the night I was attacked, some assholes have found a blind spot and are exploiting it. How the hell am I going to protect myself if I never see them coming?

I stare up at Ellery, willing him to take back his words and make this all go away.

He doesn't. His expression grows pained, as if he can feel the cold, haunted turn my emotions have taken. He tries to bolster me with a soft smile.

"I think it would be good to have a woman with you. A witch with a different set of skills and magic who might be able to help us see what we're missing."

"Okay," I say, the word hollow because nothing's okay right now.

"She's here, ready to meet you. If you're up for it."

I nod, not looking at him, not looking at anything.

He lets go of one of my hands to reach up and press a button on the walkie-talkie attached to his shirt. "Karen, can you come up here, please?"

Less than two minutes later, the elevator dings and a woman with an inverted black bob striped with chunks of lavender steps out. Her green lipstick would be startling, but it goes well with her heavily lined eyes. There's a black stripe down the center of her throat, but I can't tell if it's a tattoo or makeup. Her gray uniform has been modified to be skintight, and she's covered it with a leather vest stitched with strange symbols.

When she sees me, she stops short. “Ellery Arcan, what the hell are you doing to this girl?” Her eyes roam over me and take in my appearance. She clucks her tongue and says, “Noah, nice to meet you. But why in the name of the moon goddess are you letting him dress you like that?”

I glance down at the oversized green shirt and leopard print yoga pants I put on after my shower. They’re not exactly cute, or matching, but they were in that bag the guys gave me, and it’s not like I was planning on leaving my room...maybe ever, after today’s disaster run.

It was supposed to help me burn off my restless energy, but now I feel more on edge and agitated than I did before.

“Hand over your black card. Now.” Karen sticks her hand out expectantly toward the sheriff, completely straight-faced.

I’m slightly amused when Ellery looks bashful and tries to counter her. “We’re happy to get Noah anything—”

She gestures to me. “If this is what you’re getting her, then no. Nope. No excuses.” She snaps her fingers. “Give it here.” Then she turns to me. “You can’t be shy, Poodle.” She jabs a thumb in Ellery’s direction. “This one’s bank account has more digits than a phone number. Don’t be letting him off easy. Shit, if his den had bitten me, I’d have bought myself a nice little helicopter for my Hunt present.”

“Why a helicopter when you can just ride a broom?” Ellery quips.

She plucks his credit card right out of his hand. “Because I don’t support stereotypes, thank you very much.”

Ellery’s voice sounds in my head. *“Think I should tell her that she fits the Karen stereotype all the way down to her haircut?”*

“None of that in-your-head talking, sir,” Karen says as she strides over to my door, pushing it open. “Yes, I can tell when you’re doing it. Makes you look constipated. Now, shall we?”

My laugh surprises me, but once it starts it doesn’t stop. Karen and her madness are the perfect counter to all the horrific, scary shit going down in my life. I giggle and chuckle

until tears are streaming down my cheeks, until both Ellery and Karen are staring at me in concern.

When I can finally catch my breath, I swipe away my tears and stare right at the witch. “Karen, will you marry me?”

Ellery’s eyes narrow but Karen just gives me a grin and a wink. “Not in those rags, sweetheart. Sorry, but a girl’s got to have standards. Let’s go inside and I’ll book you an appointment so we can Cinderella the shit out of you.”

My stomach tightens a tiny bit as we step into the space that’s become mine over the past few days. I haven’t shared it with anyone yet. It’s been my cocoon as I come to terms with the fact that *human* was the old me and shifter is the new one.

Karen’s quick eyes glance around the queen-sized bed with its ornate carved wooden frame.

She takes in the red couch that I dusted all the crumbs out of this morning in my frenzied need to do something.

“So, you’re one of those neat freaks, huh? Remind me never to invite you over,” she states, plopping down onto the loveseat and pulling out her phone. “I’m going to take care of this fashion emergency before it becomes a fashion fatality.” She dials and puts the phone to her ear.

I turn to Ellery and give an awkward shrug, unsure what to say.

“She’ll keep you on your toes. But she’ll take good care of you,” he murmurs. “There’s one other thing I wanted to talk to you about,” he starts.

Nervous jitters barge into my stomach because the look he gives me is hesitant. *Is he going to ask me about this mate claim thing? Fuck. I’m not ready to deal—*

“I’ve got some of the shifters who ran in the Hunt coming in tomorrow to answer some questions. I wanted to see if you’d be okay observing while I speak to them. See if you pick up on anything.”

Relief takes off inside of me like a herd of gazelle, leaping and bounding around, until I’m nodding a few too many times

at Ellery. “Yeah. Sure,” I answer, trying to sound relaxed and nonchalant.

Finally, someone’s asking me for something reasonable. Something small. Something I can do.

NOAH



Antagonism smells as awful as wolverine musk. It's got a dark scent that churns my stomach and fills the air around us in the station meeting room. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead and make everyone in the room washed out and just a shade less attractive.

I'm standing in the back of the room next to Karen, Fife, and a deputy named Bucky, while Ellery sits at the table and questions the Bianchi den. They're apparently the group of shifters who nearly bit me during the Hunt.

To say I'm relieved they didn't is an understatement.

The alpha of their den is a rough-looking late thirties who appears closer to fifty and, while age gap romances are fun to read about...he's not main character material. He's got a wide face, a pug nose, and what appears to be an anger issue.

The rest of his den doesn't appear to be much better. One guy has a net of unruly black curls that could be cute if he knew what curl cream was. As it is, I'm not sure the guy has ever touched a comb. Another one of them looks as though he's fighting a losing battle with allergies. His golden-brown eyes are watery, his nose is red, and he keeps wiping it on the sleeve of his shirt. The final member looks like the type who lives in his mother's basement. He just seems...soft and has trouble making eye contact with anyone. It's hard for me to reconcile the fact that he's a wolf shifter, because the ones I've met so far have been big and strong.

If the Arcan Pack were a body, this den would be the armpit.

“We shouldn’t even be here. If you weren’t the alpha’s son, you’d be the one getting called to the carpet. She should be wearing our bite.” Joe Bianchi speaks for his den as he glares at Ellery.

The urge to step forward and knock this fucker down a peg is hard to resist even though I don’t know where it’s coming from. Definitely not from the human side of me. I don’t like the way he looks at the sheriff, or me, or anyone else for that matter. The look aggravates me as much as a thorn in my shoe, and I want to pluck it right off his face. But I keep my hands to myself and my feet planted where they are.

The room we’re in is on the smaller side. In a human interrogation, we’d be set up on the other side of two-way glass. But I guess it doesn’t work here the same way it does on humans. It works out since Ellery wants me to use all my senses to see if I pick up on anything. But damn, we’re crammed in here. There’s barely enough space for the long table in the middle of it and the sets of chairs on either side. Plus, I’m not sure what those glowing red crystals on the table are—but instinct tells me I don’t want to touch them.

“How did you know she’d be there to bite?” Ellery asks calmly, ignoring the other man’s ire.

“Smelled her, same as you,” Joe retorts.

“Caught her scent pretty quick.” Ellery keeps his eyes on Joe, though his fingers mess with a pen and notepad in front of him. I think it’s just for show. He hasn’t written anything down yet.

“You want to accuse me of something, Sheriff, then you need to man up and say it. Otherwise, me and the guys are needed down at the sewage plant.”

“Yeah,” pipes in the curly-haired one. “We deal with enough *shit* all day as it is. Don’t need this.” He snickers at his own bad joke and looks resentful when nobody else in the room joins in.

“We’re not here to accuse, just to gather information. I simply want to know if you saw or scented Noah before the actual Hunt.” Ellery’s tone is calm and steady in a way I don’t know I could ever manage.

When Joe’s cobalt-blue eyes land on me and skim down my body, I immediately feel as if I’ve been coated in the nasty slime that was clinging to the celestial the other night. Gag.

I try to take a subtle sniff of the air, to see if anything about these guys seems familiar. Their faces certainly don’t ring any bells. But my nose is immediately overwhelmed by the variety of scents muddying the room. Nothing specific seems to stand out from the three men across the table.

Instead of smelling for clues, I try judging the guys rationally. Do they creep me out? Absolutely. Does the fact that they might have bitten me terrify me? Yup. But are they the ones who attacked me in a parking lot, stripped me down, and then served me up like a ritual sacrifice? Not sure they’ve got the brainpower for it.

My gaze drags over them again, and the final guy, basement dweller, looks up and catches me staring. His light brown eyes hook and hold mine, and his expression tightens the tiniest bit. Just enough to make me feel uneasy.

He glances away but I’m left staring, uncertain and unsure. Dammit. Why’d he have to look at me like that? Now, I don’t fucking know. I’m not an investigator. I’m just a vet tech. I’m good at giving vaccines, not the third degree—I have no clue how to judge innocence or guilt. I stew in my misgivings for the rest of the interview.

By the time Ellery’s done questioning the Bianchi den, Joe is practically vibrating with anger, and I’m surprised he doesn’t wolf out. I’m relieved when Ellery escorts them away.

“Thank fuck that’s over,” I say.

“Over? That was just the first den, Poodle,” Karen retorts. “We’ve got more coming in.”

I sigh and sag back against the wall.

She gives a dry grin. “Yup. Buckle up for some balls-to-the-wall snarling with the last den. They’re assholes with a chip on their shoulder, although that could be said about a lot of wolf shifters. They like to get all growly and puff up like Pomeranians in the face of authority. Others tuck tail and flash a little belly. It’s always one or the other.”

Next to Karen, Bucky chuckles and clears his throat. “This calls for a little Would You Rather.”

Karen groans, but the sound only serves to make Bucky’s mischievous smile grow even wider.

“Would you rather sit through all these interviews or have your fingernails pulled out?” he asks with a fiendish glint in his eyes.

“Fingernails. That would be quicker and, at this point, less painful,” Karen instantly replies.

“Um, I dunno,” Fife hedges as though each option requires thorough contemplation. He rubs at his bald head as he considers. “Probably sit through the interviews. Fingernails take forever to grow back, and it would hurt to type up reports.”

Both of the other deputies stare at him and shake their heads. Karen makes the incorrect-buzzer sound.

“Would you rather sit through these interviews or sit in a vat of melted wax?” Bucky shoots off another set of options.

Karen sucks in a breath through her teeth and grimaces. “That’s a good one. Gonna have to protect the lady bits. Stay here and suffer through interviews.”

I chuckle at what’s clearly a common game around the station.

But then Bucky checks his watch. “The Sullivan den should be next,” he declares, and just then the door swings open.

In walks a familiar, tall, muscular man, wearing a smirk I recognize and a deputy uniform that has my heart slipping from my chest and plunging into my stomach.

It's one of the guys from the diner. The one who had a smirk that leaned closer to naughty than nice. He'd been one of the men from the table of three who'd first set off my alarms. His hair is shorter than the last time I saw him. It's buzzed now and looks darker than it did that night. His brown-eyed gaze is friendly instead of intense, and today his grin is easygoing and relaxed.

He has a box of fresh muffins in his hands, and he sets them down on the table as the two other guys from Droolies stride in through the door.

"Dillon." Ellery follows behind them and greets the deputy with a nod. "Hank, Brooks. Come on in and have a seat," he invites as he closes the door. He looks first to the man with the ice-blue eyes and mousy brown hair that's pulled back into a ponytail. That must be Hank. He nods to the guy who started the fucked-up staring contest that night, Brooks, who has black wavy hair, muddy green eyes, and that same look of exhaustion I noticed the first time I saw him.

Unease creeps up my throat as everyone finds a seat and gets settled in. The Sullivan den doesn't watch me like they did before. Today, their gazes are amiable and curious, and I tell my heart to calm down and stop trying to play bumper cars with my ribs.

"What's going on, Sheriff?" Dillon the deputy asks before waving a hand at the box of muffins and glancing back at those of us leaning against the far wall. "Dig in, guys. Hank has already called dibs on the leftovers, so if you don't stake a claim now, they won't be in the breakroom waiting for you later."

Bucky rubs his hands together and steps forward. Leaning over the table, he tugs the box closer, selecting a blueberry muffin and handing Karen a banana nut. She side-eyes the other deputy for a moment but takes the muffin with a small huff, like she's offended he knew which one she wanted.

Hmm. I make a note to ask her about that later.

Fife grabs two and offers me the box, but I shake my head, passing on the pastries. The box gets set back on the table, and

when I look up, Ellery and the Sullivan den are watching me.

“You should take one. They’re from Millie’s,” Brooks encourages, his voice rough and gravelly like he’s using it for the first time this morning.

“I’m good, thanks though,” I tell him.

“No really, you woke up dangerously fast,” Dillon counters.

“Even if you’re from a strong bloodline, you need to be careful,” Brooks contends, tired eyes imploring.

“You need all the calories you can get to support the transition,” Hank adds, pushing the box back across the table in my direction.

A low growl fills the room.

My head snaps in Ellery’s direction, whose angry blue-eyed gaze is fixed on the deputy. “Let my mate decide for herself,” he practically snarls.

Dillon throws his hands up in surrender, and his two other denmates grow tense and immediately drop their eyes to the table as if the wood grain is fascinating. “No offense. Sorry. Didn’t mean anything by it. I was just trying to help.”

The air is squeezed from the room like it’s an accordion. I gape at Ellery and the other den because what the hell was that?

Karen gives an amused snort and Ellery leans back in his chair and seems to force himself to take a deep breath and relax. As soon as he does, everyone else in the room lets the tension bleed from their frames, and the easygoing vibe that was just chased out of the room returns.

I step forward and quickly grab a muffin from the box, holding it in my hand and hoping it will help ease the last tendrils of tension floating around. It makes Dillon smile but has the opposite effect on Ellery. He suddenly looks pissed. His back straightens and I see him grip the pen so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t snap.

Immediately, I know I've made some kind of muffin or shifter faux pas, but I have no idea what. Maybe it was the muffin he wanted? But I can't exactly put it back because I've touched it, and manners, so I just sit there as Ellery returns his attention to the Sullivan den.

"You three were at Droolies the night of the Hunt. You saw Noah there, correct?" he asks sternly.

All three men nod, looking from the sheriff to me and back again, confusion sprinkled across their faces.

"Several witnesses reported that you were watching her at the diner. Can you explain that?" Ellery presses.

"Witnesses?" Dillon asks, his brow furrowing. He looks around as though expecting one of the other deputies to explain, but no one does.

Hank clears his throat awkwardly. "We stopped in to grab a bite to eat before the Hunt. She...uh, Noah, is it?" he asks me, and I nod. "Well, Noah came in after we'd ordered and, well, she caught our attention," he explains, waving a hand in my direction.

I fight the urge to slink down and hide beneath the table when everyone turns to look at me. It almost reminds me of the time in sixth grade that Mike told Tommy, who told Ginna, who told me that Mike thought I was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. But pile on top of that an angry reaction from a celestial shifter who looks like he might rip the armrests off his chair. I feel like I just downed an entire bottle of awkward, and it burns like bleach.

"We were going to run, and like Dillon said, we overheard her talking to Zara about it, so we were being a little, I guess you could say, nosey," he continues, embarrassment pinkening his cheeks.

"And did you run?" Fife asks, stepping forward because Ellery looks ready to breathe fire.

Brooks dives into the conversation. "No. We planned on it, but I tweaked my back at work earlier—my team's been renovating the old Aradia property. I thought I'd be fine, but

when I went to shift, I threw it all the way out, and there was no way we could run,” he explains, leveling an apologetic look at his denmates. They both pat him reassuringly on the shoulder and back, and wave off his obvious chagrin.

“Bummer. You missed out on snagging Poodle here. She’s stuck with Ellery’s den now,” Karen says just before she takes a bite of her muffin.

“Tragedy,” Bucky jokes, but the Sullivan den goes stiff.

His comment feels like a dig at the den, but I’m not familiar enough with eerie dynamics to be sure. The angry glint in some of their eyes tells me I’m on the right track though. There must be some kind of history I don’t understand, because unlike the Bianchi den, these guys don’t seem so bad. Or maybe I’m just overthinking things, sensing insults where there are none because the cringey nature of this whole interview is invading my brain.

“I guess congrats are in order,” Brooks rasps, nodding at Ellery.

The sheriff gives a stiff nod of acknowledgement before turning his eyes to me. Fuck. The possessive look he gives me should be illegal. It’s the kind of look that makes women agree to all sorts of stupid things. Sure, you can handcuff me. Whips and chains? Sounds fun.

I drop my gaze to my muffin before my lower belly catches fire, because the last thing I want to be caught doing with an audience is eye-fucking the sheriff. Well, with *this* audience anyway. Karen is definitely the type to never let me live that down.

“Did you see the healer? For your back, I mean? Must have been bad if it wasn’t healing on its own,” Bucky asks before Ellery can muster up another question.

“Yeah, Imogen came by. It was better later that night,” Brooks answers.

Ellery writes something down on his pad, and from here I can just make out the words, *check alibi* and *Imogen*.

“Did you three notice anyone else in the diner who seemed interested in Noah? Anyone outside who might have been watching her when you left?” Fife inquires.

Dillon shrugs. “There were other dens there fueling up like we were, the McNeals and the Evanoras. I got the impression that they were curious too. I mean, she’s pretty and new, so that’s to be expected, ya know,” he explains, dropping his gaze and scratching at his arm.

“Anyone outside when you left?” Ellery asks again.

“Not that we noticed, but we weren’t exactly on the lookout,” Hank offers sheepishly.

“What’s this all about, sir?” Dillon demands, sitting up straighter and studying everyone more sharply. “Did someone hurt you?” he asks angrily, his intense stare suddenly trained on me.

“Someone stole Noah’s car,” Ellery starts.

“And threw the poor naif into the Hunt,” Fife adds. Ellery levels him with a glare.

Come the fuck on, Fife. He definitely shouldn’t have said that. Even I know better. But my reaction is nothing compared to the Sullivan den’s.

“Oh shit,” Dillon exclaims at the same time Brooks asks, “Naif?” Their muscles grow tight with anger, and each member radiates outrage.

“Don’t you dare wolf out in here,” Karen orders, scooting sideways along the wall like she doesn’t want wolf germs.

The red crystals on the table strobe brighter, and the Sullivan den winces.

“That’s...that’s fucked-up,” Dillon growls. “What are we doing?” he demands, as though the need to take immediate action is riding him hard.

My eyes sting with sudden emotion at their response.

Is this what Alpha Morgan meant about pack? People who will have your back and fight for you no matter what, all

because you're one of them?

Ellery, Ruger, Perth, and Gannon were all furious on my behalf too, but I figured that was thanks to the mate claim. I mean, what happened to me directly affected them too. They're stuck with some woman who doesn't know jack-shit about their world or even if she wants a mate, so they'd obviously have feelings about that. But to see perfect strangers enraged over what was done to me...well, it's surprisingly touching.

"Interviewing the dens that were hanging around that night, and chasing any other leads that come up," Karen answers, and Dillon's brows dip in thought.

"You're just interviewing dens?" he questions, looking around the room.

"Yeah, for now," Karen tells him.

"Well, isn't that a little sexist?" he asks. "I mean, it was a Hunt night, and yeah, that means the dens were out in force. But so were the lone wolves who were running. Most lone shifters are women, right?"

"Yes..." Ellery's brow furrows.

"What if a woman who was set to run backed out at the last second? What if she didn't really want to or was being pressured into it, so she tossed someone into her cape to take her place, stole a car, and hightailed it out of town... You're looking for a den, but maybe you should be looking for a she-wolf."

NOAH



Ellery grimaces when Karen immediately agrees with Dillon.

I furrow my brow and ask, “I thought women chose to run?”

The sheriff’s eyes shoot over to me. “They do.”

But Karen cuts him off. “Well, yeah, technically they do. But all kinds of people in a relationship can feel pressured to take that next step. Or families can pile on.” Next to me, she waves her muffin to emphasize her point. “He’s right. Female shifters are just as strong as males. Some of them anyway. Our attacker could be either.”

Oh fuck. That would put us back to square one. Or did we ever leave it? Why is a real-life investigation nothing like the TV shows? Why can’t we have wrapped up this shit in an hour? It’s been days of wondering and agonizing. And it’s still not over. Now, a whole new set of possibilities just opened up. Could that be what actually happened? Could it have been a shifter woman who got cold feet? Did she see me as her way out?

“It’s worth exploring,” the sheriff reluctantly acknowledges as he leans back in his chair. “But we suspect someone’s been following Noah around town.” He turns to me. “The person you saw, any chance it could be a woman?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, thinking about all the different eeries Alpha Morgan said lived in Howling Rapids. “Unless the pack has their very own Brienne of Tarth, they looked too

big to be a woman. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I couldn't definitively say what kind of eerie they were or that I didn't get spooked by someone who was just out for a walk and I misread the situation."

Ellery shoots me a disapproving look at that last part, but I ignore it. I know it's important to trust my gut, but it's also important to be realistic too. I don't know for sure that someone was following me around, and until I do, it's smart to consider all theories.

"To be fair, if someone is following her, it could be because she smells like a partial mate bond. You know something like that is going to draw attention. If it goes too long, you're going to start facing challenges, even if you're the celestial," Hank interjects, and both Fife and Bucky nod in agreement.

Ellery pushes back from the table and stands. "If you want to officially challenge me, we can go outside and take care of this right fucking now," he snarls.

A wave of furious possessiveness washes over the room and nearly buckles my knees. There's suddenly a scent filling my nostrils that I can't identify, and I start panting. The muffin in my hand becomes a stress ball, and I squeeze it. My nipples tighten and I panic that everyone can see them right through my T-shirt.

Holy hell, what is this?

"I appreciate you guys coming in," he declares stiffly, walking over and pulling open the door in a clear dismissal. "If you think of anything else that might be helpful, please call or stop by."

The Sullivan den all get up and throw concerned and apologetic looks at me before they start to file out. The box of muffins is left behind.

"Be sure to get some sleep, Brooks," Fife calls out, giving him a friendly little wave, oblivious to the vibe in the room.

Brooks huffs out a laugh. "Will do. Last witch reno project for me. Hopefully, we'll be done soon."

Brooks and Hank leave without another word, and Dillon pauses in the doorway. "I'm here to help if you need anything," he offers. After a nod from Ellery, he follows the rest of his den.

As soon as they're gone, Ellery shuts the door. He strides right to me and looms, forcing me to look up at him, my neck exposed. Those eyes of his glide over me, and damn if I don't feel them like a caress. Everyone else in the room just becomes a dab of color as I focus in on his face.

"Are you hungry?" he asks softly, tone R-rated and completely inappropriate for the workplace.

"Um...no," I answer, still confused about what is happening and why my body feels like a puppet on strings with Ellery as its puppeteer.

"Are you going to eat that?" he presses, nodding his chin at my muffin.

I look down at the misshapen and crumbling baked good still clutched in my hand. "Uh...I wasn't planning on it. Do you want it?" I hold it up to him, and he looks like I just offered him a dead rat.

"If you're hungry, tell me, and *I'll* get you food," he mandates, and I nod, not sure what the hell is going on right now.

Ellery takes the muffin from my hand.

"*Good girl,*" he praises inside my head.

Oh shit. Without my knowing it, someone erected an entire waterpark between my thighs. And those words...yeah, they fucking turned on the slides.

He inhales and I swear he can smell what just happened to me. My cheeks glow as bright red as the crystals on the table behind him.

Turning, Ellery wears a smirk as he walks across the room and drops the muffin in the garbage can, just as a huge man appears in the doorway. The sheriff waves the man in.

I'm distracted when Karen presses a hand to my arm, and I look over at her instead of watching the new den enter.

"Heads up," she whispers. "Shifters are weird as hell when it comes to providing for their mate. He won't like anyone trying to take care of you when that's his and his den's responsibility," she explains, squeezing my arm once before sliding away along the wall again.

Like a struck match, understanding sparks through me. Oh. Duh. That explains so much about the past couple of days and my babysitter bodyguards.

I smile at Karen in gratitude and turn to find three frat-boy-esque men pulling out seats on the other side of the long table. One of them is wearing a black cowboy hat that's seen better days, it looks like a mouse has been chewing on the brim. It was dark the night I ran into him, but I have no doubt that this is the guy I saw after the coffee shop. He leers at me, and I instantly feel the need to get as far away from him as I can.

"What the fuck is this about?" a platinum-haired douche beside Cowboy Hat demands.

"Take your seat. Where's William?" Ellery asks instead of explaining.

I like his style. I call it flicking a dick. Instead of stroking them off and feeding their egos, you remind them who's in charge. It's a personal fave.

The blond mouthpiece for the group huffs irritably as he flops into his chair. "His aunt died. He's up north making arrangements and getting her house sorted. That's where we were headed too, until one of your pissants pulled us over and informed us our presence was *requested* here."

"I'm sorry for your den's loss, Mitch," Fife offers.

Mitch, the blond prick, rolls his eyes. "If you pulled us in here to offer useless condolences, I'm going to be pissed. This is already a waste—"

"Where were you the night of the Hunt?" Ellery interrupts, getting right to the point.

Mitch studies the sheriff, a taunting smirk spreading slowly across his face. “Here and there.”

“Be more specific,” Ellery encourages flatly.

“We spent most of the night with the Gullvieg murder,” the third member of the boy band offers.

“*Wait. What?*” I stare at him for a beat before Ellery clarifies in my head.

“A murder is a den of crow shifters. The Gullvieg murder is full of females.”

Oh. Okay. Yeah, that’s far less creepy than I originally thought. I study the third guy, who’s got a Roman nose. He seems to be the tag-along in this group. Asshole by association, at least if my assumptions are right. He rolls his eyes at Mitch like he’s sick of the tough guy routine too.

Farther down the wall, Bucky goes still. “What were you doing over there?” he demands a bit protectively. “Shouldn’t you have been running in the Hunt?”

Mitch laughs and leans back in his chair. “We don’t need a bitch nipping at our heels just yet.” His hazel eyes move to me. “Then again, if we knew there was fresh meat running, maybe we would have.” His eyes trail all over me, and the ick is almost overwhelming.

“And where were you two?” Ellery asks the other guys sitting at the table.

Cowboy Hat continues to eyeball me as he answers. “Tony”—he jerks his chin in the direction of the guy with the Roman nose—“and I closed up shop a little late, and then we met Mitch at the Gullvieg’s. That Hunt ceremony always gets the ladies all kinds of rowdy, and we took full advantage.”

Bucky huffs in disgust and I agree. One-night stands aren’t an issue, but this guy’s attitude toward them makes me feel sorry for any woman he’s ever touched. I guarantee he’s never given anyone other than himself an orgasm in his life.

Cowboy Hat’s smarmy grin drips with menace. “You smell unfucked,” he sneers. “Your new mates not up to standard,

cupcake? Need me to bend you over real quick and show you how it's done?"

Ellery's roar is deafening, and he explodes out of his chair so fast I almost can't track it. He leaps across the table and has Cowboy Hat pinned against the wall by his throat quicker than I can say *eat shit* to the guy. Cowboy's hat goes flying, and Fife and Bucky are on the other two guys before they push out of their chairs to interfere. Meanwhile, Karen's stepped protectively in front of me.

"Don't you ever speak to my mate like that again," the sheriff snarls into the other shifter's face. I check his veins for black lines, but none appear. There's just the raw, feral nature of his fury. He looks unhinged...he looks fucking hot.

I swallow hard against a ripple of attraction that surges down my body from head to toe.

Cowboy Hat tries to laugh, but Ellery's hold on his throat tightens and the sound is choked off. "She doesn't smell like she's yours, Celestial," he gasps out defiantly. "She smells needy."

"Did you hurt her?" Ellery demands, pushing Cowboy Hat up the wall until he's on his tiptoes. "Did you attack her and throw her into the Hunt?"

"Why the fuck would we do that?" Mitch shouts, growling when Bucky tweaks the arm he's holding behind the shifter's back.

"Because you're assholes," Karen offers, while she examines her black nails like all of this is no big deal.

"From where I'm sitting, Sheriff, you and your den bit her, so how do we know *you* didn't throw her into the Hunt and now you need someone else to pin it on? That's what you Arcans like to do, right? Walk around like you shit gold and can do whatever you want."

"We didn't touch her," Tony insists, and Ellery's nostrils flare like he's scenting the shifter's answer.

After an easy few seconds, Ellery tosses the cowboy. His yell is more animal than human when he orders, "Get the fuck

out!”

Cowboy Hat scrambles to his feet, and Fife and Bucky let the other two go. The den scurries away like roaches fleeing light, cowards despite all their bravado and shit talking.

Ellery turns to the rest of us, his eyes glowing and furious and repeats the order. “Out.”

His staff scramble around the sides of the table, and I move to follow. But the sheriff’s arm shoots out and grabs my wrist, stopping me.

“Karen—the crystals,” he growls.

“You sure—” she starts.

“Take them.”

She carefully picks up the bowl of red crystal shards and carries them into the hall. Bucky shuts the door behind her, careful not to meet my alarmed gaze.

Why do I have to be stuck here with the furious alpha and they all get to escape?

“You need a minute?” I shakily ask Ellery, whose veins started to blacken the second the bowl left the room.

His pupils dilate and he licks his lips as he stares down at me. All that anger converts to something else.

Oh shit.

“I need—” Ellery steps forward into my body, and I take a step back, bumping up against the wall. He presses in close to me, so close that the heat of his body soaks into mine.

The world around us stills, and a devious little threat of desire ties me up in knots. My hands don’t know what to do or where to move, and suddenly they’re on his chest. I can feel his heartbeat underneath his uniform, and it’s meteoric. Inhumanly fast. Mine speeds up to match his as my throat dries out.

“Can I, please?” He doesn’t finish his sentence, almost as if words are too hard for him to form right now.

I can't blame him, because my vocabulary has shrunk to basic sounds. Nerves skitter through me at his proximity, and yet I want him closer. I feel this visceral *need* to know that he's alright, but for some reason, words don't seem the best way to do that. No, my body is pushing me to shove my nose into the crook of his fucking neck and wrap myself around him.

Insanity.

And then he leans down, planting one hand on the wall next to my head, my wrist still gently but firmly locked in the grip of his other hand. Our eyes meet and the pent-up desire pouring from him floods me as if it's my own. Or maybe it *is* my own. I can't tell.

I stop breathing.

There's an intensity to this moment that goes beyond anything I've ever experienced before. It feels like diving into an ice-cold lake and having every nerve in your body come alive at the same time.

His face comes down, closer and closer. "Noah," he murmurs my name, and it's the most erotic thing I've ever heard. His eyelids flutter shut.

I keep mine open. I don't want to miss a second.

When Ellery's lips brush mine, the ground rushes up at me because gravity forgets itself. He catches me, and I realize it's not gravity but my legs that have given out. He smiles against my lips as he pushes me into the wall so that I can't fall down again. And then his lips begin to nip and suck. He ravages my mouth desperately. Feverishly.

My arms wrap around the back of his neck, and my fingernails start to carve half-moons into his skin, marking him, staking my claim...my claim.

But doing so drags me out of the moment. Shit. I'm not ready for forever. For the permanence of the mate claim. I rip my lips away and bring a hand to them, feeling how plump and sore and deliciously well-kissed they are.

Fuck.

I want this kiss. I want more kisses, but is it smart? Will it mean what he wants it to mean?

Fuck. I don't know, and for that reason, I push him back.

He lets me, makes no move to convince me to give him what he so clearly wants. I hate that I don't give in. My body hates me even more, but I'm not going to play around with emotions I don't understand and am not ready to return.

Heart pounding, I step around him and speed walk for the door. I want him, more than I've ever wanted anything, but that scares the shit out of me. I'm not prepared for this. Not prepared at all. I grab the handle and yank it open, fleeing to the safety and sanity of the hall.

A low, pained howl is the last thing I hear before the door to the conference room shuts behind me, locking the mournful sound away. I can't help feeling like I've made the right choice and the wrong one all at the same time, and I have no idea where that leaves me.

Fucked, that's where. Completely and utterly fucked.

NOAH



Karen takes one look at me and announces, “Retail therapy STAT!” and then pretends to shock me with an imaginary defibrillator. Before I can protest, she grabs my hand and pulls me after her through the maze of cubicles and out toward the front of the precinct. “No more hobo chic for you, Poodle, it’s time to show these boys what you’re workin’ with. Let’s go slut you up!”

“Ew, Karen, nobody says shit like that,” I argue, stopping in the middle of the lobby and side-eyeing her.

“Pretty sure I’m someone and *I* just said it,” she counters matter-of-factly. “And come on, you know you’ve got cake. Let’s make those boys wanna blow your candles out.”

I roll my eyes and fight an annoying smile from taking over my mouth. “Are you in middle school?”

Karen just cackles, a true evil witch cackle that makes me grin as I shake my head. She snatches my hand again and yanks me out of the front doors. As much as I hate shopping, I’m glad to leave the tension with Ellery behind for a bit. This is what I need. Something uncomplicated and silly to wipe away the aftertaste of uncertainty.

“We’ll be a little early for our appointment, but it’s close enough. Trista and Astrid won’t mind.” Karen links her arm with mine.

As we head down the steps, I note that the wind has picked up a little, and while the sun is still warming my shoulders, dark clouds are collecting along the horizon.

“No. Back off. This is girl time,” Karen snaps, suddenly vicious, pulling me closer.

Wondering what could have caused that over-the-top reaction, I glance to my side and spot two familiar figures lurking on the sidewalk. Perth is leaning against a squad car in jeans and a T-shirt, and Ruger’s standing next to him in all black, his tattoos and muscles on full display.

Fuck. My thighs tighten as attraction spreads through me like the flu with its accompanying fever and chills. My body almost feels shaky with need.

Shit. Can they tell?

My eyes lock onto them, and I stare them up and down like I’m starving. Or a perv. Or fuck, I’m not sure. All I know for certain is I want a police calendar with both of them posing shirtless on it. Maybe holding puppies so I can pretend I bought it for the animals. I have to swallow hard as my steps automatically slow when Perth catches sight of me and straightens. He smiles at me, and then so does Ruger.

Individually, they’re both hot. Dual smiles though? Shit. It’s sensory overload in every possible way. Complete logical meltdown. I can’t help it—my belly tightens and a soft smile creases my lips.

“Goddammit, don’t get puppy-eyed on me. That’s fucking gross.” Karen elbows me in the ribs.

“You just wanted me to slut up for them,” I hiss under my breath at her.

The guys’ smiles widen, and I wonder if they’re reading my unruly thoughts or if their hearing is better than I realized.

“Yeah, so you could show them who’s in charge. None of this dewy-eyed damsel crap.” She fakes a gag.

But her words startle me a little because...did I just look like I was fawning?

Shit.

What just happened with Ellery is all the proof needed to know I can’t be pulling that crap with anyone else. Not unless

I'm ready to hike that mountain, and I'm not. I don't have the gear, the experience, or the training... Crap, am I really thinking in hiking terms? Ew.

Why the hell isn't Gannon the asshole on babysitting duty today? I definitely wouldn't have this issue with him.

"Hey, ladies, where you headed?" Perth asks, loping up to walk a pace or two behind us down the sidewalk.

Karen gives a long-suffering sigh, pursing her green lips for a moment before she says, "You can only come if you promise to *sit* and *stay* like good boys."

"Karen," Ruger gently rebukes her.

"Nope. Those are my terms. Take 'em or leave 'em," she states, walking ahead of the guys and pulling me with her like I'm a pet on a leash.

Scurrying to keep up with the witch, I notice the guys fall into line behind us. I also don't miss the way Karen smirks at that fact.

Oh, it's like that, is it? Well, two can play this game.

"So," I start, my tone goading. "Bucky knows what kind of *breakfast* muffins you like?"

She stops mid-stride and turns to me, her free hand slowly lifting her sunglasses so she can stare directly into my eyes. "You really want to go there, Poodle?"

Nope.

Not anymore.

Not with that deranged look in her eyes. I most certainly do not.

"I do," Perth volunteers from behind me. "What's wrong, Karen? Got fucker's remorse?"

Oh, shit. She's going to consume him piece by piece and pick her teeth with his bones.

Karen glowers over her shoulder at Perth, but he's all happy grins and smiles at having rendered her speechless.

“You are lucky we’re here and that your mate is so *desperately* in need of my help. I don’t have the bandwidth for you right now, but watch your back, mutt.” She lifts two fingers up to her eyes and then points them back at Perth. “Watch your back.”

Perth playfully snaps his teeth at the gesture, earning him a glare so icy it could correct global warming.

Turning to the building, I stare up at a hand-painted purple sign that says Witch Stitch in a curlicue script. I have no idea how a store that has new age crystals and antiques displayed in the window is going to be the answer to my apparel problems.

I need panties not palm-reading predictions.

Karen stands at the door and taps her foot. Perth chuckles and jogs forward to open it.

“After you,” he declares, all gentlemanly. His smile is more naughty than chivalrous though, and he looks at me like we’re sharing a secret.

Only—I’m not aware of any secret.

A little thrill runs down my spine at the gleam in his golden gaze. Karen darts into the shop ahead of me, but I pause as I walk past Perth. My body hums with some unspoken energy, and I move closer to him like I’m a satellite caught in his gravitational pull. Face to face, we watch each other—studying. Tabulating. What, exactly?

No idea.

He’s taller than me, lean defined muscle adding to his bulk and making him thicker than me too. Freckles dapple his face, and there’s a playful challenge bristling between us that makes my heart pump faster. I breathe him in, sipping on his clean cotton scent that’s mixed with a rich musk and a hint of smoke that’s kissed by something deep and slightly floral.

Damn, did I really just get all that from one quick sniff?

I feel a ridiculous amount of triumph when he looks away first, waving me into the shop like he’s an overly polite

doorman. His smile grows wider like he's pleased as punch about whatever just happened.

He likes that I smelled him?

I finally snap out of this weird trance he's pulled me into and step inside.

Stunned, I find it's three times the size it appears from outside. The wood planks of the floor are painted jet black. A chandelier hangs in the center of the high ceilings, filled with so many shimmering crystals that the walls are painted with rainbows from the reflections. A large antique mirror with a gold frame leans against a long wall, but the one thing I don't see anywhere is *clothing*.

Um, hello, Karen. What the fuck is this?

Expectantly, I look over at Perth, hoping he'll clue me in on the inside joke that's clearly taking place. Maybe we stopped by this store for something else? But Perth just grins at me and wags his eyebrows annoyingly. Before I can turn to Ruger in hopes that he'll take pity on my ignorance, the draped beads that cover a back doorway clack and part, revealing the two women I saw in the coffee shop.

"Welcome!" the older woman coos in greeting. "I'm Astrid, and this is Trista, my daughter."

I offer them both a pleasant smile. Trista is wearing an outfit that Wednesday Addams would wear if she were the boss bitch of a major corporation. She has a sleek, pulled-back bun, a crisp white button-down shirt, onyx wide-leg trousers, and a bolo tie. It's the epitome of sophisticated goth vibes.

Astrid's look is on the hippie, flowy, opposite side of the spectrum. Layered necklaces, a long rust-colored skirt and cream top. Her weathered hands are covered in rings, and I spot rows of piercings that decorate the outer edges of both her ears, along with a dainty, barely-there septum ring in her nose.

They're both cooler looking on their worst day than I could ever be on my best.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Trista offers as she snatches up my hand just as soon as her mother releases it. "It's about

time we got some epic new blood in Howling Rapids. Goddess knows we need it,” she assures me, her dark brown eyes twinkling with amusement even though her lips don’t curve up in even a hint of a smile.

“What are we looking for today?” Astrid asks me sweetly. “Something flashy to celebrate your mating? Or maybe a few gifts? Set the tone for the well-deserved spoiling your future holds?”

“Noah is a naif,” Karen offers. “She’s just learning about eeries. And her guys, bless their dumb little hearts, didn’t think to get her squared away with real clothes. They got her fast-fashion crap, not the good stuff she deserves.”

Both Astrid and Trista gasp as though Karen just announced war crimes have been committed instead of shopping at a big-box, everything-in-one-place kind of store.

“Well, boil me in a cauldron,” Astrid whispers, pressing a hand to the multitude of necklaces on her chest as she once again looks me over. I wait to see a sliver of judgment or pity enter her surveying stare, but all I find is a glint of support and determination. “You must be losing your shit right now,” she declares evenly. “About the clothes, sure. But just about...you know, everything.”

I bark out a laugh and then cover my mouth when it echoes loudly through the mostly empty room. “Understatement of the century.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” Trista assures me. “We’ll get you squared away. Ready for the new and exciting dick...” She coughs and pats her chest dramatically. “Oops...I mean, *things* you’re about to face.”

Karen cackles that creepy witch-cackle again, and Trista wraps her arm around my shoulders and steers me toward a raised platform that’s positioned in front of the huge mirror.

I look up and catch Ruger’s watchful gaze in the reflection. An amused smile stretches across his face, and I feel my cheeks pink. Perth is getting comfortable on a dark tan sofa that I swear wasn’t there when we walked in. He tosses his

arms wide across the back, still wearing that impish grin that's doing strange things to my insides.

Why do I feel so affected by them today? Is this because of Ellery, or is this something else?

“Let's get you measured,” Trista announces eagerly, even though her face is so stoic it almost makes me do a double take. It's like she's a ventriloquist without the dummy, her tone is *glitter and rainbows* while her face is *fuck around and find out*.

“Okay,” I agree hesitantly as I try to bat away my confusing thoughts.

Astrid and Trista both close in around me. I expect them to grab a measuring tape or something similar to get started, but when they each pull a pair of lime green hexagonal crystals from their pockets and start running them over my shoulders and back, I'm at a loss for words.

The crystals are cold through my clothes, bumping over my bones and sliding over my skin. Astrid rolls hers all the way up from my wrist to my shoulder blades. Trista skates hers down my spine and over my hip, not stopping until she's crouched over and pressing the sharp point of the crystal against my ankle.

Did they confuse clothing with chakra cleansing?

“So, how does this”—I vaguely wave a hand at the crystals as they continue to glide up and down my body parts—“work, exactly?”

“Oh, I can't wait for you to see,” Astrid exclaims, her tone dipped in sweet excitement the way an ice cream cone might be dipped in chocolate. “We rarely get to meet people who have never seen magic before. Watch,” she encourages eagerly, and just then the crystal in her hand starts to glow a bright, luminescent spring green, giving off purple sparks so brilliant I shy away from them.

A tiny gust of heat assails me, and I close my eyes against the sensation. The second I open them, I'm no longer in a baggy T-shirt and sweatpants. I'm in a black turtleneck

sweater dress with a scandalous slit up the side. A pair of thigh-high black platform boots hug my long legs, and the entire outfit molds to every dip and bend of my body as though it's painted on.

Holy fuck. Add a nifty utility belt, and I look like I could fight Batman.

My long brunette hair tumbles in loose curls over my left shoulder, clean and shiny and freshly styled. I somehow have makeup on that looks like it was applied by a professional, and I lean closer to the mirror and marvel at the smoky eye, peachy blush, and perfect nude lip color.

Holy shit. They just strobed me into looking like I belong on some who's who fashion blog.

A wolf-whistle erupts from Perth behind me as I stare into the mirror, blinking, not believing my own eyes. I turn and marvel for a moment at my ass. Did they give me a magical BBL too? Because it has never looked better.

"Is this a trick mirror?" I ask as I run my hands down my stomach, unable to believe that what I'm seeing is really me.

"Psh, don't insult my hemlines. Those spells took years of work," Astrid retorts. "You look gorgeous."

"You do," Ruger's honeyed voice agrees. "But you were before too," he adds with a shrug, like he's happy to take me all dolled up, but stripped down and natural is just as good.

I meet his gaze in the mirror, and we watch each other for a moment. The more we stare, the more I see etched in the planes of his face, in his warm gaze, in his easy smile. He'd take me in any way I offered. He'd savor, and admire, and relish me, and it'd be so easy for me to do it right back. It could be seamless...

Or, it could go like every relationship I've ever had and crash and burn, leaving me to dig my way out of the rubble.

Dropping my gaze, I inhale a fortifying breath. I swallow hard and glance down at myself, smoothing the fabric around my hips as I try to process just how intense and crazy all of this is. That's when I notice that I also have panties on.

A magical thong.

“Um...so, is all this clothing in the back and you just spell it in place, or...?” *I’m not quite sure how to ask if I’m wearing previously worn underwear. Please say no, please say no, I chant mentally.*

“The rolls of fabric are in the back, but no, we whip up everything right here.” Astrid taps her crystal, and it emits a tiny purple spark like it’s eager to do some more showing off.

Thank fuck. I swallow a sigh of relief. So not ready to dive into a conversation about used panties and shifter hygiene.

Do I need to find a groomer in addition to a hair stylist?

I look at Astrid. “Don’t get me wrong, this is gorgeous, but I don’t think I need anything this nice,” I tell her, hoping it comes off more polite and less *what the fuck.*”

This is not exactly grocery-store attire. I’m not considering a change in career from vet tech to dominatrix, nor do I have the sudden urge to skin dalmatians and make a coat out of them.

“Who cares?” Perth argues. “You’re a knockout; you should definitely keep it.”

The compliment has a very, very mollifying effect on my uncertainty.

“You heard her, ladies, she wants *practical*. She’s new to the eerie world, bitten but not fully claimed; surely you can come up with something more pragmatic for her circumstances,” Karen encourages, but something in her tone has wary suspicion pecking up my spine.

“You make a good point,” Astrid chirps, and that makes me even more nervous.

And then Trista smiles, actually smiles, and I know I’m screwed.

I don’t even get a chance to protest before the witches wave their crystals in a sharp slashing motion, as if swinging swords, and a ripple of heat washes over me.

I stare into the mirror, utterly gobsmacked as my eyes trace over the very skimpy lines of a bright magenta lingerie set. The pushup bra has my breasts lifted to the high heavens and is covered in embroidered flowers. I've got a barely-there thong on and a garter belt that's clipped to sheer thigh-high stockings that are the same color as the set.

Oh my god, did they give me a magical Brazilian, because there is nary a stray hair anywhere?

Several things then happen all at once. Karen starts clapping like this is exactly what she was talking about when she mentioned my needing more practical options. And then a savage roar fills the shop, and Ruger leaps for me.

PERTH



Screams fill the room as Ruger loses it and vaults for Noah. The witches are frozen in shock, mouths gaping, as he explodes forward out of nowhere. Our poor mate looks petrified.

“Shit! Stop!” I mentally yell, but he ignores me.

I shoot up from the sofa. Launching myself at him, with desperate adrenaline racing through me, I pump my arms and reach—reach—reach—

I barely hook my hand onto the back of his shirt before he can grab our mate. Yanking hard, I pull him sideways, off balance so that he can’t get to her. My fingers claw up his torso until I can wrap an arm around his throat and use his momentum to spin him away. Breathing hard, my lungs working in short, furious puffs, I quickly move to place my body between him and our mate, and then I rush him.

My shoulder slams into his solar plexus and pain radiates down my spine as I shove him into the wall. He cracks the plaster when he hits, but I don’t feel sorry for the damage at all; it’s the least the witches deserve for pulling a stunt like this. To say I’m livid with them is a fucking understatement.

“Let go!” he growls, the pupil of his eye overtaking the color until there’s only a glowing ring of spring green left. The black veins in his neck bulge thicker with outrage.

“Calm the fuck down!” I thunder, not a damn bit calm myself. If I didn’t deal with shifters losing their shit on the daily, I might be tempted to shift and fight him right now. Or

take his place and charge at Noah myself. As it is, I can feel the furor of the wolf stampeding through my veins, and I have to breathe deeply to keep myself centered. To keep myself human.

“*Mine!*” Ruger’s howled word echoes inside my skull, and I hear the first of his bones crack.

Shit. He’s starting to shift. “Fight it, Ruger. Fight it. She isn’t ready.”

Fuck, It’s never a good idea to get between a wolf and his mate, but I know Noah won’t understand this extreme reaction to her trying on lingerie. All his instincts are driving him to keep her from being vulnerable and exposed, and one way to fix that is to rut her and then initiate a pair bite to solidify the claim. Right now, his wolf is telling him that’s what needs to happen, and I can’t let it. I grip tighter as he pushes against me, and I switch to mindspeak.

“*She won’t get that you want to protect her. You’ll scare her.*”

She’s not ready for any mate claim shit yet. She’s a naif and barely coming to terms with our world. That fact forces me to get in Ruger’s face and try to talk his crazed wolf down.

Luckily, the word *scare* seems to slow him down a little and lets me know I’m getting through to him. If we were playing poker, his slow blink would be his tell. I exploit my advantage, talking steadily inside his head while my fingers start to ache from the death grip they’re maintaining. “*We don’t want Noah scared. Then she’ll run. We want our mate happy.*”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Trista has the good sense to magic a pink robe over Noah. Thank fuck.

Ruger snarls threateningly in my face, but I don’t hear any more bones cracking, which means he’s winning over his wolf, for now.

I deliberately take a deep calming breath, hoping he’ll do the same.

He doesn’t.

I lean toward him, doing my best to look as unchallenging as possible and whisper in a conspiratorial tone. “She’s safe. Look, she’s covered now. She’s not exposed. The only wolves around are us...see?”

Ruger’s growl morphs into a desperate groan as he fights his instincts and tries to regain control. I fight back my own animalistic drive as I feel his pain lash out in bright, stinging gusts. Resisting is unnatural for a wolf. But so is having an adult naif running in a Hunt and getting claimed.

Noah is breathtaking and strong, and I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

Fending off the need to touch her, to caress her, to rub my nose along the crook of her neck and gulp down her erotic scent...it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. But it’s what she needs. We have to be what she needs.

“*Need her,*” Ruger mindspeaks, the tension in his mental voice vibrating with all the force he’s using to hold himself back.

“*We can’t freak her out if we want to keep her,*” I reply, unsure if he’s capable of rationality right now. I really, *really* don’t want to have to shift to block him. A violent face off will fuck up the progress we’ve made with Noah.

“*Go run it off,*” I order, which might be a stupid thing to do at this moment because, technically, Ruger’s wolf is a touch more dominant than mine. It’s never been an issue before, but we’ve also never had a mate before. I’ve never seen this sort of shimmering need in his eyes. He doesn’t ever lose control like this, but clearly this witch trick and the scraps of pink barely covering our girl are too much for him to handle.

Ruger’s head bombards me with a series of images of us kissing Noah, each of us on either side of her, grasping her hips, pressing her against the wall, peeling her out of the lace and straps—all the things his animal nature is calling for.

The yearning sears through his lungs, and I swear I feel it transfer into me. I have to squeeze my eyes closed against it.

Noah's breathing picks up, and a layered scent of enticing desire rolls off her to mix with the acrid bite of her unease. Whether she knows it or not, she's responding to Ruger and his dominant display—and it's not all fright and alarm. I want to explore that, point it out to her, explain why we're being driven together and why we should act on this hunger. I want to pull the smell of her need deep into my lungs, let it fuel my body to close the distance between us and rip the small bits of fabric from her lithe body, but I can't get past the taint of her trepidation.

We're fucking this up for her. If we're not careful and we push too hard too soon, her panic will drown everything out and she'll slip through our fingers just when we've barely caught hold of her.

"Can't you smell it? She's nervous. She's scared," I point out to Ruger, hoping the sour trace of alarm in the air will slap some sense into him.

"Fuck!" Ruger bellows in my head, and I can tell he's picked up on the scent and hates that it's coming off her as much as I do.

"I know it's hard, but go run it off. I've got her," I tell him aloud, suffusing all the dominance I can into the order. If Ellery were here, he'd shut Ruger down with a single order. Perks of being our den's leader and the most alpha-dominant of the four of us.

Ruger grits his teeth, fighting the change, shaking as he tries to get the black veins to recede. His eyes are still locked on Noah, and she sucks in a breath. Her small noise of fear is what finally snaps him out of it. His green eyes flash, and then with a growl, he spins on his heel away from me and strides out of the shop. The door slams shut behind him.

Thank fuck.

That could have ended badly.

Noah watches the door, and the struggle whether to go after him or not is written all over her face. It's what my

instincts need to see, because she may not be ready to admit it to herself yet, but she's ours.

Trista and Astrid look a bit sheepish, but I can't tell if Karen looks repentant or pleased. Knowing her, it's probably both.

I slap a shaky grin on my face and do my best to de-escalate the situation.

"Well, that outfit's a definite yes," I declare, a little out of breath as I settle my apprehensive gaze back on Noah. "Almost made my boy shift himself," I tease.

Noah stares at me, the look on her face worried as my attempt at levity falls flat as a pancake between us.

"Is he okay?" she asks, her gaze moving from mine back to the door Ruger just disappeared through.

She's worried about him. That's good, maybe this won't set us back.

"He'll be fine," I reassure her.

He might toss around a few cars outside to burn off some of his frustration, but nothing we haven't had to deal with before.

Noah levels me with a *come the fuck on* look. "He didn't look *fine* to me," she argues.

"That's because Ruger is a pillar of calm control. It takes a lot to get him riled up. That'll make more sense when you meet his family," I explain. "He'll be right as rain after a good long run."

"Fuck," she whispers, running her fingers through the long silky strands of her hair, which reach almost to her waist.

The pink robe she's wearing rides up her thighs with the motion, and I have to look away to keep a hold of myself.

"First Ellery and now Ruger. What the hell am I even doing? Why am I standing here playing dress up while everything around me is a complete mess?"

My brow furrows. "What happened with Ellery?"

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she declares, and my stomach lurches at the distress I see on her face. “I don’t know how to be a wolf, or an eerie, or how to stand still in one place for longer than a year. I sure as fuck don’t know how to be someone’s mate, let alone mates with all four of you. This is so fucked.”

Shit. She’s spiraling.

I shoot a quick glare at Karen, and she cringes and points at herself and then the door. She slinks out as Noah drops her face into her hands, and I close the distance between us. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Astrid and Trista disappear through the curtain of beads that leads to their back room. I sigh, grateful that we’re alone, or at least have the illusion of privacy so I can try to help my mate.

“Shifters are sensitive creatures,” I tell her as I move closer. “We feel everything just a little more intensely. Happiness, anger, need—our emotions ride us hard. And sometimes our baser nature rises up to meet that call. It’s not a bad thing or a good thing. It just is. That’s all that happened with Ruger, so don’t let it freak you out,” I explain. “Take it as a compliment.”

“A compliment.”

“He wants to protect you, keep you safe.” I don’t add that his plan to do that mostly involved pinning her to the wall, fucking her so hard the building would shake, and then biting the shit out of her.

Noah sighs and shakes her head, dropping her arms and looking around the room as though she’s searching for something. She fists her hands and then releases the tension, only to fist them again, before her wandering gaze lands back on the door like she wants to run.

Fuck. I can’t let her run.

“Noah, you’re not fucked. You’re just new at all of this. It’s gonna take time and patience for things to make sense and feel normal again. You just have to trust yourself and trust us to help you find your way.”

She releases a little growl that's absolutely adorable. I'm pretty sure she'll swipe at me if I tell her that, so I keep it to myself.

"That's the thing, I don't know how to trust myself anymore. My emotions and thoughts are a fucking tennis ball bouncing back and forth between terrified panic, calm understanding, and this strange pull I've felt since I woke up in bed with you and Ruger. It's confusing as shit. Do you get that?" she asks, and the anguish in her voice tugs at my soul.

I reach for her but she steps back, folding her arms across herself, tugging that wisp of a robe tighter. Her distrust saws roughly at the lining of my stomach, but I back off knowing she needs to get it all out before we can move forward.

"How can I trust myself when I don't even know what I'm feeling anymore? And honestly, *that* probably bugs me more than anything else. Because even on my darkest, hardest days, on the days where the world crumbled and I had to find a way to get back on my feet and survive, I always had *me*," she declares, pressing a hand to her chest. "I've always known that I could rely on myself. That I could, and would, do whatever it took to be okay. But now it feels like I can't trust myself, and I don't know how to get that back. I've gotten used to lonely. But lost is so much worse."

The plea in her declaration wraps its fingers around my heart and squeezes painfully. Tears well in her eyes, and I curse this situation, and all of us, for putting them there. But I'm going to fix it. I have to fix it.

She continues, "I'm being forced to fit myself into a world I don't know, and all I can rely on is a bunch of out-of-whack instincts and a group of complete strangers. I don't know how to do that, Perth." Her expression is pure agonized panic, and her hands make a clawing gesture near her face as if she wants to grab this entire situation and rip it to pieces.

Shit. I need to show her that she belongs here, that she's one of us and always has been. I need to show her she can trust herself and us. Desperate to pull her out of the desolate thoughts she's drowning in, I ask, "Do you dance?"

“What?”

“Do you dance?” I repeat. “Not like you do when you’re home alone rocking out, and not when you let loose in a club or bar. I’m talking with a partner, something more formal and structured?”

Once again, confusion crosses her face. The doubt and bewilderment that settles in her blue-green gaze beats the hell out of the lost anguish and despair that was just there. I’ll take it.

A little flustered, she answers, “No, I don’t dance. I mean, I’ve never...”

“Perfect,” I chirp as I step closer to her in all her gorgeous glory and extend my hand. It takes effort to keep my tone light and playful so I don’t put any undue pressure on her, though my wolf is howling for me to grab her and chase her mouth with my own. I bat him down and ask, “Noah, may I have this dance?”

Her nose scrunches up adorably as she surveys first my hand, then my arm, and finally my face. I feel the caress of her perusal as if she skims her fingers across my skin instead of her eyes. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, keen awareness rising inside of me. Is she checking me out, or is she debating whether I’m safe?

I let my own eyes glide across her heart-shaped face, the soft angle of her jaw, the long line of her neck. I don’t let myself go any further, because I refuse to tempt the restless wildness already pacing inside my chest.

Mate.

The title and all that it means rings in my mind like a gong. I breathe slowly to quiet the overwhelming need to touch and taste and bite reverberating through me. That’s easier said than done because I know what’s wrapped beneath that flimsy robe, and I have all those dirty images Ruger planted in my mind circling like vultures.

Her scent blooms around me, and I bite my lip hard, using the pain to keep me from closing my eyes and falling into the

memory of how good it felt to hold her that first morning.

As much as I want to get lost in her, this isn't about me or how much I love having her so close again. This dance is for her.

I smile at her, and then my grin grows even wider when there's a hitch in her breath in response.

That. That right there is her tell. That's what I need to show her. That her body is responding to me, to my den, and that her instincts are trustworthy.

"It's okay if you don't understand," I reassure her. "Will you dance with me anyway? Promise I won't crush your toes."

Noah hesitates for a second more and then slowly lifts her hand, the movement unsure, like she's still debating what to do.

I wait for her to come to me, and it's the most delicious agony.

The anticipation of how her skin will feel is beautiful torture. I want to know—no, I need to know—how it feels to thread our fingers together and what her hand looks like when it's on top of my palm.

My heart speeds up with the awareness of what's at stake here, the fact that she could easily say no when I desperately need her to say yes.

Come on, Noah.

An explosion of warmth erupts on my palm when she finally slides her hand into mine. Her skin is softer than silk, and something bright and joyful leaps inside my chest as my fingers close eagerly around hers.

Yes.

But then, when she looks down shyly and glances back up through her lashes with a tentative smile, I forget all about my hands. I have hands? I don't even know what appendages are for a moment. Because when she looks at me through those sooty lashes, I drown in that blue-green gaze.

Oxygen ceases to be the essential element for my life—those eyes are.

One of my fathers always told me men fall faster and harder and to watch out for that. I didn't believe him.

Fuck, was he ever right.

With that revelation unsettling my mind, I still have to pretend I'm composed and not some lovestruck fool. I'm not completely sure I succeed at keeping a sappy look off my face, but I attempt to look calm.

Striding backward, I guide Noah to follow, and she steps away from the mirrors. I pull us to the middle of the room, stopping just under the massive chandelier that lights the shop, because I love the way it paints golden highlights into her hair.

"I know you're overwhelmed," I start as we settle in across from one another, her delicate hand still gripped in mine. "Everything that's happened since the day you got here is nuts."

"You can say that again," she quips, but her smile is weary. The return of her sarcasm helps me relax, eases some of the tension I didn't even realize was tightening my spine. Ribbing means she's not terrified.

"You've had to put up with a lot, and I don't just mean Karen." I pull a face.

That earns me a snort-laugh, bolstering my confidence and prompting me to step closer.

Fuck.

I could just stare at her for hours, memorize every smile, every freckle, and gleam in her eyes. I want to know what she looks like when she's at peace and happy. When she's sated. I want to know what she looks like when she's coming on my cock...

Crap. Not helping, Perth.

I shake off my wandering thoughts and continue, "The eerie world can be shocking, but you can—you will—manage it. One step at a time. Just like dancing."

I catch her inhaling deeply and wonder if she's pulling in my scent. If she likes it as much as I like hers. I hope so. Because this woman smells like the only future I want.

I lift my other hand, palm up. This time there's no hesitation as she sets her free hand in mine.

I start guiding her, moving backward and letting her body get used to my command. Her first few steps are reluctant and unsure, but quickly she realizes all she has to do is stride around the room at my lead. No dancing yet, merely moving together.

"We're going to two-step," I explain as we circle the room slowly. I'm a bit taller than her, and I have to shorten my steps so she can keep up. I change the pace a few times once I realize that her legs brush against mine when we're off-rhythm. That tiny hint of a touch lights a flare inside my head, shooting off delicious red sparks, and I have to breathe slowly and carefully to reset myself. Remind myself that I have to be good.

With a metric ton of effort fighting against my wolf, we settle into an even pace.

"The thing about telling someone how to dance is...it moves focus to the wrong place. You get in your head, try to picture the moves and figure out how to fit your body into what you've been told. Logically, that might make sense or feel like the easiest way to put it all together. That's only because we're used to braining everything out."

She gives a lopsided grin. "Braining, huh?"

"Yes, too much braining." I wink. "I avoid it whenever possible."

That earns me a soft laugh that makes my chest expand to twice its normal size as I continue, "In the end, it isn't our brains that are doing the actual dancing. It's our bodies. And sometimes it's better for our bodies to tell our minds what feels right."

With that, I pull her closer. I position us in a classic, closed dance position. Noah automatically rests a hand on my

shoulder, and she gasps quietly as I fit us together before once again leading her into the quick-quick-slow-slow rhythm of the dance.

She stumbles a little and drops her eyes.

“Look at me, Noah,” I gently correct in a low tone. And those eyes slowly rise back up to my face, flooding me with emotions. Now that she’s so close, I notice details about her face that I’d missed before—a tiny scar near the left corner of her mouth, like she nicked her lip on something. A trio of freckles near her hairline. The divot in the middle of her luscious lips.

I start to get hard having her here, holding her close, feeling her trust me. And suddenly I’m not sure I can do this. I might need to run like Ruger. I might need to burst out that door and burn through this hunger threatening to overtake me.

But that would leave her alone. Unguarded. That’s un-fucking-acceptable. Breathing deep, I envision a metal door and slam it closed on my human and wolf desires all at once.

“Don’t we need music?” Noah questions, pulling me out of my thoughts. Fuck, she’s looking up at me, her pupils steadily dilating, and her breaths are growing more shallow as the cadence of our movement speeds up. It doesn’t help my self-control.

Gentle, Perth. She needs gentle.

“We don’t need music, but can I tell you a story?” I ask, needing to distract myself, to show Noah that she’s not alone, that I understand a little where she’s coming from.

“Of course.” She blushes. “I’d love to hear something about you.”

“I haven’t been in your shoes, dealing with what you’re dealing with. But I do know a little something about how it feels to have your head and your heart go to war.”

Her fingers squeeze mine as I search for my next words. “I have good memories of my parents’ den from when I was younger, birthdays and all that. That surprises a lot of people

because they were from feuding packs, but they made it work.”

Noah’s eyebrows shoot up but she doesn’t voice the questions I know she must have. Instead, her gaze roams gently over my face as if she knows there’s a twist coming. There is.

“It was all good until my mom’s brother, who refused to accept their bond, challenged my dads.”

“What happened?” she asks, voice almost a whisper as we glide around the room.

“My uncle was killed. Mom never recovered. My fathers left their territory and moved here, hoping a change of scenery would help, but nothing they did or said pulled her from her grief. Nothing I did or said made a difference either. After that fight, she was just...not herself. One day I woke up and she was gone. She left.”

I find my throat oddly tight as I recount a story that everyone in town fucking witnessed. But I realize I’ve never spoken the entire thing aloud until this moment. I’ve never had to, never wanted to, never needed to share my loneliness with someone else before.

“How old were you?” Noah asks, her blue-green eyes studying my face like she can see each thread of pain and stitch of loss that’s been embroidered into who I am.

“Fifteen,” I answer. “My dads struggled for a while and ultimately decided to go after her. I never saw any of them again.”

Noah jerks us to a stop and stares up at me, aghast. “They just left you behind and never came back?” The end of her question gets rougher, her tone a tiny bit angrier.

I shrug, the sharpness of that fact dulled enough by time that it doesn’t hurt quite as badly as it used to. In fact, her hint of outrage on my behalf almost soothes the small ache like a balm. “Honestly, looking back, they abandoned me long before they ever actually left,” I admit evenly. “Don’t worry, it

fucked me up in all the ways you'd expect," I joke, and she snorts out a laugh and shakes her head at my dark humor.

We stare at each other for a moment, the air swimming with both our vulnerable confessions, our pain and fears exposed for the other to see. And instead of judgment or discomfort, her face is full of sympathy. I imagine my expression is the same.

I move a tiny bit closer, the need to kiss her almost overwhelming, but she startles because the lights in the chandelier suddenly dim and then start to pulse and flicker like candle light even though they're electric bulbs. Unexpectedly, a warm tingling sensation sneaks across my body, and I look down. Yellow sparks are fading all around me, and my jeans and T-shirt have been replaced with a black-on-black tux. My hair has been magically and stylistically slicked back, and my sneakers replaced with fancy-looking loafers, the kind I'd never choose myself.

I shake my head just as Noah gives a gasp of shock and pulls away. In a blink, her pink robe and lingerie melt into a flowy cherry-red dress that ties around her neck, hugging her torso like a second skin and then flowing from her waist down in long pleats to the ground. Her lips are painted the same ruby color, and her hair hangs smooth and straight down her back. She looks stunning, and it calls to my baser nature in an undeniable and staggering way that leaves me breathless.

"I don't know if I'm more impressed or unnerved that they can do this," she mumbles in awe as she pulls back from my grip to run her hands down the bodice of the silky scarlet gown.

The lingerie was pure torment. And now they've put her in a dress with a single tie to keep it up.

"It's official, Astrid and Trista are sadists out to torture me."

I feel my nerves light with heated desire and have to glance over at the beaded curtain-covered doorway to distract myself.

“Need to pull a Ruger and go for a run?” Noah mocks.

I look back, the cheeky glint in her eyes making me grin. “Nah, I don’t need to run. I like to live close to the edge. Edging is kinda my thing.”

I wink at her and Noah chokes on air, coughing for a second until she’s recovered enough to laugh.

“Dammit, Perth. You’re killing me.” She shakes her head, and her features soften as she looks at me, expression changing from amusement to wonder. “How’d you get to be so normal?”

My barked laugh bounces around the room, and Noah’s beautiful eyes glimmer with pleasure. “I hate to break it to you, but I turn into a wolf. I don’t know how *normal* that is.”

She giggles and swats playfully at my chest. “Fair point,” she admits, trailing off as fervor slowly seeps into her features. “But you’re just so happy...how?”

The longing in her voice almost cleaves me in two. I don’t want her to want for anything. So, I give her the only thing I can in this moment—the truth.

“It wasn’t me. It was them. When I met Ellery, Ruger, and Gannon, I struggled to accept them. On some broken level, I convinced myself that they couldn’t fully accept me. I mean, the people who were supposed to love me and care for me unconditionally didn’t, so how could these strangers?”

Her eyes tell me that she knows exactly where I’m coming from.

“I wish I could tell you that it was easy, that it all just clicked one day and we’ve lived happily ever after. It was hard. My insecurities fucked shit up for a long time. But my den, my brothers, they *always* showed up for me. No matter what happened or how I pushed them away, they didn’t budge. And slowly, the voice in my head that kept telling me they were going to leave, that I wasn’t enough, stopped sounding believable because their actions relentlessly proved it was a liar.”

Noah gives me a small smile, but sadness marks the edges of it. She looks away, her gaze buried in uncertainty and doubt, and pulls in a deep breath, using my scent to ground her without even realizing it.

I automatically step closer, scenting her in return. Wanting her. The perfume of fear that tainted her earlier is gone, but sadness still lingers the way that humidity thickens the air after a storm.

“Shall we?” I put my hand back out and she takes it. We resume our dance. She easily follows my steps now, though I don’t think she realizes it. Her self-consciousness is gone, and her body is doing what feels natural.

Her eyes study mine for a second, and when she takes a deep breath, I tense, expecting her to fortify her defenses and lock me out like she has before. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and then like a flower that just needed a little light to bloom, she opens up.

“I don’t know how many homes I lived in after my mom died.” Her intense gaze is fixed on mine, pleading for me to hear and understand what she’s saying.

I don’t breathe. I almost stop moving, but I force myself to continue because I don’t want to interrupt her finally letting me in.

“As I got older, they stopped trying to fit me into cozy little family units. It became group homes or larger centers for unwanted kids. Time after time, I’d think I found something, found where I belonged, only to have it yanked away. Even as an adult, when I could control where I lived, what I did, who I let into my life, I kept seeing over and over again that unconditional love and acceptance is a fucking myth. I’ve been chasing this thing my whole life, Perth, but I’ve had to accept that, for some people, it’s impossible to catch.”

God, I want to wrap her into my arms and never fucking let go. She’s wrong, so goddamned wrong that I want to put my teeth on her neck and nip at her for even thinking such a thing. Primal urges surge through me and I push them away,

pushing her at the same time. I expertly spin her and then twirl her back into my arms, pulling her in tight.

She squeals in surprise, eyes darting up to mine shocked and playful, like she thinks I'm trying to silly away her sadness. But I'm not playing.

Tension grips me as I pull and push her, dominate her through this dance, show her that she's wrong—show her what she's capable of if she just gives in to her instincts.

Finally, I pull her close. Fitting her against me like we're two pieces forged from the same steel, meant to fit together seamlessly and become stronger as a whole. Dropping my lips closer to her ear, I lower my voice, lacing it with certainty.

“They weren't your people, Noah,” I tell her smoothly, and I watch goose bumps trail up the side of her neck as her scent deepens. “They couldn't give you what you needed, what you deserved, because you were never meant to be theirs. You were always going to be ours.”

Her quiet gasp rings in my ears, and the scent of her arousal floods the room. Her body knows the truth of my claim, and I fucking press my advantage. I step in closer, wedging my thigh between hers as I lean down. “I know you don't believe me yet. Talk is fucking cheap—we both know that—so let us prove it. Let us fight for you, claim you the way you deserve, because we will. We're desperate to.” I pull her up against me tighter, until she's straddling my thigh. When I release her, she slides back down slowly, panting.

Stunned.

Need courses through me like an unstoppable tidal wave, crashing over me, pushing my hands to touch her. I cup her face, my thumb brushing across the flushed apples of her cheeks.

“Let us show you that we can be your forever.” The whispered words skim both of our lips as I lean closer. Her breath catches and the flickering golden light from the chandelier glimmers in her eyes. We hover, our vulnerabilities perfuming the air as we trade breaths for a moment, inhaling

one another's scents, devouring each other with our eyes, neither of us daring to move closer or away.

It's all I can do not to kiss her.

My wolf roars at me to pull her into my arms and let my body show her that she's mine, that there's no running from this, that everything is going to be okay, but I stop myself. Barely.

"Don't let what's in here"—I reach up and run a finger down her temple, her skin softer than satin—"overpower what you feel here," I whisper as I drop my hand to the top of her chest and press my palm over her heart.

I can feel it hammering against my touch as though it wants to reach me as badly as I want to reach her. Her heart recognizes me, even if her head doesn't yet.

I press us forward, leaving one hand over her heart while the other clasps her shoulder blade. My feet find the quick-quick-slow-slow cadence of the two-step again, and Noah matches my movements seamlessly.

A slow smile stretches across my face as I stare down at her. "You'll be surprised what you can do if you just let go. Ten minutes ago you'd never danced like this before. Now look at you," I point out. "Who we are, the power we possess, it's no different. You can make everything harder on yourself by *braining* your way through this, or you can trust your instincts. You can do this, Noah. You were always meant to. If you let yourself, you'll feel the truth of that, *here*," I tell her, pressing softly against her chest once more before dropping my hand, releasing her, and taking a step back.

It's hard. So fucking hard not to pull her back in and keep her right where I want her, where I need her. But one more second and I'm going to fucking shift. I've reached the brink of self-control.

Noah leans after me, her subconscious telling me that she hates the distance I just put between us. I hate it too, but it's necessary. I've pushed her enough for now. She needs to

decide what she wants and bridge the gap between us when she's ready. And I'll be right here waiting when she does.

NOAH



Perth, Karen, and I crowd into the hotel elevator, my arms weighed down by bags that Astrid and Trista insisted are essentials for my new life. I insisted that I have clothes and shoes that I'll hopefully recover when we find my car, but the witches weren't hearing it. Which is why Perth's carrying a stack of boxes with shoes and boots, and Karen has several garment bags slung over her shoulder.

Meanwhile, I'm wearing a black long-sleeved thermal top and charcoal-colored jeans. It's a *Trista-inspired* outfit completed by a pair of burgundy combat boots that Astrid contributed.

My hands tingle, and I try to convince myself that it's from carrying the overstuffed bags, but it's not. The memory of Perth's touch still whispers across my senses. Our dance flickers through my head in an endless loop. And his words... I know I'll be holding those words close for the rest of my life.

I've always been a loner, a wanderer. A free spirit. Maybe I didn't start that way, but it's how I've defined myself for years—it was my best line of defense against the constant rejection and moving. If you can't beat 'em, make it your whole personality.

Or so I thought, until I tumbled into this world where instincts hold a mirror in front of your face and force you to take a long hard look at everything you've been avoiding.

What do they want?

Deep down, what do *I* want?

I close my eyes as the elevator starts to rise, leaning back against the wall, and just feel the steady thud of my pulse.

Emotion streaks through me like a meteor shower. The first flash of feelings are quick pulses, too quick for me to catch what they mean. They warm my chest and are gone a split-second later. But then more appear. Bright, golden slashes dash behind my eyelids, strobing with desire and leaving sparkling trails of hope lingering behind them.

Shit.

He's got me hoping again, craving the taste of something I thought I'd gotten over.

Startled, my eyes pop open, and I look down at my chest incredulously. I thought we had an understanding, and yet here my heart goes beating a little faster, scrambling my butterflies until they're a fluttering frenzy, and making me feel all light and buoyant.

I think I want these men.

Part of me would like to keep pretending that's not true, but what's the point?

It would be so easy to fall into this den and let them catch me.

Maybe, just this once, I could try.

Swept up in my thoughts, I'm caught off guard by the ding of the elevator. I follow Karen and Perth out into the hall and then slam into a hard back. I open my mouth to apologize, but I quickly register that both Perth and Karen have become tense statues in the hallway, and instantly an alarm starts blaring in my head.

"What is it?" Karen asks in a low tone. She must have stopped because Perth did, and her eyes scan the hallway as though she expects something to come charging down it at any moment.

"It smells wrong," he mutters so quietly I'm not sure Karen can hear him.

But then she nods and the two of them exchange a look before slowly putting their bags and boxes on the ground and straightening.

I inhale and I'm shocked when I can smell what he's talking about too. It's not a particular aroma that gives it away, but a strange lack of odor that raises the hair on my arms. The hallway typically smells like wood polish and the powder they put on the carpets before they vacuum them. Since I've taken up residence, I can always catch a hint of Ruger, Ellery, Perth, and even Gannon lingering in the corridor, but now it's all gone. The air smells stale, old, and wrong.

Karen turns back to me, her heavily lined eyes more serious than I've ever seen them. Expression tight, she whispers, "Stay here. I don't want you going down the elevator in case it's a trap to get you alone."

Fear drapes over me like a spiderweb, and I shiver under its gauzy veil. I nod.

Karen moves her gaze over to Perth. "Stay with her," she orders. Then, she pulls a crystal from an inside pocket on her vest. The thin purple stone glows, lighting her face eerily. That's when I glance at the window and realize that the world outside has gotten darker. Storm clouds have rolled in and shadows are pouring across the rooftops, coating the town in dusky gray tones.

Fuck you, universe. This doesn't need to be scarier.

Karen holds out a hand, and it takes me a full second to realize she's waiting for me to hand her the key card. My heartbeat is thudding so loudly in my ears that it makes it hard to think. When I hand it to her, she turns and moves stealthily down the hall, crystal poised just like a human officer would point a gun.

Perth presses a hand to the small of my back and pulls me closer. Worry rushes through me like river rapids, and my heart shudders inside my chest. My fingers curl into my palms, clutching the bags in my hands tighter as Karen stalks closer to the unknown.

“Ellery’s on his way,” Perth reassures me in my mind.

But the mindspeak thing is still so new to me that I startle where I stand and then immediately curse myself, wondering if I made a noise or gave us away somehow.

Karen reaches my door and I hold my breath.

Fuck, is the key card sliding into the lock going to give her away? Is she in danger? My tension and fear ramp up, but right alongside them is a burning hot surge of anger. It’s something I never would have felt as a human, but the heat of it quickly overtakes the other more frigid, more fragile feelings.

On my next exhale, a low sound erupts from my lips, the shadow of a growl.

Perth wraps his arm around my shoulders just as Karen pushes the door open. She freezes, for a second, glancing around the opening, and then she disappears inside.

The seconds tick by with agonizing slowness. Perth and I seem to breathe in unison as we hold silent vigil, tense, waiting, ready for anything. Nightmare visions dance in my head as I wonder what the fuck could be lurking in my room.

“All clear,” Karen calls out.

I startle again before heaving a massive sigh of relief that I can feel all the way down to my kneecaps.

Thank fuck.

“This shit is too damn stressful,” I mindspeak.

“You’re telling me,” Perth replies.

“You can come in,” Karen’s voice instructs from inside my room. Perth bends and gathers up the abandoned boxes and garment bags and then leads the way. But he stops mid-step in the doorway.

This time I avoid crashing into him, and I lean to the side to try and see what’s going on.

“Shit, what is it?” I ask, when all I see is Karen running her crystal around the windows in the room.

Perth steps to the side and lets me pass, and I instantly know what the problem is. Just like the hallway, the entire room is absent of any fragrance. It's like it's all been erased somehow. Nothing has a smell to it. Not the couch, not the sheets, not the curtains billowing in front of a window that's been left cracked open.

The only thing is, I haven't opened the windows in this room. Not once. It's been too cool outside for that.

"What the fuck?" I croak.

"Someone was definitely in here," Karen states flatly.

"Someone with magic," Perth adds. "If they've wiped the smell, they've probably wiped all other traces of themselves."

When I glance over, he's fuming, and somehow his outrage helps to settle mine.

Karen gives him a grim nod, and then her head jerks toward the open window. "Guessing that's how they got in or how they left."

And just like that, my safe haven is ripped away.

Stepping deeper into the room, I look around. My eyes land on the bench at the foot of the bed, on the spot where I know I left my pajamas. They're not there. I scan the ground, looking to see if maybe they fell, but my gut is screaming that I won't find them.

"They took my clothes," I rasp, vacillating between the urge to throw open all the drawers and closet to check if anything else is missing, and the aversion to touching anything because now it's fucking tainted.

Ellery comes rushing in and I squeal in surprise.

"Fucking shit!" I gasp, not sure if I'm cursing the surge of adrenaline that just shot through me or this whole fucked-up situation in general.

I take one look at Ellery and freeze. His eyes are zeroed right on me. His expression is tense, but it's not because of the room.

“What happened?” I ask, his somber face and irate gaze making eight-legged fear crawl down my spine and leave a chill in its wake.

“I just got word from the station. Your car’s been found.”

NOAH



Raindrops dance along the windshield of Ellery's SUV, the sound mimicking the sad tap dance my heart's doing inside my chest. Ellery starts the car to get the heat going, and we both sit and stare out at my Bronco as a man straps the mangled mess onto the long flatbed of a tow truck. I pick at a thread that's bordering a hole in the knee of the artfully-distressed black jeans I'm wearing, and try not to cry.

"What happens now?" I ask, hating the ache that bleeds into every word.

Everything's gone. My entire life, the things I've worked so hard for, are now at the bottom of a lake or destroyed by whatever or whoever used my car as a punching bag. The asshole that dumped it here didn't push it far enough into the body of water for it to sink beneath the surface, and a fisherman happened to spot it. I don't know if I'm grateful or sorry that he did.

"Our crime lab will process it," Ellery answers. "They'll run spells and other tests to see if there's any evidence they can find pointing to who might have done this."

The witches who magically pulled the SUV out of the lake stand together in a little huddle discussing something. The same spell they used to pull my car to shore now floats above their heads, keeping the rain from soaking them through.

Hollowly, I stare out the window, keenly aware of my reality and the blow I've just taken with the loss of my vehicle and things. As pissed and downhearted as I am, it doesn't feel

as catastrophic as it might have a week ago. I guess that's what getting attacked and finding out that your entire life is a lie will do to you. It takes a lot more to land on the *my life is over* list now.

"I'm sorry," Ellery somberly offers me, his eyes tracing over the broken pieces of my Bronco, like he wishes he could put it all back together for me and make it right.

I sigh and stop picking at the loose threads around my knee, smoothing the mint-green rain jacket that I've folded into my lap.

"Don't take this the wrong way, because I know you're doing everything you can and I appreciate it, but I'm just so fucking mad," I snarl, fisting my hands in my coat. "I don't know if I've ever felt this enraged in my life. I just want to find whoever did this to me and rip them apart the same way they tore my life into fucking tatters. And for what?" I demand as I turn to Ellery. "Why put me in the Hunt? Why pummel my car and dump it? Why break into my room? What's the point of any of it?"

A jolt of shock flashes across his face, and then a small tic of amusement starts at the corner of the sheriff's mouth. The unexpected emotion makes me flounder.

"I swear to fuck, Ellery, you better not be smiling while I'm raging, or I might try to punch you," I warn. "I know you're the big scary celestial and you could wipe the floor with me and then arrest me afterward, but I'll happily bite off more than I can chew right here, right now."

His wobbly half smile morphs into a full-blown beaming grin, and a growl works its way up my throat.

Ellery's hands snap up in surrender. "It's your wolf," he quickly defends before I can lunge for him. "Your eyes are glowing right now, and it's why you feel so volatile—not that any of this isn't enraging," he explains, gesturing to everything that's happening on the other side of his windshield. "It just took me by surprise to see your wolf peeking out at me."

Spinning in my seat, I flip down the visor and angle the mirror at my face. I reel back when, sure enough, my eyes are glowing a bright teal color. I check my cheeks and neck for black veins and then push up my sleeves to examine my arms when I don't spot any streaks of black.

“What does this mean?” I ask, leaning closer to the mirror on the visor and turning my head from side to side so I can study my eyes. They start to dim and I don't know if I'm disappointed or grateful.

“If I had to guess, you'll probably be ready to shift soon,” he answers, and when I look over at him, there's an undeniable twinkle in his eyes. “We should get going,” he announces, clearing his throat and straightening in his seat. “Before this storm unleashes the way it looks like it wants to.”

I press the visor back to the roof of the 4Runner and pull my seat belt across my chest and buckle it. I take one last look at my battered Bronco, and then Ellery puts his SUV in gear and we start backing away.

It's a strange, sad sort of goodbye that drifts through me as the lake and the tow truck with my car on it grow further and further away. In a sense, it's like I'm shutting the door on a life that isn't mine anymore, and while it's sad, what I'm facing on the other side doesn't feel so insurmountable anymore.

Or maybe I'm just numb.

Perhaps I've hit my limit of shit I can handle and all that's left is acceptance or insanity?

We start to drive down the mountain, and the onset of dusk makes the clouds look twice as menacing—thicker and darker than they were just minutes ago. The storm churns every sliver of fading sunlight from the sky, mixing in shadows until it's a somber iron gray.

The speakers of the car chime with an incoming call, and I see Perth's name pop up on the dash display before Ellery answers.

“Any luck?” he asks, and Perth huffs in answer.

“Deputies are checking the whole floor, which rules out the other room we were using,” Perth tells him, and a trickle of relief spills through me, because I don’t think I could stay on the same floor as before even if it were an option. “The only other available room is a second floor terrace.”

Immediately Ellery starts to shake his head. “Yeah. I don’t like that either. If the twelfth floor didn’t deter them, the second floor would be a cake walk, and a terrace might as well be a fucking invitation,” the sheriff growls.

“Agree,” Perth pipes out. “That pretty much rules out the small motel too, because Harrold won’t clear out the other guests that are already staying there. Karen offered for Noah to stay with her, but Fife said he thought the apartment above Internet Trolls might be empty, so I’m headed there now to see if a short-term rental might be an option.”

“Okay, keep us posted. We’re headed back into town now,” Ellery orders.

“Will do,” Perth agrees and the call ends.

Ellery’s foot is gentle on the gas as we wind up a road that’s more gravel than asphalt, the black tar worn down to nearly nothing. I’m grateful to be on the side of the car that hugs the mountain, because the sheer drop on the other side is alarming.

The chill of the air and my thoughts collide to make goose bumps pebble along my skin as I stare at the sheriff. A five o’clock shadow darkens his chiseled jaw, and his expression is intense, focused on the road, squinting against the rain now falling in sheets.

He really does take my safety seriously. He and the guys are doing everything they possibly can. Each action they take—watching over me and answering my questions, cooking me food, the non-stop work on my case, this search to find me somewhere new to stay...

My vision becomes as smeared as the windshield, and I have to glance out the side window, because it’s on the tip of my tongue to ask Ellery if I can stay with them.

A plinking sound startles me, and then an utter deluge of plinks pummel the hood of the car. The rain has turned to hail.

“Should we pull off?” I ask, just as I look around and realize there’s nowhere for us to take shelter. The drop off on the side of the road isn’t a direct plummet to death anymore, but there’s still a dangerous looking slope before you hit trees.

“Probably best to power through. You buckled in?” He glances over at me with concern, his right arm moving in my direction, almost as if he wants to put a protective arm bar across me.

“I’m good. You just focus. It’s getting crazy out there,” I respond, as the intensity of the hail ramps up.

He turns his high beams on, and the wipers squeak across the glass, unable to clear it for more than a second at a time. The storm surrounds us, encroaching from every side, becoming a wall of cloud and ice that slams, thunks, clonks, and clangs all around us—nature going to war. Sky trammeling earth.

My fingers curl into the door handle, clutching it like an “oh-shit” bar as we crawl slowly around a bend and take a fork onto a one lane road. A jagged bolt of lightning streaks across the mountain peak in the distance. Less than a second later, percussive thunder has me jerking forward in my seat—the sound loud enough that it feels like I put my ear to a drum.

“Damn,” I gasp, just as Ellery’s large hand lands on my thigh. He squeezes it once, the gesture way more reassuring than it should be. I give an embarrassed laugh. “Sorry, I’ve never been so close to the clouds when they’re angry.”

He retracts his hand in order to take us through a sharp turn in the road, and I have to stop myself from grabbing it and putting it back on my leg.

More thunder growls and grumbles, rolling through the sky. But the low tone doesn’t end, doesn’t fade. It grows louder and more intense, begins a long seemingly endless roar—as if a tsunami is crashing into the mountain.

My brow furrows as I whip my head to the window, eyes trying to cut through the white lines of continuous rain. “What is that?”

We come around a bend, and I don’t need Ellery to answer my question because I can see the answer for myself. My heart thuds wildly at the sight, primal fear instantly coating my skin in a sheen of sweat.

A sliver of the mountain has been sliced off a hundred feet above us, and I watch dirt drizzling down the side like melted chocolate. Rocks tumble and bounce like rubber balls. Boulders slide along the mud, coasting along the surface or rolling like swimmers who repeatedly duck their heads under and emerge from the deluge.

Shocked alarm rockets through my chest as the mess cascades right down the road in front of us, less than thirty feet away.

Rockslide.

Ellery brakes hard and so suddenly that, even though we’re going slowly, I jerk forward in my seat. The ground beneath us quakes.

“Fuck!” he exclaims as he puts the car in reverse, hand flying to the back of my headrest to brace himself as he ignores the rain-speckled backup camera feed on the dash and peers out the rear window to navigate us backward. As he turns the wheel, his headlights slash through the watery mist, and I spot a shape in the darkness.

“There’s a car!” I yell, adrenaline and panic constricting my throat as he backs the 4Runner another twenty feet away from the cascading edge of the mud fall. “It pushed them off the road!” I point through the windshield, and Ellery stops instantly, leaning forward and peering through the rain. I can tell the moment his eyes make out the red minivan, because they widen slightly, right before a string of curse words erupts from his lips.

He starts pressing buttons on his dash display, and a shrill ringing fills the car before I realize what he’s doing. A man

answers the other end of the line, but I don't catch the greeting before Ellery's commanding voice starts to speak over him.

"Fife! We have a rockslide up on Painite Pass. Right where we had that small forest fire last year. I see one car caught up in it, but there could be more. I didn't see anyone in front of us through the switchbacks, but visibility has been shit since I started down."

A voice blasts through the speakers. "On it, Sheriff. Sending all availables to you now. The closest we've got can be there in ten. I'm alerting Magical Med Services and Fire now. Sit tight—"

Fife's instructions are cut off when Ellery turns to me and growls, "Stay here." The next thing I know, he's put the car in park and he's out the door, running to the back, which is full of police equipment and way too many shopping bags. He hurls the back hatch open and grabs a case, pulling flares from it, which he activates and tosses behind him. They roll down the road, smoking and giving off a bright green light. A couple of orange cones are set out next.

"He left, didn't he?" Fife demands, the question tugging at my attention.

"Yes, he's..." I'm about to tell Fife that I think he's assessing the situation, but then Ellery streaks past the car toward the mudslide and the van that's gone over the steep embankment.

What the hell does he think he's going to do? He can't just walk out into that! "You can't—" I call out, just as he leaps over the side of the road and disappears.

More panic wells in my belly, but this time, it's not about what's out there, this anxious twisting in my gut is for him.

He's going to get himself killed.

I've been hearing for days about eeries and shifters and magic, but nobody's mentioned fucking immortality. So what the hell does he think he's going to do?

He's out there and he's alone. The wrongness of that catapults through me and smashes against my ribs, making my

heart skip a beat.

“Ellery!” I shout as I fumble with my seat belt. I don’t know if I’m more scared or more furious he left me behind.

“Stay in the car, Ms. Lupescu,” Fife orders, parroting Ellery’s command before he took off.

“Fuck that!” I snap back as I toss aside my seat belt and struggle to pull my raincoat on.

The hail thankfully has moved on for now, but the storm cloud overhead is dumping rain. Adrenaline pours buckets of energy through my system and makes my hands shake as I fight against the door handle. By the time I get it to open, and lurch out into the thunderstorm, Fife is shouting something at me that I don’t bother to listen to. There’s a boiling hot fear inside my stomach that’s steaming and shouting a hell of a lot louder than he is.

I scramble to the last place I saw Ellery, and I’m soaked in under thirty seconds. Useless jacket. The water’s cold, but I don’t feel the chill, my blood scorching my veins as I scurry after the sheriff. He’s already halfway down the steep shoulder, his uniform molded to every muscle as he slides confidently toward the rocks and dirt pinning the van against several blackened trees.

I didn’t notice it before, the storm doing its best to hide the fire-decimated landscape, but the vista is barren except for sporadic stalks of tree trunks that are nothing more than blackened husks. Mud and rocks have carved a path through the devastation, and even though the sludge-like river has stopped flowing here, the ground’s obviously unstable.

“Goddamned idiot,” I mutter under my breath, cursing Ellery just before I set out to mimic said idiot.

The van is upside down and beat to shit. Mud and debris press against one side, and I hope the side of the vehicle wedged against the trees has fared better against the deluge of rocks and dirt. If they give way though, the van will plummet down the rest of the mountain. There’s no surviving that.

“Ellery!” I shout as he starts to work his way closer to the car. The wind rips my words from my lips and tosses them down the side of the mountain, stealing them away before they can reach him. The gale screeches like a Valkyrie, and I can hear the glide of mud and the rumble of rocks falling down lower on the hillside beneath us. The ground shudders beneath my feet as though the whole mass is threatening to move any second now.

My heart shoves its way roughly into my throat, and I can't swallow. I can't breathe. Can't think. I can only watch as Ellery darts toward the river of mud that cascaded down the mountain. I don't know how he's going to get from the side he's on to the side where the van is lodged. Just when I decide it's impossible, he leaps onto a boulder jutting out of the chaotic mess of dirt and stone. Crouching, he throws his body into the air with inhuman strength.

My anxiety flies with him, rising up as I watch his muscular form hurtle through the sky, because there is no other boulder for him to land on. He's going to smash down into that liquid mud and be sucked under—

He doesn't fall when he should. His jump lasts longer than it logically should, as if gravity has loosened her rules just for him.

What the flying fuck?

My mouth opens and closes and opens again, as startled surprise mutates into silent horror and then into utterly discombobulated awe.

This shouldn't be possible.

It *isn't* possible.

But I watch Ellery land on a boulder that's at least thirty feet away from the one he started on, his boots smacking down on the stone with a resounding thud.

He turns back, assessing the deluge, and catches sight of me as lightning cracks apart the dark sky behind him. He yells something at me, but it's drowned by a clap of thunder that shakes my very bones.

Adrenaline and fear make my feet move before I've truly grasped what the hell I'm doing, my body following Ellery even though I have no business being this stupid.

I find myself sliding down the hillside, boots skimming like a surfer, riding the mud and short wet bracken with a level of skill I've never possessed before. I expect to eat it and fall the rest of the way down on my ass, but I don't. Somehow, my body moves gracefully. And it's definitely not because I told it to. I just went—just moved—didn't think.

Perth's smirk flashes inside my head, but I don't have time to flip it off.

Ellery has already made it to the other side of the landslide, and he's rushing around the van and shouting at whoever is inside. Somehow through the cacophony of the storm and the rumbling mountain, I hear a high-pitched wail.

Shit. There's a fucking kid in there.

Any fear is wiped away. Determination blazes through my veins and—without giving it a second thought—I run toward the river of mud, leaping with all I have, just like Ellery did. I aim for the large boulder sticking out of the muck, landing hard, and have to clamber and scabble at the rock to keep my feet under me.

Holy crap.

I almost overshot it, which is crazy. I shouldn't be that strong. At least I never was before. Understanding flickers through me like bolts of lightning, burning through my doubt and surprise.

I'm not human.

I know they've been saying it, but this is the first time I'm really *feeling* it. Feeling it in a way that isn't confused attraction or startling anger. Feeling it in a way that's pure strength and ability. Emotion whirls in my center at that thought, but I push past all the inner noise and focus. There's no time for me to freak out right now.

My eyes zero back in on the van. Right now, it's about them.

Moving on instinct and hope alone, I crouch down, muscles tensing, and pull in a deep inhale before I shove myself up. With the wild cry of a banshee, I launch myself across the mud. My stomach drops out, and when I glance down I realize that I'm soaring through the air like I was built to fly. I'm easily fifteen feet above the ground and slowly starting to drop.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck!” Pinwheeling my arms, I try to slow my momentum as I fall, not wanting to plunge right into the liquid mud. Just in case I measured the distance wrong, I clench my teeth together and hope I don't choke on too much dirt before I can find the surface again.

To my utter shock, as if my body knew exactly where to go and what to do, I drop onto the far side of the mud river, my hand smacking down against the hard dirt.

Well, fuck me. I just Supermanned that landing.

Breathing hard, I push myself up and wipe my stinging palm on my raincoat. In two strides Ellery is in front of me, his hands on my shoulders as he glowers down at me, pissed.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demands, his bright eyes raking over me as though he's frantically looking for injury.

I look back at the mud river I just leap-frogged across and realize his question is valid.

What the hell am I doing?

The answer cracks against me like a clap of thunder, and I turn back to Ellery. “Trusting my instincts, like Perth told me to do.”

He growls and his blue eyes start to glow. I can tell he swallows down a hell of a lot he'd like to yell at me—and most likely Perth—but instead, he grabs my hand and pulls me toward the van.

“Help me then,” he orders, not wasting any more time. “We both need to get over there,” he explains, pointing to the trees, “and push the van onto its side. The tree trunks are

blocking the doors and windows, but if we can get it over, I can pull them out.”

I can hear people crying. It sounds like a set of parents trying to soothe their children. I can't tell how many, but I hate to think about what they're going through, how scared they must be. Ellery helps me climb over the car to the tree side and positions me between two blackened trunks.

“Stay in your seat belts!” he calls out to them. “We're going to push the car over and help you out.”

“Thank you, celestial!” a man shouts shakily from inside. Small whimpers and crying reach me over the steady spatter of rain. A cloud of fear wafts around the vehicle, and I fight the urge to fan a hand in front of my face to clear the burning tang of it away.

“We're going to have to lift and then push,” the sheriff commands, and I nod my head as though that's all perfectly logical.

“Shit, can I do this?”

“You can, you just have to tap into your wolf, demand everything she has, and use it, okay?” Ellery assures me, answering my thoughts. His stare is streaked with rain and full of more faith than I've ever had in myself. “On three,” he shouts, and I crouch down and grab onto the lip of the roof of the van.

Tap into my wolf.

“One.”

Tap into my wolf.

“Two.”

Fuck. I don't know how to tap into my wolf!

“Three. Lift!”

I heave with every muscle I have, screeching with the effort when nothing immediately happens. A woman cries out from inside the car, and the children—I think there's two—wail and plead for their parents.

“Push, Noah! You can do this! Let her out!” Ellery growls at me, his voice reverberating with a resounding command, the strength of it sinking into my very cells in a way that does not feel human at all.

Agony starts to scratch at my stomach because I want to help so badly. But this wreck looks like it needs a crane, not a couple crazy but well-intentioned people trying to play hero. What the hell were we thinking?

“I know I’m asking a lot, but you’ve got it in you. Let go,” Ellery orders, and I can practically hear Perth’s voice echoing the same.

You’ll be surprised what you can do if you just let go.

“Let go,” I snarl at myself. “Just fucking let go!” I beg the black streaks to take over my veins, invite whatever foreign power that’s supposed to be coursing through me to take what it wants. I promise freedom and acceptance if this wolf lurking under my skin will help me stem the acrid metallic scent coming from inside the vehicle. I know it’s terror—I don’t know how I can recognize it, let alone smell it, but I need to get these people out more than I need my next breath.

Heat takes over my limbs as a howl explodes out of my very soul. A tiny frisson of panic darts through me, making my ribs feel a bit too tight. It’s not work—

The van starts to move. I look over at Ellery, utterly shocked and equally ecstatic. Instantly, I renew my efforts, lifting with every ounce of strength I possess. The veins and muscles in Ellery’s neck strain with his effort. Rain sluices down his body, darkening his gray uniform and gliding over all those taut muscles as I help him perform his second impossible feat of the night.

“Yes, Noah. That’s it,” he grunts as we lift the side of the van even higher. “Get under it and push,” he bellows, and I rush to do as I’m told.

My hands fly to the crumpled roof of the van, and I push, shoving for all I’m worth, forcing my muscles to coil and then spring forward, thrusting and pressing against what shouldn’t

be possible. Ellery repositions his hands under the roof too, and we push. Together. Synchronized. Moving perfectly...just as Perth and I were earlier.

And just like with Perth, I feel a dazzling sort of energy rush through me, a lightheaded sort of pleasure even though this task is the furthest thing from pleasurable that I could ever imagine. The van creaks in objection but slowly rises.

Inch by lifted inch, I prove to myself that I'm more than I ever thought possible. That I'm stronger and more fierce than I ever expected, which causes jubilation to march through me, from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet—this giddy, elated pride overtaking my bloodstream, erasing my thoughts. Making me fucking glow.

There's no time for awe, only enough space in my head for short quick breaths. My fingers spread wide and my feet dig into the ground as my spine tries to lengthen. I push. And push. Push without thought.

We gain another four inches. Then five. The smell of pine sap is strong in the air, and the crinkle of dead leaves being battered by the wind combines with the puffs of air coming from between my lips. My entire body becomes a tool. A vessel. A lever to move a van. I stop thinking about impossibilities because...apparently, in the eerie world, that word doesn't mean the same thing.

Six inches.

Ten.

Gravity suddenly takes over and the van rocks violently to its side. It wobbles and then settles exactly where we need it to with a thunk that feels as loud as the sigh of relief gushing from my lips.

Ellery immediately climbs up the side, and the driver's side window is broken from the inside. He reaches through it, and a man with pointed ears emerges from the battered opening. Metal and glass scrape against his large frame, but the man ignores the new injuries in his bid for freedom from the car. He's bloody, clearly hurt, but it doesn't stop him from

scrambling to the rear window to help free his family as Ellery reaches back through the front.

Ellery pulls a woman out next. Then the man plucks out a girl and then a little boy quickly after. He hands the crying boy to Ellery, and I reach up to help the woman slide off the overturned van to the ground.

My blood is flowing fast and hot in my veins as the woman's feet touch down, and she reaches to pull her son from Ellery's arms. My neck feels like it's on fire. My chest is spewing lava as first Ellery and then the man and his daughter climb down from the destroyed van.

The second they're all free, I'm suddenly drained, wiped, void of all energy. I stay planted where I am, unable to do more than blink through the downpour. Ellery instructs the family to climb to safety, and they all start to move, but I can't lift my feet to follow. I just gave everything I had to give, and now it feels like there's nothing left for me.

Rain drips from my eyelashes into my eyes, and I hardly have the strength left to swipe at them as the family disappears, moving away from the mudflow's path and up the mountain. By the time I manage to lift a palm to try and clear my vision, Ellery is suddenly there, his handsome face looming over me, his blue eyes bright with concern.

"Are you alright?" he asks, his steady stare searching my face for an answer.

"That seems to be the question of the day," I murmur, finding a tiny bit of sarcasm left in my reserves and scooping it out just for him.

"You might be feeling a crash right now," he explains as he studies my eyes. "It'll happen until you get used to shifting and balancing the magic and effort it requires."

I nod, or at least I try to. Moving my head suddenly feels like it requires entirely too much effort.

"You're incredible, Noah," Ellery declares almost reverently.

A soft sort of delight expands inside of me, followed quickly by an intense longing that manifests as a strange sort of prickling in my neck, right at the spot where my throat meets my shoulder. My shaky arms reach up and rub at the spot, and Ellery's eyes drop to it.

He bites his lip. Then, for a split second, my heart jumps because I think his eyes flicker into a wolf's, but it must be a trick of the light, an illusion of shadows created by the rain, because a second later, he's gazing back at me normally.

His hand reaches for my cheek, and my head tilts automatically to lean into his palm. "You did it."

"I'm a badass," I tell him shakily as I nod in shock.

"Shifter strength isn't so bad, huh?" he asks, a knowing grin erupting.

"That was...holy shit, that was crazy."

"It's like base jumping inside your head," he comments.

"Perfect fucking description. Except now, I don't think I can walk. Pretty sure my leg bones were replaced with marshmallows."

"Well, then..." The sheriff's eyes sparkle with delight as his hand moves from my cheek to my shoulder. "I might be able to help with that." And then, he lifts me up into his arms bridal style, and I suck in a startled gasp.

He turns, ready to carry me up the mountain, but a roar rends the sky apart. I look up the ridge only to see the tumultuous clouds blotted out by tumbling shadows. Terror seizes my entire body as a second wave of the landslide bursts over the cliff above us.

Ellery's arms wrap tighter around me in an instant, and he's running, dodging around the van, heading down the hill at an angle as a new stream of mud begins to crash down the mountain in the same path the prior slide took. I'm pressed hard against his shoulder, his body and mine slapping together with every step he takes.

Behind his shoulder, I can see huge rocks raining down like stone hail. Inhumanly fast, Ellery veers farther away, getting us clear of their falling path—or we *would* be clear...

A large boulder splits in two with a loud crack.

One half goes careening down the mountain with the other stones. But the second half shoots straight for us.

“Ellery!” I shout as the huge rock arcs at the perfect angle, hurtling like a cannonball through the spray of mud and shower of pebbles.

He drops me and shoves me against the blackened trunk of a sole pine that seems to be standing sentinel in the melee. The world switches to slow motion. Lightning glows inside the clouds in the distance. Rain pummels the earth so hard that it leaves tiny divots. The huge chunk of rock casts a shadow over us, marking me and Ellery for pain and death.

He spins, giving me his back and lifts his arms, muscles coiled, bright blue eyes aglow with determination. The side of his face becomes chiseled and contoured by the shadow of the clouds. His hair is a wet curl plastered across his forehead as he looks up and tracks the careening boulder.

What is he doing? Is he making sure it hits him first?

“Ellery, no!” I scream as I reach for him, grabbing at his shirt, wrapping my arms around his torso, and attempting to pull him back toward me. I’m not rational. I know we can’t get away quick enough, that the tree can’t protect us even though I want to pull us both behind it. Buttons snap off his shirt as I pull, but it makes no difference, I’m not quick enough, and he doesn’t move.

The rock smashes into his outstretched hands, and I can hear the impact, feel it resonate through his body and into mine. My scream is silenced when we’re abruptly shoved back by the force of the hit, my body molding to his as his knees bend in an effort to absorb as much of the shock of the collision as he can. Black lines surface along his veins—and for the first time, their appearance causes relief instead of trepidation.

Somehow—impossibly—we don't break. The rock doesn't shatter our limbs, crush our bones, or pummel us into nothing. With a wild, low-pitched, ferocious growl, Ellery redirects the boulder away from us like he's playing volleyball with Mother Nature. The thing is the size of his torso, but he launches it like it's nothing more than a basketball. It sails away and I hear it smack into the earth, though I don't turn to watch where it lands.

Instead, my eyes are glued to Ellery Arcan as I scamper around to face him in the mud. Black veins crawl over his skin, and glowing blue eyes glare at the mountain as though daring it to challenge him. His muscles are taut, his stance ready for any and every threat as a deep growl of warning spills out of his lips.

I stare at him, unsure if there's a term or even a word to describe the primal power and pure ability radiating off of Ellery right now. It calls to me in a way I don't understand, and I'm not sure if I want to fight or face it head-on. Maybe... I want both.

NOAH



I blink up at my ceiling fan, my body boneless and utterly comfortable, with the exception of my stomach. It's the middle of the night, moonlight beaming through the window at my side. But I'm as hungry as if I hadn't eaten in days instead of the handful of hours it's been since the guys plied me with a banquet at dinner.

Apparently, superheroing is draining fucking work.

Forcing myself to sit up in bed before I start gnawing my pillow, I glance around the guest room at the Arcan den's palatial mountain home. It's a different room than the one I woke up in next to Ruger and Perth. The walls in here are a pale jade-green color that I love, and the furniture is a white wicker set. It's got a feminine vibe that's a little different from the rest of the house and yet somehow fits in perfectly.

It also happens to be the closest room to the stairs, and the bed was the easiest to fall face first into from sheer exhaustion. Ellery brought me to their place after the road washed out. I'd been so exhausted by our rescue that he'd had to carry me up the front steps. Then he, Ruger, and Perth fed me until I was able to make it to my feet long enough to stumble through a quick tour and then promptly pass out.

I climb out of bed and stretch. As I pull my arms overhead, I smell the guys on the furniture as if they recently touched it, or possibly moved it. It makes me wonder if they set up this room just for me. I'm not a decorating expert, but I'd have picked everything in here if given the chance. At the thought of them selecting things and moving them in, a small smile

dances across my mouth instead of the panic I might have felt earlier.

What a difference a day can make.

My stomach growls and grumbles, the sound an obvious threat. It's about to rebel. I give in to its demands and slip out my door, tiptoeing down the hallway. I cringe when a wooden board squeaks underneath my feet. The house is quiet, painted with the dark blue and purple shadows of night. All the other doors on the second floor are closed, and I assume the den is fast asleep behind them.

Another angry grumble rolls through my abdomen and up through my chest, my stomach voicing its displeasure at how slow I'm moving.

Down, girl. Geez.

I spot the stairs I snuck down during my great escape—before my first, and hopefully only, stint as a car thief. Then I find myself stepping cautiously, hoping not to wake anyone up. I don't exactly know why I'm sneaking around. Ellery explained that I could treat their home like my home and go wherever, whenever. But as grateful as I am that I'm here and not somewhere else, that's easier said than done.

Maybe it's all the times I've heard that offer before from foster parents who didn't really mean it, or maybe this situation is too new for me to feel that level of comfort yet. Either way, I hold my breath and make my way down as though alarms will start blaring and the hounds will be set on me—or in this case, the wolves.

I reach the first floor, and this time instead of ninjaing my way to the garage to hijack a Transformer, I swing left past the double-sided fireplace that faces both the living room and the dining room. Ignoring the long dining table where I ate my weight in pasta earlier this evening, I don't pay any attention to the wall of windows that lead to a back deck and the woods beyond. Instead, I aim for the insane kitchen, my lips quirking up at seeing it without the distractions of three hot men moving around. It's obvious that Ruger has indulged his every whim and the guys have let him.

Spoiled. I grin as I glance around the space.

It boasts two long islands that take up the center, a wall of fridges, a few of them with glass fronts displaying wine and colorful produce amongst other things. The back of the kitchen is taken up by a massive range and hood that are matte black with brass trim and knobs. Looking too fancy to touch, this place is, without a doubt, a chef's wet dream. The large beams that frame the ceiling in the living room carry into this space too, and it's all light woods, black cabinets, and sleek surfaces.

The first of the matte black fridges holds perfectly organized rows of meats, all labeled and wrapped with care. I see containers of broths and other sauces, but there's nothing that doesn't require culinary school to figure out.

Dammit.

The next fridge I open looks a lot more normal: milk and cold brew mixed with Tupperware leftovers. I spot a covered plate on the middle shelf with a note taped to it, my name written in a blocky, masculine script. I reach for the plate and the note.

Noah,

Just in case you get hungry, I made you a sandwich. There's a fruit salad in the bowl next to this plate, and you can find chips five doors to the right of this one. It leads to a hidden pantry. I left you some homemade chocolate chip cookies on the counter there too.

Ruger

I stare at the note and then peek at the gorgeous gourmet steak sandwich Ruger made. I do a giddy little dance as I pluck the fruit salad from the fridge and then track down all the other goodies he mentioned.

A girl could get used to this.

I inhale everything and then spend fifteen minutes trying to find a garbage can for the empty chip bag and another ten minutes attempting to find the home for the plate and bowl I cleaned and dried. Turning off the lights and strolling over to the wall of windows, I tug at one of the sliders and step outside into the cool night.

Pulling in a deep breath of air scented with freshly fallen rain, I stride across the large deck and lean against the far railing.

The sky is breathtaking. I've never seen anything like it. The storm clouds have cleared and, in their absence, I stare up at more stars than I've ever seen in my life. They wink down at me, glimmering and glittering in all their glory as dark blues and purples swirl around a deeper, milkier part of space. It's so quiet out here, quiet and surprisingly peaceful. Even the insects with their little chirps and night song seem hesitant to get too loud.

I run my hands across the cold wood of the banister, the same hands that helped lift a car earlier, that helped me find my balance as I leapt across a river of mud and rocks. I stare down at them, expecting them to look different somehow, but they don't. Turning them over, examining the soft creases of my palms, I try to picture paws and fur instead of skin and fingers, but I can't seem to wrap my mind around that even though I know, all too soon, I'll have firsthand experience with not only how that looks but how it feels.

Am I excited about that? Terrified? Definitely both.

I sigh and stare out at the layers upon layers of shadow-draped trees that surround the property. It's as though the peaks of the pines are standing guard around this little slice of paradise, and I marvel that such a place exists.

I've lived in cities or suburbs my whole life. I've always enjoyed the hustle and bustle, the constant view of some cityscape or another, the noise, the activity—but really, I didn't know any better.

Standing out here now, surrounded by mountains and nature, I realize that the twinkle of city lights is nothing

compared to a blanket of beaming stars. I used to find the steady thrum of traffic, barking dogs, or passing pedestrian conversation soothing, but this silent serenity is a salve to the abraded soul I didn't know I had.

So much has happened that I haven't taken time to breathe this tranquility in, to settle into it and let it settle right back.

A cold wind drags across the back of my neck, and my senses prickle with some innate awareness. The peace I was just experiencing evaporates, and that same edgy sort of distrust I felt when I was running with Perth resurfaces. My hands flip back over and tighten on the railing as I look around for what's setting me off.

Glancing back at the sliding glass door, I wonder if one of the guys is awake, but the house is cloaked in stillness and silence. There are no lights on. There's no one prowling in the kitchen in search of their own midnight snack. I catch my reflection in the glass, the burgundy shorts and slouchy sleep top I pulled on earlier reflecting back at me like a garish wound in the windows.

I noticed a running theme in many of the clothes I dug through when I was searching the shopping bags for something to sleep in. Red. Every tone and variation of the color. On clothes, shoes, accessories. It makes me wonder if there is a *Little Red Riding Hood* fetish going on here I don't know about or if this is Astrid and Trista's idea of a joke. Maybe they're warning me about the big bad wolves?

I laugh at that thought, not sure why I find it so funny. I *was* attacked here. If there was a big bad wolf, I've met it. I just wish I knew who it was. Then again, how big and bad can someone be when they attack you from behind? So maybe I've only met the Cowardly Wolf.

Studying my reflection, I look for subtle changes. Do I look stronger? More eerie? I survey my eyes for the same wolfish glint I saw in Ellery's car, but all I see is the uninteresting color they've always been.

I guess I've always unknowingly had a wolf staring back at me in my reflection. Maybe that's why everything outside

still looks the same while my insides seem to be fully renovated.

Movement in the glass suddenly catches my attention, and my gaze snaps to the reflection of the trees. I whirl around, heart thumping violently as I search for the source.

Frantically, I scan the spot where I swear, seconds ago, one black shadow dislodged from another.

Nothing happens.

Nothing moves, and yet I feel like I'm being watched. The hair on the back of my neck rises as my sense of fear returns and grows stronger, gripping the sides of my throat, making it hard to breathe. The wide expanse of sky overhead seems to condense into a wall of darkness closing in around me.

"Noah."

A deep voice whispers my name inside my skull.

Goose bumps cover me from head to toe, and my exhale is a puff of mist, as if the night has suddenly cooled and instantaneously extracted all the heat from my body. I zero in on a spot that looks exactly like every other—black, shrouded, impenetrable—but there's something about it. Something there.

"Come here, sweetheart."

The three words are a whispered invitation in my head, and I reel back, completely rattled. Alarmed, I retreat from the railing. I'm a breath away from hurtling into the house and bolting upstairs to wake up Perth, Ellery, and Ruger when movement off to the side has me freezing. A huge black wolf emerges from the woods.

A familiar onyx-furred figure.

Gannon.

I gasp, heart hammering in my chest, and his head snaps in my direction as he pauses mid-step.

"Was that you?" I demand, stepping back to the railing as he stands there watching me. I know he's got a problem with

me, but would he fuck with me like that?

He trots forward and I feel a small rush of relief at his presence. It pricks the bubble of fear around me, and I inhale deeply, desperate for his scent to calm me.

Well, that's fucking new...and weird.

Or is it?

I suddenly recall the way I gulped down both Ellery's and Perth's scents when I was with them, and how it almost seemed to anchor me. I didn't realize I was doing that until now.

Gannon's ears perk up, alert, as he lopes closer.

"Was that you in my head?" I question again, and he leaps up the handful of steps onto the deck.

His head tilts and his ears flicker as though he doesn't understand what I'm saying, and then, in a flurry of pops and audible tears, the dark wolf disappears and Gannon rises to his feet, completely and gloriously naked.

Well...shit.

Immediately, I look away, despite the howling demand inside of me to take in every magnificent inch of him—and *damn*, there are a lot of inches.

"What?" he asks, his voice deep and growly like it's still on the cusp between man and beast.

My mind stalls as my gaze settles on his naked reflection in the wall of glass next to us, only to flit away quickly in search of somewhere safe to look.

"Uh," I mumble like an idiot. "Were you just in my head with the whole *come here* crap? Were you out there?" I stammer, gesturing to the dark line of trees around us. My eyes snap to him greedily as he looks from me to the dark towering pines I'm pointing at.

Eyes on his face, Noah. Eyes on his face!

But I've already committed the angular lines of his torso to memory, the sharp cut of his deltoids against the bulge of his

biceps, the very defined pecs.

“Yeah, I was just doing a perimeter check,” he confirms, and I blow out a relieved breath.

I open my mouth to snap at him about fucking with my head, but I get distracted by his body.

How do his muscles have muscles? Crap, Noah. Don't look!

In the two seconds it takes for me to get a hold of myself again, his chiseled chest and the dark line of hair leading from his belly button *down* will now be stamped in my mind forever. I've never seen brickwork abs before. Looks like I can cross that off my fuck it—I mean—bucket list.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks me, his eyes raking over me as he brushes his fingers through his hair, pushing the dark locks back from his face.

The obvious annoyance in his tone makes it easier for me to shake free from my addled state and focus.

“Waiting for you, obviously,” I answer, refusing to miss an opportunity to goad him.

I mean, if he's going to dislike me, it might as well be for good reason.

He watches me warily and then takes the bait perfectly. “Why?” he questions with a glower.

“I figured it was time we fuck it out.”

Gannon chokes on air. His eyes widen as he coughs and hits a fist to his chest before his scowl is firmly back in place. “What are you talking about?”

“Fuck it out,” I repeat innocently. “You know, get whatever this is out of your system,” I continue, casually waving a hand in his direction and then adopting a mocking, over-the-top grumpy look on my face. “Now that we're roomies, I figured this was the best way to help you get over your shit.”

Gannon rolls his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest.

I do everything I can to keep my eyes from wandering lower.

It's harder than it should be.

"We're not roomies," Gannon irritably contends.

"Don't fight this," I counter dramatically, lifting a hand like I'm reaching for him but he's just too far away. "Besides, if we don't bump uglies, then I can't justify the screwvenir I've got my eye on in your room. And that dragon snow globe is really calling to me."

His nostrils flare and his brow furrows as indignation creeps into his eyes and drips down into his words. "I'm too tired for this shit," he grumbles as he turns to walk into the house.

"Is that a no then?" I taunt, and then the next thing I know, he's right in front of my face.

Pissed is an understatement for the fury radiating from him.

I jerk back at the physical jump-scare, but I'm already up against the railing of the deck and there's nowhere for me to go.

"Is this all a fucking joke to you?" he snarls, his ire pinning me in place and calling to my own.

"Not one little bit," I snap back, and the venom in that statement seems to take him by surprise.

"That's right, wolf, I can give as good as I get."

A savage little smile starts to spread across Gannon's face, and I suspect I didn't keep my last thought to myself like I intended. I picture a vault in my mind and quickly shove all my thoughts inside before things like *why is this turning me on* and *what would that big dick feel like inside of me* slip out and blow my unbothered cover. I slam the door, turn the crank to lock the vault, and focus back on Gannon, who's way too naked and way too close.

"So you're done tucking your tail between your legs, kitten?" he challenges, towering over me as he presses even

closer, calling my bluff. “You’re ready to let me fuck you right here, for us to bite each other, and then march you upstairs and let each of my brothers do the same?”

Holy fuck.

Let the thigh drenching commence.

But also, no.

I hesitate and Gannon’s grin morphs into a full blown sneer. “That’s what I thought,” he mocks, leaning back. “You can’t handle this.”

Like he just threw down an invisible gauntlet, something wild rises in me demanding that I snatch it the fuck back up. “Oh, Ace,” I purr, assigning him my own condescending little nickname. “You don’t have the first clue about what I can handle.”

The black of his pupils almost blots out the light gray of his irises completely. The heat coming off his smooth, sculpted frame laps at me, and a heady scent I can’t identify has me feeling light and untethered. One side of his lush lips tilts in a needling grin as he leans forward, his large arms caging me in against the banister.

“Tell me more about what you can handle then, kitten.”

Mayday. Mayday. The ship is going down. I’ve officially lost control. A crash is imminent.

I try not to go brain-dead, not to gape at his proximity or the suggestion soaking his words and my panties. He’s so damn brazen, so annoyingly insolent. He’s pushy where the others have given me space. He’s assertive when they’ve been understanding. And I hate that I like it.

The wind brushes a few strands of my hair into my face, and I reach up to sweep them back. Gannon’s hand twitches as though he wants to be the one putting the wayward strands in their place.

We stand there, on the precipice of something. Both of us pushing and nipping at one another, neither willing to back off

even if it means we go careening off a cliff—at least we'll take the other one with.

My eyes flit back and forth between his challenging gaze. I could back off. Admit that he might be right, that I'm not ready for where this road most definitely leads. But that's the thing—I think I am.

Maybe not right this minute, because I could just as easily punch Gannon in the throat as fuck him. But even that's not the deterrent it was days ago, because this back and forth is doing things for me. No, where this connection with the den is heading, my being here, what it could mean and turn into, it doesn't freak me out like it did.

It's gone from *what the fucking hell* to *hmmm...*

The smug glint in his eyes and the cocksure way Gannon is leering at me, like he knows he's backed me into a corner I can't escape from, make the decision for me.

"Fuck it," I declare, and then I press up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

He does nothing for a split second when my lips meet his. His mouth is soft and pillowy, and his body is both hard and pliant against mine. And then it's like a crackle of lightning shoots through him, shocking him from his stunned stupor. He kisses me back.

The hands that were gripped on the railing, boxing me in, lift, and Gannon's long fingers thread through my hair. He takes control and I gladly hand it over as he angles my mouth and deepens our kiss. His tongue teases mine, dipping in and tangling. Desperate passion floods my senses, as we nip, and suck, and fight to dominate one another.

His thick thigh presses between mine, and tendrils of need skate down my skin, pebbling my nipples and pooling between my thighs. The stubble on his cheeks tickles my palms as I cup his face and take what I want from him.

Gannon groans, and I lap it up, thirsty for more, eager to dine on his desire. He kisses me into a floating, breathless

place. He ignites my soul and holds me like my place in this world was always supposed to be in his arms.

Pulling me closer, his hard length presses into my stomach, and my nipples grow peaked and sensitive as they brush deliciously against the fabric of my shirt and his bare chest. I whimper, needing more, and his hands drop to my ass, squeezing once before lifting me so I can wrap my legs around his waist.

Desire is an inferno burning through me. It consumes every thought other than the driving need to devour and be devoured. I'm vaguely aware of Gannon setting me on the railing of the deck, of his hands skimming up my sides.

I scarcely feel the wind darting through the closing gaps between us. I hardly notice the cold or dark. The scents of pine and mud fade as Gannon's scent becomes the only one I notice. His lips. His teeth, which are so disappointingly flat and not sharp enough to bite through skin the way I'm suddenly craving.

I jerk back as that thought invades my bliss.

Bite? Why the fuck do I want to bite him?

Gannon gives a disgruntled growl as I pull my mouth from his, but then he moves his lips to the side of my neck and I lose focus. I moan and pant as he drops kisses down my throat, nipping at the juncture of where my shoulder meets my neck. Blistering pleasure that's so intense it borders on pain engulfs my entire body, and I swear I almost come.

The feel of his scruff against my skin is driving me crazy, and all I want to do right now is rip off my clothes. He's already naked. I could be ready in under ten seconds, then ride his cock while he marks me.

Seriously, what the hell?

Marks me?

What does that even mean?

"Why do I want to bite you?" I pant, and Gannon laughs as he sucks on that spot just under my ear lobe that I've always

heard about but no one has ever been able to find. I feel like game show alarms should be ringing, because this contestant deserves a prize. What do we have for our winner, Johnny? Just me—a moaning, wet, writhing mess.

“That’s the mate claim, kitten,” Gannon answers, his lips and hands gentle and warm as they skim over my body. A wicked smile sneaks across his lips as he takes in the flushed, disheveled chaos he’s left in his wake. “That overriding need to fuck, bite, and mark is your wolf wanting to solidify her claim on us, and demanding that we do the same to you.”

I jerk back at his words, stunned, and confusion flickers over his face. He studies me for a beat, and then his features harden and his gray eyes become shards of ice.

“You talk a good game for someone who doesn’t know what the fuck they’re doing.” His tone turns glacial.

“Aaand we’ve exited the roundabout back onto Dick Street,” I grumble, pushing him away from me and throwing my hands up in defeat. “What the hell’s your problem now?”

“My problem is you’re playing with fire and you don’t even know it!”

“I’m not coming at anyone with a lighter and kerosene,” I defend. “I’m just trying to figure this all out. Isn’t that what you wanted? Is it that hard to find a sliver of empathy like your *denmates* have and cut me a little slack?”

Gannon laughs but there’s no real humor in it. “Oh, it’s not empathy my *denmates* are feeling for you, kitten, let’s get that straight.”

“Fine, basic human decency then,” I argue.

“Wrong again, we’re not human.”

I glare at the hard glint on his face. “What do you want? What’s the real problem here? Why are you dead set on being an asshole?”

He holds his hands up innocently. “Hey, I might be an asshole, but at least I’m an honest one.”

“Oh, please,” I scoff. “Honest? Or hurt? You can pretend you’re being real here, Gannon, but all you’re doing is pouting over some shifter slight I didn’t even know I was making. This feels a hell of a lot like retribution. I just wish you’d grow some balls and explain why. What did I just do that set you off?”

“No, kitten. This is me not wanting to waste your time. The clock is ticking and I’d like to know sooner rather than later what the hell you’re going to do.”

“What clock?” I demand, beyond frustrated with all the back and forth.

How can someone be so fucking hot and such an insensitive prick at the same time?

My body gives a longing pulse as he puts even more distance between us, but I ignore it. Clearly my instincts are hardwired to be attracted to assholes with more red flags than a NASCAR official.

“Of course.” Gannon chuckles hollowly as he shakes his head and runs a hand down his face. “Of course they didn’t tell you.” His chin juts out and his lips turn down in frustrated anger.

“Tell me what?” I snarl, jumping down from the railing Gannon had me perched on, needing my feet under me for whatever he’s about to lob my way.

“You ran in the Hunt...”

I open my mouth to argue the semantics of that statement, but he silences me with a shake of his head.

“It doesn’t matter how you got there or whether you’re a naif, you were there and our den initiated a claim. We bit you. Once that happens, you have until the next full moon to accept that claim or establish one with a different den.”

“And if neither of those options work for me?” I interrupt, not liking the corner he’s obviously trying to back me into.

The cocksure look on his face is infuriating until it falters. He turns to the side, staring out at the shadowy trees, watching

the wind pluck their leaves one by one, like a thief. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other before settling his heavy gaze back on me.

He stares at me like a man staring at a widow after a funeral. Like a doctor delivering news to a family about to be swallowed by grief. He looks at me like a man who knows hope is a caged bird and he's about to set it free.

“You’ll get moon sick,” he answers, his dismal tone like a kick to the chest from a mule. “You have until the next full moon to forge a bond with a den, or you’ll go insane.”

NOAH



I pace in the living room like a caged wolf. Under other circumstances, I might find that comparison amusing, but right now I'm trying not to completely lose my shit. Anxiety is snarling underneath my skin, and I can't tell if I want to scream or cry—probably some combination of both.

But I need answers first, and I need them now.

Moonlight streaks across the two-story river stone fireplace, falling down to splash over the wide wooden planks of the floor. I trace the glow with my eyes as I pace across the cream-colored rug in front of the hearth. I've never had the urge to break something before, but a surge of violence rises up like acid in my stomach, and I have to swallow it down. The fury rides me hard, and I try to regain the reins by breathing slowly, in and out.

Footsteps make my head snap up to the staircase, and a light switch clicks, making the round iron chandelier with faux candles flicker to life.

Ruger, Ellery, and Perth trudge down the stairs, Gannon close on their heels. He's put on a pair of sweats, thank fuck, but unfortunately I now have the other three and their perfection to contend with as I try not to ogle.

Maybe I should have given them a second to get dressed when I stormed into the house and barged into each of their rooms, demanding that we need to talk *right fucking now*, but hindsight and all that.

It's a testament to how pissed I am that their shirtless presence isn't completely frying my brain. At least Ellery and Perth sleep in pants—Ruger's sporting gray boxer briefs, and it's a sight I'm not prepared for.

Too bad I want to rip each of these assholes limb from limb right now.

I turn and face the hearth so that I don't have to subject myself to the torture of watching each of them walk down the stairs. Logs of wood are stacked carefully in front of me, ready for a fire at any moment, and I bend and flex my fingers, imagining I could light one instantly with my fury.

“Noah, what's going on—” Ellery's the first to speak, his tone gentle and soothing, but I'm onto him. None of that bullshit is going to work now that I know every word and action is laced with ulterior motives.

“When were you going to tell me?” I demand.

“Tell you what?” Ellery questions, his brow furrowing with confusion, as if I'd fall for that innocent boy-next-door shit again.

“Oh, shove it, Sheriff, you know exactly what.” I don't even care that I'm rude, that my tone of voice carries up to the giant beams crisscrossing overhead and bounces back to me. I'm livid. “All the mate shit,” I fling at him with an incendiary scowl when he still looks bewildered.

“I'm confused. We talked about that,” Ellery defends.

“We've all talked about the Hunt and what it meant,” Ruger defends, and I turn my glower on him.

“Oh no, I remember all of that,” I counter with a growl. “I recall perfectly how you made it seem like a choice. Like it was no big deal. But when exactly were you going to tell me about the losing my mind part? About the moon sickness that kicks in if I don't shack up by the next full moon?”

“Oh...that,” Ellery murmurs flatly, and I start to see red.

My pacing resumes because I just can't contain this agitation inside of me. I don't look over at them as they slide

slowly down onto the giant sectional, each of them taking up positions on the edge of the seat, sitting up straight, like students who know they're about to be scolded.

They deserve so much more than scolding, but the images of violence flashing through my mind are all of biting, wrestling, seeking blood, and not in the *fuck you up* kind of way, but rather the *yes! Please fuck me like that* kind of way.

That is really annoying because I'm pissed, and I know my eerie nature wants to take this to an extreme that will just land my ass in trouble.

I'll have to be careful about how I go about this. I'll have to stay calm. Collected.

“WHAT. THE. ACTUAL. FUCK!” I snarl each and every word, my throat raw by the end of the sentence from the power and rage vibrating through my vocal chords.

Ruger cringes a little, Perth drops his gaze to his feet, but Ellery and Gannon keep their eyes trained on me, one of them looking concerned, the other indignant. I address the sheriff and ignore the asshole.

“You bit me knowing I'd have to accept this claim?”

“Technically, only I bit you,” Gannon interjects, because of course that fucker wants to rub salt in the wound. “But we are denmates, so the claiming bite applies to all of us.”

I thread my fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots as though it will keep me from leaping at Gannon and strangling him.

“Noah—” Perth tries to chime in, but I'm so over this right now. He doesn't get a say. He stood in that shop and danced with me. He had all the opportunity in the world to come clean, to tell me everything I was up against.

“Don't even start!” My hand leaves my scalp, and my arm chops through the air until an accusing finger points right at him.

He sucks his lower lip between his teeth, and his angel-kissed face looks up at me with a beseeching expression, one

I'm not going to fall for.

These men have played me.

“What were you thinking? You just bit a complete fucking stranger! You all knew this bite came with a countdown. You knew this contract had an insanity clause. And yet, you decided to rope in some woman you'd never met because of what? My tits?”

Ruger clears his throat, the sound entirely too amused, but I swing an ice-cold gaze in his direction.

“Fuck the hell off!” I tell all of them. “Not one of you told me about this moon sickness shit. You left it to fucking Roy Kent over there”—I point at Gannon—“to tell me the truth.”

“Roy Kent?” Gannon asks, perplexed.

“*Ted Lasso*,” I snap at him, rolling my eyes when he still doesn't know what I'm talking about. “The guy's a gruff asshole, that's all you need to know.”

“Listen, kitten, I think you're being a little unfair,” Gannon argues and, I swear, he must have a death wish, because I'm about one more arrogant brow flick away from doing my best to make his insides his outsides.

“We really want to talk about fair, Gannon? Because I don't know if it gets more unfair than being jumped as I was trying to leave town, thrown into your *Hunt*, and then bitten against my will.”

“Valid. But we didn't know about half of that equation when we bit you. We're trying to do the best we can with what we've been dealt too,” Perth offers, but that argument doesn't hold as much weight with me anymore. “We thought you chose the Hunt and knew the rules. Since then, we've been trying to handle all the other—”

I raise a hand to stop him. “I get that. I do. But it's so fucked-up that you weren't honest about the stakes for me. Why is the prick of the den the one that's more than happy to feel me up and spew all the bullshit I should have been told?”

“What the hell?” Perth turns on Gannon, peering at him across Ellery’s torso. “You felt her up?”

Ellery ignores the daggers currently flying back and forth between the other two men’s gazes as he leans forward and says, “Noah, we weren’t trying to keep anything from you.”

“Like fuck you weren’t.” God, if only he was wearing a shirt, I could grab him by the collar and shake him, then I’d see if I could throw him like he threw that rock earlier.

A soft, deep honeyed voice speaks up from the side as Ruger does his best to calm me down. “You have more time. It didn’t make sense to stress you out over something outside of your control, not when you were dealing with so much already. We all knew we didn’t want to influence your decision or add unnecessary pressure.”

“We weren’t hiding it from you, but we didn’t want it looming over your head until you were in a place where you could deal with it,” Ellery adds.

I fucking hate how reasonable they both sound right now. How every word just seems to pop one of my little pissed-off bubbles. I deflate slightly, only to puff back up like a dangerous puffer fish when Gannon relaxes into the sofa like he’s won this round.

“No, seriously, did you cross a line?” Perth demands, his angry stare still fixed on Gannon.

“You know me better than that,” Gannon defends, a flash of hurt sparking in his gray eyes. “Not that it’s any of your business, but she kissed me. How was I supposed to know she wasn’t in the loop?”

“Forget the kiss. It doesn’t mean anything.” I stare down at Gannon, and it’s oddly satisfying to see him drop his eyes, chagrin etched in his features.

I turn back to Ellery, the leader of their den. His bright blue gaze is fixed unwaveringly on me, accepting my glare. “So explain it to me then. Tell me everything I need to know,” I press, folding my arms in front of my chest as though the protective stance will fend off the blows I can feel are coming.

It's always like this. New place. New people. And boom. Some unknown rule. I had a foster mother slap me once for getting second helpings at the dinner table, a rule she only told me about *after* the fact. Another who made me sleep on the bathroom floor for two nights because I touched towels that were for guests only. But nothing, nothing I've experienced, compares to the fact that I'm apparently on a one-way track to lunacy.

“As pack animals, our bonds are integral, not just to our mental health, but to our magic,” Ellery says. Then he sighs and runs his hands through his hair like he's struggling with how to explain everything so it will make sense to someone who barely knows anything about their world.

“So we explained about how a mate claim bite creates an instant link, right?” the sheriff asks, and I nod. “It links us mentally, but it also bonds our magic. If that bond isn't made permanent by the next full moon, it breaks. It's like a mate failsafe in a way—but if the bond is severed and there's not a new one to replace it, it can damage your magic and your mind. It more or less leaves you untethered, and then your magic goes a little feral. That's where stories of werewolves come from. They were moon sick shifters.”

Monsters that are half wolf, half beast, howling to the moon as they slaughter villages and lose themselves to chaos and violence, flash in my mind. I shudder and try to banish that terrifying image.

Fuck.

“As a naif, as a lone wolf outside a den, you're more susceptible because you don't have any other connection to help stave off damage if our link is severed,” Perth adds.

“That's why it's especially important for you to make sure that your magic has what it needs before the next full moon,” Ellery finishes, and his words have me feeling like my stomach is suddenly made of rocks.

Everything he's saying feels strangely like the rock slide from earlier, all of it just careening through me, smashing and obliterating everything in its path. Silence slips into the room

like thick fog, hiding my reeling thoughts from the way that they're studying me, worrying about how I'm going to take this.

"So if our bond breaks, does it hurt you too?" I ask, looking at each of them.

"Not in the same way, no," Perth answers. "Mostly because our bond as a den helps, and then of course our connection to the pack protects us too. The severing of a mate claim *can* be dangerous for a den, but it's usually a claim that's older and has been established for a long time. Then the loss can be catastrophic."

"Okay, so how do I join a den then?" I counter, trying to find some loophole, some workaround that gives me more time to figure this all out. "Not as a mate, but how you guys are with each other," I tell them, gesturing to each of them on the couch. "Wouldn't that solve the problem?"

"You could Blood In to a den, but only *before* you've been given a mate claim bite," Ruger answers.

My brow furrows and I stare at him, confused.

"When you find your denmates and you're ready to bond, there's a blood ceremony. We cut one another and exchange blood, and that forms the link between our magic and our minds," Ruger explains. "A mate claim bite is different. It's more powerful and the bond it forms is far more potent. It's a bond that can only be created between a den and a lone wolf. Because we bit you in the Hunt, you can't Blood In as a den member anywhere."

"So if I had a den before..."

"We couldn't have initiated a mate claim," Perth answers.

Ellery's eyes are full of apology as he takes me in. "This is why what happened to you is so egregious. The Hunt is sacred, and lone wolves don't take running in it lightly. They know it can be dangerous. They know what's at stake and what they're risking. We don't fuck around with that."

A burst of emotion floods me, like a dam that's cracked. I quickly try to shove it all back between the fissures, unwilling

to look at what's seeping through despite my efforts. I have to take a moment to control my breathing because my lungs are compressing and contracting like a bellows right now.

"So you just risk everything on some stranger and hope for the best? What if you're wrong? What if you bite the wrong person or make a mistake?"

"We told you earlier that instinct drives us. We didn't pick you the second we saw you, Noah. We picked you before. The second we scented you, we all knew. You're the one."

My knees threaten to buckle, so I take a seat on the hearth, gripping the stone edge. "That seems like a *very* flawed system."

"It's actually not. A wolf's scent communicates a lot about them—it's almost like an aura, but one you know with your nose instead of seeing it with your eyes. You can tell if a person's grounded and calm, if they're happy and free-spirited, if they're a fit for you and everything you want."

"And what am I?"

Each of the men on the couch answers simultaneously, but each of their answers is different and the words overlap. It takes me a second to sort out what they've said.

Wise came from Ellery. *Fierce* from Gannon. Perth said *magnetic* while Ruger claimed *compassionate*.

I shake my head as I stare at all of them and try not to scoff. "You didn't even say the same thing; how does that make any sense?"

"No person is only one thing," Ellery counters, and I eye him with annoyance.

He can take his psychological babble and shove it.

"Look." Ruger stands and my neck cranes to follow him. "Try smelling me."

I quirk a brow and have the urge to issue some sort of sarcastic remark, but I swallow it down, strangely curious despite my irritation.

When I move to stand, he holds out a tattooed hand. “You can stay comfortable. Trust me, your senses will be able to pick me up.”

I inhale a little, still skeptical, and I’m highly aware of the other three men in the room. Their gazes are laser-focused on the side of my face, making my cheek feel like it’s about to erupt in flames. The tiny pull of air in my nose doesn’t tell me anything though. My brain doesn’t light up with knowledge. He doesn’t suddenly feel like home or smell like Mr. Right. Then again, the tattooed expanse of hard male chest that my eyes are currently privy to very well might be dulling my other senses.

“Try closing your eyes,” Ruger coaxes.

I should be embarrassed, but I’m not.

Because Ruger suggested it instead of commanded it, I listen and let my eyelids flutter closed. I take a tidy little mental sponge—that definitely doesn’t resemble a pair of boxer briefs—and scrub the image of a half-naked Ruger from my mind in an effort to focus on the task at hand.

Taking a larger pull from the air around me, I do my best to focus on scent—a sense I’ve often taken for granted before. In the past, smells have either resonated or they haven’t. Fresh chocolate chip cookies, warm coffee, the jealousy-inducing scent of a neighbor grilling steak. I’ve always just walked past smells as they occurred, never intentionally seeking them out unless I’m selecting a shampoo or deodorant. Perfumes were always a struggle for me. They were too strong, too artificial. I have a feeling my eerie side is to blame for that. But now, I’m searching for a scent in this room deliberately, and it’s slightly unnerving.

Inhaling a third time, I try to still my mind. That’s when I catch a soft subtle scent I can’t quite identify. It’s almost like cinnamon, but not—the smell deeper, richer somehow. Instead of trying to make sense of the individual notes that comprise what I’m sensing, I attempt to take in what it represents to me on a more primal level.

Sweet nostalgia with promises of the types of big-family holidays I've always dreamed about being a part of. Shelter in the storm, tranquility amidst tumult. That's Ruger, layered with so many other more subtle things it would take ages to pick apart and identify.

I open my eyes and he's smiling broadly down at me. He holds that grin as he sits back down on the couch, his posture more relaxed than it's been since he came down the stairs.

"Okay, so you can kind of get feelings from scents," I concede, turning back to the rest of the group so that I'm not tempted to nuzzle the others and see what I can figure out. Well, everyone but Gannon, the honest ass.

"So when is the next full moon?" I ask, already knowing that the answer is never going to feel like enough time.

Ellery grimaces. "Twenty-four days."

Fuck my life.

I choke out a horrified laugh. "Twenty days is a breath. A blink. How am I supposed to decide if I want to claim *four* men by then?"

"Shifters," Gannon corrects.

I flip him off.

I have to stand. To pace again. The urge to panic, to scream, to rip something apart is riding me hard. I grab a throw pillow from the corner of the couch as I pass it, not sure if I need it to muffle my shrieks, absorb my tears, or take the brunt of my anger.

Things were fitting together. They were moving in such a good direction. I fell asleep in a great headspace, excited about my wolf, happy to be here with them. I just made out with grumpy Gannon for fuck's sake, that's how ready I was to try this, to give things a shot.

But *try* is where I'm at.

I'm nowhere near ready to decide on forever.

And now the moon has become a ticking clock? Each rise and fall in the sky is counting down to an end I don't even know how to process. There's a weight on my shoulders, a pressure that wasn't there before, and it feels like it's robbing me of my choices. First the attack, then the Hunt and being bitten, and now this.

Trapped.

All of a sudden, I feel trapped.

By my magic.

By these men.

By the bastard who threw me into the Hunt.

This den has taken care of me and helped me from day one, but foreboding builds a fortress inside my chest and locks me up. For a second, I don't see the room anymore, panic making me blind. My lungs compress and I have to force a shuddering breath through them.

Twenty fucking days, or I'm stuck as a crazy monster forever.

I scoff and shake my head, trying to dislodge the dread crawling up my throat. No. That isn't an option. I won't let myself be stolen by magic I didn't even know I had a week ago. Which means I know where this path is going to lead.

To them.

Whether I like it or not.

The sad thing is, I was starting to like it, and I don't know how this messed up revelation is going to change that. Will it?

Maybe I should just get it over with already.

"Noah," Gannon's voice invades my ears, and I whip my eyes over to him, already on the defensive for whatever surly bullshit or snarky comment he's about to lob my way.

But I stop short, puzzlement trickling through me when I see he's trying to hand me something.

“Here,” he offers, extending his arm even further. I look down and see a small dragon snow globe clutched in his hand. He must have snagged it when he went to his room and got dressed.

“Your screwvenir,” he reminds me, and my brow furrows.

“But we didn’t...” I trail off, looking from him to the other guys, who are watching us intently.

Gannon shrugs and that smug smirk sneaks back across his face. “One way or another, that kiss screwed you, so I figured it counted,” he jests as he shakes his hand, urging me to take the trinket from his outstretched palm.

I don’t know if I’m offended or endeared by his gesture.

“If nothing else, it’s been good luck for me. It belonged to a girl I once knew, in the pack I was in before this one. We were just kids, but I think Addi would have wanted you to have it. She was a pistol, just like you.”

It’s the tiniest crack in his voice on the last word that does it. It pulls me from the haze of my own trepidation and allows me to peer into his. His motions are casual. His words are nonplussed. But there’s something in his eyes that tells me all of this matters more than he’s letting on. That I matter.

Maybe it’s the antagonistic nature of our relationship so far or that I can tell that Gannon hates feeling vulnerable as much as I do, and I suddenly feel protective of that. Either way, I cock an eyebrow and level him with my own taunting grin.

“Did the kiss screw me, Gannon, or did the kiss screw you?” I bait, and I like the challenging glint that enters his eyes, much better than the sad, uncertain shadow that was just there.

He shakes his head but he doesn’t confirm or deny anything.

“Oh please, don’t get shy on me now. You called me *sweetheart* earlier and were all *come hither* when it was just us outside.”

Gannon's smirk falls and he tosses a bewildered look my way. "What are you talking about?"

I roll my eyes. He's fucking with me again, but I'm not letting him get away with it. If I have to face my shit, he does too.

"It's fine if you got so overwhelmed by my presence that you dropped your shield. It happens to the best of us," I joke, poking him about the first conversation we had about mindspeak and how judgy he was about my lack of control.

"No, really, Noah, what are you talking about?" he reiterates, only this time he looks genuinely concerned.

My grin melts away, and I look from him to the others and then back again. "On the deck earlier. I heard you. You called my name. You said *come here, sweetheart*. I asked you about it, and you said it was you, that you'd been out on patrol."

He shoots up out of his seat, standing, and I'm hit with a violent scent that's as potent as bomb smoke. "I was out on patrol, but I didn't mindspeak with you when I was. I didn't say *any* of that."

"Well, someone did," I argue, turning to the other guys expectantly.

And then my stomach drops.

Someone did, but not them.

Ellery is up off the couch and striding to the open doors that lead out to the deck before I even know what's happening. Ruger is right behind him.

I've hardly had time to stand before the pair of them leap off the deck and start combing through the woods. Their eyes are trained on the ground as they make pass after pass through the surrounding trees, not caring about their nearly nude states, unbothered by the chill in the air.

My chest gets tight and my pulse thunders.

Perth comes to stand next to me. He doesn't say anything, but when he holds out his arm, I lean into him and let him tuck me in close to his side.

Minutes roll by as Ruger and Ellery search, and I start to believe that they won't find anything.

Then I watch as Ellery crouches and studies a particular patch of mud. His finger dips down to trace over a shape on the ground. Fear crawls up my throat and starts to pound in my head as he looks over at me.

I can see the words etched in his furious features before they spill out of his mouth. I want to shove my hand over his lips and keep him from once again shattering my reality, but I know it's useless.

Ellery's bright blue eyes harden with promises of pain and punishment. "There was someone here. They left their boot tread in the mud." His words reach my ears easily, though he's standing nearly one hundred feet away.

Perth pulls me closer and I cling to him as Gannon steps in front of me, as though his presence can shield me from the horrible truth.

Ruger hurries through the trees to join Ellery, to see what the sheriff is talking about with his own eyes. Ellery searches the forest around him as though the trees will whisper who it was, but the woods stay quiet.

A vicious snarl spills out of the celestial, and his glowing blue eyes land on me. "Someone was definitely watching you, and just like your room at the inn, there's not a trace of scent to tell us who."

RUGER



“Your alpha lives in a Bass Pro Shop?” Noah stares up at the massive stone and wood cabin in skeptical awe.

Ellery’s neck goes brick red. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone compare his parents’ grandiose home, which has four distinct wings, to a giant human sporting goods store—but there’s a first time for everything.

I swallow a snicker as my gaze rolls over the house, which is built of gray stone at the base and has wide round wooden beams running across the top and lining the pitch of the roof. With giant gables and two-story windows galore, I’ve always thought of it more as a Swiss chalet on roids, but I can see her point.

Ellery tries to explain away the opulence of the ten car garage when her eyes turn to look at that part of the house, which connects to the main home via a covered skywalk. “It’s a bit much. But a lot of pack business goes down here—meetings with betas and enforcers, pack gatherings, parleys with other packs and eerie representatives, things like that.” Ellery shrugs.

“Alpha Morgan is king of the castle, and our boy Ellery here is *the prince*. Our beloved celestial,” Perth declares as he slings an arm around Ellery’s neck and winks at Noah. Gannon trails behind and rolls his eyes.

I shake my head at Perth. *Always trying to stir the pot, little shit.*

Ellery scoffs as though Perth's statement is outrageous instead of fact. He doesn't actually deny anything though—because he knows he can't. Instead, he straightens his blue jacket, tosses his hands in the pockets of his dress pants, and tries to change the subject.

“You look nice,” he tells Noah, his smile warm as his eyes drink her down like she's a cool glass of water on the hottest day of the summer.

She glances at her mustard-colored sweater and runs her palms over her torso. She's paired the tight-fitting top with dark jeans and boots that make her the perfect height for kissing.

Shit. Don't think about kissing. Or how hot she is. We're lucky she's even here right now. Don't blow it.

“Thanks,” Noah replies lightly, a tinge of pink coloring her cheeks. “You guys clean up well. I honestly feel a little underdressed,” she admits, gesturing toward the slacks and button-down shirts we're all sporting. “Karen would be proud,” she snarks.

I grin, though I'm personally glad the deputy has the night off and we get Noah to ourselves without the constantly running side commentary. I touch my shirt a little self-consciously though. We always dress up for these things. Mostly because it makes Melana Arcan, Ellery's mom and our luna, happy. Deep down though, it's because of the wall of shame.

Luna Arcan doesn't call it that, of course. To her, the wall shows off her amateur photography skills with a priceless collection of memories caught on film. All the rest of us see though are pictures capturing every awkward moment.

Ellery would give anything to burn the framed photo of him in a wrinkled Piglet shirt that Perth dared him to wear at age twelve, his big smile showing off a chunk of something green caught in his teeth.

There are far too many snapped and displayed prints of our bed hair, us stuffing our faces, trying to light our farts on fire,

or merely just existing all gangly and awkward before puberty did its thing. We've learned our lesson. Now, we all come ready with blinding grins, respectful outfits, and our heads on a swivel for the luna and her sneaky camera.

Unfortunately, I don't know how to explain any of this to Noah. Judging by the other guys' silence, they don't either. We're on shaky ground with her, and making her feel self-conscious about photos on top of everything else...just nope.

After the confrontation this morning, things are even more uncertain than they were before. And we were already tiptoeing across quicksand.

It probably doesn't help that we're all too worried to outright ask if her instincts are telling her what ours are, that she's our mate. But that will only put more pressure on her, and that's the last thing she needs.

This whole dinner is going to be a lot to take in. Dumping more on Noah by meeting extended family—when she's not even onboard with accepting us as mates yet—feels like a bad idea. Honestly, everything that's happened since the Hunt is a huge bowl of too-much-too-soon, and we're all just wolfing it down and hoping no one chokes on it.

"You're not underdressed; you have us all beat by a mile," I reassure Noah, trying and failing not to drool all over her. "No one's even going to notice us when they get a look at you."

Noah winces and the sharp tang of her apprehension fills the air. I instantly want to junk-punch myself.

Why did I say that? Now she's even more nervous than she was before. Fix it, dumbass. Say something calming.

She's already turning and following Ellery down the path when I manage to speak. "Your yellow sweater makes your eyes look really pretty, they're more...green today," I bumble like some doltish caveman.

You beautiful. Grunt. Me like. Ugh, I'm a fucking idiot!

It's all I can do not to immediately bash my head against a wall. I swear I'm not this dumb or shallow, but the

overwhelming need to be near her, to smell her, to touch her has turned me into a pile of useless goo. The mate claim is riding each of us so hard, calling to our baser natures and making our ability to function on any kind of intelligent level way too fucking hard.

“Can you even see her eyes?” Perth snarkily mindspeaks, his judgmental ribbing coming through loud and clear. *“Looks like you can only see her ass from here.”*

“Fuck off. I noticed her eyes earlier.”

“She does look good though...and seriously, it’s such a good ass.”

“The best.”

We share an internal sigh as Ellery swoops ahead to open the gate to the back like a gentleman. The wooden arch swings open with the tiniest of squeaks that’s quickly overpowered by the sounds of my rambunctious nieces and nephews.

I reach up and touch my hair as we walk, checking it in the reflection of the windows, making sure it’s still gelled in place, because my family will be here tonight too.

“Don’t worry. You look pretty too. Doesn’t he, Noah?” Perth gives a smirking grin from where he’s striding at my side. Normally, I’d roll my eyes at his antics, but seeing my family always leaves me a little on edge, and I know tonight is going to be worse than normal.

Gannon just stays silent and stoic like always.

“Charles is here,” Ellery announces, as if any of us missed the telltale chaos that always accompanies my oldest brother and his den.

There’s no mistaking their brood of utterly adorable and loud little shifters, usually being chased by Steph—Charles’s mate—and the rest of his den.

I simply nod, hoping they don’t scare Noah off. The idea of family and kids seemed to make her go a bit pale when we talked about what life looked like for a mated den. What if

seeing my brother's family tips her over the edge and convinces her to leave?

I hate feeling so insecure about everything—it's not something me and the other guys usually have to navigate. We've known our place with each other and in the pack for some time. We all thought our mate would fit in seamlessly when we found her.

Joke's on us.

“Oh,” Noah gasps and my head jerks in her direction, muscles immediately tensed, eyes scanning the woods all around us for a threat.

When I realize her exclamation was one of awe and her scent isn't distressed, I relax my stance and follow her gaze. She's staring out at the lake behind the alpha's house.

Sometimes I take for granted how gorgeous this place is. I've been coming here my entire life, and it's easy to miss things that now seem normal. But I take a moment to try to see things through her eyes. The pear-shaped body of water is lined with dull gray rocks and surrounded by a variety of both pines and deciduous trees, heavy on the aspens, whose white bark and gleaming gold leaves stand out starkly in the afternoon light. A pair of ducks rises from the water, taking to the sky. No other houses or hints of civilization can be seen. The view is the very definition of peace—it settles something deep inside my belly, and I wonder if it's currently doing the same for her. I hope so.

Of course, that peace is shattered a second later when one of my nephews comes barreling at us, top speed, head lowered, fingers poised like bull horns, a giant bellow ripping from his lungs. I have to crouch down to swoop him up in order to avoid a headbutt to the thigh.

“Whoa, Jayden! Slow down there, little man.”

“I'm not a man. I'm a bull.” He kicks at the air as if he's pawing at the ground, and I have to turn him to avoid getting it right in the nuts.

“A bull? What’s wrong with being a wolf?” Perth teases the seven-year-old as I set him back on the ground and ruffle his hair.

“Wolves don’t have horns. They’re boring!” Jayden declares, his nose stuck up in the air as if he’s daring us to argue with that point.

“True. But in Spain, people chase bulls all through the town.” Perth gears up for an epic battle, bending forward to poke my most aggressive nephew in the belly.

“Not true. Bulls chase the people!”

“Nope. People chase the bulls. And when they catch them, they tickle them.” Perth waggles his fingers, and my nephew shrieks in delight, catching onto the game. The two of them go streaking across the grass toward the patio.

My eyes drift over to Noah, trying to gauge her response to this tiny taste of the chaos that is my family tree. She’s staring after Perth and biting her lip, holding in a small smile, expression soft. I let out a deep breath, tension riding my exhale. I feel hopeful, staring at her next to Ellery, poised and collected, the afternoon sun kissing her cheeks and the side of her neck. This is going to work.

“Hey! Fuckstick!”

Or maybe not.

I cringe as my *other* older brother, Kyson, strides over. I didn’t know he would be here today—*fucking hell*.

The tension I was just letting go of does a U-turn and parks right back on my chest as he comes to greet us. I stare at his brown hair, which is combed for once. He’s a few inches shorter than me, something he’s hated since I shot up at eighteen. Just like the rest of my family, he’s pure muscle and practiced menace.

I’m surprised Charles isn’t hot on his heels. They’re not in the same den, but they’ve been attached at the hip for as long as I can remember. I swear the two of them only know how to bond over CrossFit and triathlons. They speak a weird language that revolves around protein powder, how much they

bench, and deep discussions about protection tactics. I work out, but talking about it is about as interesting as discussing computer processors. Blech.

Kyson's wearing his typical tough-guy uniform of all black. His T-shirt has the sleeves ripped off, and his biker boots thud loudly on the gravel as he stomps closer. I manage a half-hearted grin to be polite, and my brother tosses a nod toward Ellery and Gannon as he strides over. I can tell the moment he spots Noah, because he stops short and gapes for a beat before getting his shit together. Then the brother, who's six years older than me and the bane of my childhood existence, reaches out and grabs Noah's hand like he's a gentleman and not the antagonistic, hotheaded enforcer that I know he is.

My stomach instantly coils like a snake that wants to strike. I hate that he's touching her, but I hate the smarmy expression on his face more, and the way he juts his chin out like he's all-fucking-that and wants to give my mate every opportunity to take in his magnificence.

"Noah, this is...my brother Kyson," I introduce him reluctantly. Because I refuse to be the same sort of hothead that Kyson is, I swallow the growl building in my chest and tamp down the raging desire to deck him. If I give the slightest hint that what he's doing bothers me, he'll just double down and be even more annoying about it. My eyes drift toward the lake for a second, as I try to maintain my composure.

Noah's hi is brief and flat. Disinterested.

"Damn," Kyson exclaims. "I don't know what I was expecting, but I wasn't expecting you," he announces as he pointedly looks Noah up and down in what he thinks is a compliment. She casually pulls her hand from his and takes a discreet step back, clearly uncomfortable. "Are you sure you're with the right den, angel?" he jeers, like the arrogant ass he is. "Because I'd love to introduce you to mine."

Ellery's eyes flash wolf, and he takes a threatening step toward Kyson, putting his body in front of Noah's. Gannon stiffens but lets Ellery take point. My brother laughs as he

skates back, lifting his hands in surrender while still staring salaciously and unapologetically at our mate.

My chest thrums with heated aggression as I take a step closer too, the need to lash out at my brother worse than ever. If it wouldn't freak Noah out, I'd encourage Ellery to fuck Kyson up for his blatant disrespect. Fuck knows I'd like to do it myself, but it would piss off my dads and guarantee their bitching for the next year. Despite the fact that my older brothers never fight fair and still manage to lose when they square off against me, I'm always blamed.

“Apologize to our mate,” Ellery commands.

“Mate?” Kyson questions with a *tsk*. “I don't know about that, Ellery, doesn't look like she's got your mark yet,” Kyson counters, dancing around the line of respect by tilting his head and exposing his neck but keeping his facial expression utterly disdainful.

That motherfucker.

He's here to start shit. It's written all over his pompous face.

I should have known this would happen. This sort of get-together is normally too tame for him. I don't know why I thought he'd be here to actually support us. A quick survey of the yard behind him shows that none of his denmates are here, which is a good thing, because they're attracted to aggression like flies to shit. But for him to come out today just to make a mess of things for me and our chances with Noah...

I hate that I know that's exactly what Kyson's here to do. Family is everything. Whether that's the one you're born into or the one you create with your den, those relationships are sacred. But as I stare into my brother's hard hazel eyes, there's no denying the truth. That asshole blames me for being born and for every perceived slight or wrong thing that's happened to him since. He just can't waste a single opportunity to screw with me.

Ellery takes another step forward, his hand going to Kyson's shoulder and squeezing hard, pressing in on a nerve

running just inside the muscle. My brother's jaw clicks together and his body tenses. He tries to fight it at first, but there's no fighting the dominance coming off of our future alpha. Slowly Kyson's eyes drop and he tilts his head, Ellery forcing him to submit.

Kyson clears his throat to cover up the small whine that sneaks up his throat. "Gonna go grab myself a drink," he says to save face before turning and stomping off.

The three of us let out loud breaths, glad my brother backed down and this didn't go further. The fact that he didn't leave the barbecue altogether though means that none of this is over. We're definitely in for a hell of a night.

"So... is that what a shifter pissing contest looks like?" Noah asks dryly from behind us.

I huff out an incredulous laugh, tempted to say *yes*. It'd be easy to tell her that's as bad as it gets, but we're not going to do Noah any favors by sugarcoating things. "No. It's usually much worse than that."

I track my brother with my eyes as he joins the others. I have the distinct feeling that this little encounter with Kyson is just the appetizer, and I'm not looking forward to what he dishes up next.

It seems Noah's about to experience the full range of my family's dysfunction tonight. That pisses me off more than it normally would because it will make it harder to help her understand how amazing a pack can be, and that's what tonight is supposed to be all about.

How the hell are we going to show her the incredible side of shifter life when I can't even get Kyson to pull his head out of his ass long enough for us to paint the picture?

When I glance back up at her, Noah's expression is serious, her eyes studying me carefully.

I look to Ellery for help explaining why my brother's such a shithead, without coming off like an asshole myself. He's better at smoothing things over than I am.

“Packs have a hierarchy,” he starts to explain. “Kyson’s always been an insecure beta with a chip on his shoulder. Avoid him if you can. Everyone else is semi-decent, but he’s pure piss and vinegar.”

“Kyson, are the lovebirds here?” I hear Steph ask from nearby before my toddler-aged nieces go streaking past her, giggling and leaving a trail of clothing in their wake that Steph hurries to pick up. She doesn’t even have time to glance our way in her attempts to catch and re-dress her little ringlet-haired nudist spawn.

“Oh, are they here?” Ellery’s mom squeals, drawing everyone’s attention to us as we finally make our way to the back of the house. The huge sprawling deck overlooking the lake is big enough to host an outdoor kitchen, two seating areas with wicker couches, and a table long enough to fit twenty people.

I watch Noah carefully as introductions are lobbed at her like grenades. She’s pulled into hugs by most of the parents and patted hard on the back by one of my dads, who’s never been the most affectionate guy. Every interaction has me worried she’s about to make a run for it, and I wish I could just fucking relax. I wish there wasn’t so much riding on this.

I love my family—most of them—I really do, but Noah is barely comfortable around us, and now we’re exposing her to all of this, and I can’t help feeling this is a mistake.

I know it’s the incomplete mate bond talking, that I need to have faith and trust that the bond will work out, but shifter life can be a lot for someone who didn’t grow up around it. Gannon was *happy* about being an eerie, and even he struggled with acclimating to pack expectations. I suppose that could have something to do with the pack he was in before we found him, but fitting in—even when he wanted to—was hard.

With Noah—I’m not sure any part of her *wants* this life.

Alpha and Ellery felt it was better to introduce Noah to things sooner rather than later, but I also think Alpha Morgan might have blinders on when it comes to his son finding a

mate. But when the alpha invites you over for *any* reason, the word *no* isn't an option.

“Ruger!” I turn at the shout of my name and find my little brothers heading my way. Atlas and Arlo greet me with beaming smiles and big bear hugs. I squeeze the shit out of them right back and marvel at how much bigger they look since I saw them a few weeks ago. At twenty, they're both hitting the last of their shifter growth spurts, and I wonder if they might take my title as the burliest in the family.

I'm caught up in small talk for a minute and lose sight of Noah as the twins catch me up on their classes at the community college two towns over. They're both getting certifications as mechanics but would rather tell me about a claw ball tournament they were in than class. As much as I want to share their excitement, I find myself scanning the crowd, looking for a pair of blue-green eyes and gorgeous dark brown hair.

I spot Noah on my second pass. She's no longer next to Ellery and his folks, who are finishing up cooking the food. The hair on the back of my neck rises slowly as I find her near the drink table, holding a beer and wearing a sour expression as Kyson leans in next to her.

I'm going to kill him. Did he not get the message loud and clear earlier?

Pressing my lips together, I leave the twins and beeline for them, ready to throttle him—consequences be damned.

“A vet tech? Ohh, I might need you to play doctor and give me a checkup later—” Kyson's statement is dripping with sexual overtones, and it takes everything in me not to drown him in the bowl full of melted ice holding the beer bottles.

I close the distance, my steps mimicking my nephew Jayden's and going full-on charging bull. But a wink from Noah as she glances over at me makes me slow down.

“Oh, I'm very good at what I do. I'm confident I could diagnose you right now,” she tells Kyson, her tone saucy and smooth, and I find myself wanting to lap it up and make her

promise to only ever use it on me—I suppose Ellery and Perth can get in on it too, and maybe Gannon if he can stop getting in his own way.

“Is that right?” Kyson asks as he leans a little closer. I fist my hands to keep myself from punching through his back and ripping out his spine.

Noah laughs, but the edgy tinkle in it is forced and zero humor reaches her eyes. “I see it all the time, there’s absolutely nothing to be ashamed of,” she assures my brother. “That whole scooting your ass across the carpet thing is normal. Usually, it’s an anal sac issue. It happens when you’re *full of shit*,” she informs him casually as she takes a sip of her beer.

I bite back a chuckle as she tries not to grimace at the tart brew my Uncle Pete is notorious for making.

“Research shows that toxic jealousy can be a factor too, but confirming *that* usually requires a blood draw,” Noah continues. “Either way, I strongly recommend getting those bad boys expressed. That and some stain remover for the drag marks on the carpet, and you’re all set. Never let an asshole get you down, Kelvin.”

Kyson’s smile falters and then falls right off his face as her insult sinks in, searing him syllable by syllable. Before he can fully process the burn or even correct his name, Noah turns to me and strides closer. Those beautiful, intelligent eyes of hers turn a pleading look on me, one I could never hope to resist.

“Take me somewhere quiet for a minute?” she asks in a hushed undertone.

All I can do is nod, because I’m caught between awe over what I just witnessed and apprehension over the fact that she wants *me* to sneak her away.

Is this a good sign or a bad one?

I weave through the crowd with Noah on my heels, literally. She grabs onto the back of my shirt, holding it with a tight fist, and I consider the consequences of never washing this shirt again. Any time someone tries to approach us, I give

a general brush-off like, “We’ll be right back. I just promised to show Noah something” or “Sorry, taking Noah on a quick tour before dinner starts.”

I offer her my hand as we go down the deck steps toward the lake, but she doesn’t take it, instead skipping down the steps herself, as lithe and spry as a fairy. Trying not to read into her refusal, I show her the wide path that meanders through the Arcans’ land. We walk along it side by side in silence for a few minutes. The muffled sounds of conversations and my nieces and nephews—who have never spoken at a decibel that wasn’t a shout—reach us despite the distance.

Tree trunks fold in around us until we’re mixed into the forest, stirred with dull green light and engulfed in the clean scent of the surrounding pines.

Finally, Noah lets out a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you. I needed this.” She cringes at how those words come out. “They’re all nice, don’t get me wrong—well, except for your one brother. It’s just...intense.”

I laugh and tuck my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her. “I get it. My family is a lot to handle even for me,” I sympathize.

She glances up at me, curious. “So, what’s with the mucus-mouthed sleazeball?”

“Kyson?”

“That’s the name. I forgot it already.”

I press my lips together to smother a grin at the fact that she seems just about as enchanted by Kyson as I am. That squashes a bit of the worry that’s been eating at me, though there are still a thousand other reasons Noah might still make a run for it.

Reaching out to push aside a tree branch that’s grown low into the path, I seek the words to explain exactly what made my brother into the ass he is today. The problem is, I’m not entirely sure.

“He’s always been kind of a douche to me. We have the same biological father. I guess he liked being the center of his attention before I came and changed things. All of our dads were always involved though, so I don’t know what the issue really was. He and Charles used to pick on me a lot. Back then, I always thought it was stupid older brother shit. Charles grew out of it, but Kyson never has. His teenage years were the worst. He was friends with Ellery’s brother, Easton. After he died, Kyson got, like, a shithead hall pass. Everyone said it was grief, but really Kyson is just a dick. It’s probably the only thing he’s good at.”

My throat grows tight at the accidental slip about Easton. It’s not exactly my story to tell, but it’s so much a part of the issues with Kyson I didn’t even think to censor myself. Noah nods as a humorless smile tilts the corners of her mouth.

“I know the type,” she tells me, and I relax a little when she doesn’t dig into the part of the story that really belongs to Ellery. “I had a foster brother who had that dickish talent too. Used to constantly be in either the principal’s office or the back of a police car.”

“Yep, that sounds about right,” I agree. “Do you still keep in touch?”

“Hell no. I don’t have a clue what happened to him. And I have every intention of keeping it that way.”

I give an understanding chuckle. “I wish I had no clue what was going on in Kyson’s life most days. But in this town, there’s no running from it. I swear everyone in Howling Rapids knows the color of your underwear the minute you bend over too far.”

Her giggle is absolutely adorable. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I wish. Ellery’s staff are some of the worst. I went to see him one time. Apparently, I flashed a little too much of my orange boxer briefs and had everyone there calling me Orange Crush for about two years after.”

Her hand smacks over her mouth as she tries to hide a laugh, her gaze raking over me as though she can see the

orange underwear beneath my clothes.

Damn, she's gorgeous.

Her cheeks redden slightly before she looks away, gazing at the path in front of us as she asks, "You always wear boxer briefs?"

Immediately, I realize she's recalling last night, when I stumbled downstairs half-asleep. Nearly naked. "Not always, but I could be persuaded to," I quip and then immediately panic that I've let my mouth run away unsupervised again.

Fuck. Was that too much?

I glance down only to see a slightly embarrassed, but definitely heated, cockeyed grin on her face. She changes the subject but her tone stays light and her eyes keep a glimmer of that banked heat I just witnessed as she asks, "So, if you're a restaurant owner and not a chef, what do you do with your days?"

"Paperwork. Endless damned paperwork," I reply with a sigh, imagining how full my inbox is going to be when I finally do go back to the office. I took a week off the morning after we bit her, and it's going to be insane when I return.

"You mean it's not all glamorous taste-testings? You're ruining my fantasy." She has the world's cutest pouty face, that lower lip jutting out temptingly.

I laugh. "Well, at the end of the day, even dream jobs are jobs, right?"

"So true. I thought when I started at a clinic, it would be me saving all the animals and having them follow me around with big doe eyes and loving me forever."

"It's not?"

Her lips press together into a wavering sort of frown. "There's some of that, but there's a heck of a lot more peopling than I ever realized. Animals, I'm good with; people...well, they're trickier."

"I get that. I imagine, in any kind of service industry, you go up against challenging personalities, whether that's cooking

a meal for someone or taking care of their pet.”

“Right you are, sir,” Noah agrees with a soft smile that fades too quickly. “The fussy pet parents aren’t the hardest part though,” she confesses as she plucks a few needles from a nearby pine and runs them through her fingers, her gaze pensive. “It’s the loss that surprised me. I never gave much thought to all the sorrow and anguish I’d be a part of with my job. Yeah, there’s the fun stuff, the puppies and kittens and other unusual animals. But more often than not, I have to deliver bad news. I have to help people say goodbye to the one precious soul in this world that they love above all others. And that’s...hard.”

“Brutal,” I agree.

I desperately want to eviscerate the heartache in her face when she glances up at me. I want to pull her into a hug. My shifter side wants to nuzzle her close and let her smell my scent to calm herself, but I don’t want to overstep here. I take a deep breath and try to pull together words to comfort her instead of touches.

“It’s a profound thing you do. You offer a sense of peace and respect when someone’s world is crashing down around them. Ending pain and suffering isn’t easy.”

She nods solemnly and I sigh.

“Sometimes, I worry that what I do isn’t enough. The rest of my family are enforcers, you know—”

“What’s that?” she asks.

“Pack protectors.” Noah’s clueless expression has me biting back a chuckle. “Ummm...like pack soldiers?”

“Got it,” Noah responds, processing. “Why’d you choose a different route?”

I shrug. “When the twins were born, everything was so chaotic. I’d been messing around in the kitchen and helping out a little, but then it just became a necessity. Mom had a brood of wild kids and pack stuff she was in charge of, two of our dads were always on patrol at any given time. Things were falling through the cracks, so I stepped up to help. Then they

appreciated it. Noticed me, you know? I liked when any of my fathers would clap me on the back and tell me ‘Well done’ and stuff like that.”

“Mmmm,” Noah’s response is muted and makes me sneak yet another glance at her. I wish she was projecting her thoughts right now so that I’d better know where we stand. Where *I* stand.

The light glints off her hair and—it might be my imagination—but her shoulders seem more relaxed than before. Her expression is thoughtful as she replies, “I may bring peace when someone’s world is breaking, but you bring the joy. People go to your restaurant to celebrate. You create a space for them to do that. That’s a different kind of magic all on its own.”

We come to my favorite spot on the property just then.

It’s a small clearing surrounded by trees but set on a slight rise above the lake. At the crest of the hill, there’s a series of square wooden posts with a small awning overhead connecting them. A worn red porch swing hangs from the awning, gently rocking in the breeze. Sitting on the swing gives the perfect view of sunset on the lake, and the house is tucked back at an angle so that it can’t be seen from here, giving the illusion of utter privacy. I’ve spent many evenings alone in this very spot, and somehow, it seems like the perfect retreat for this moment, the perfect thing to share with Noah.

“After you.” I gesture to the swing.

“Thank you.”

She sits down at one end, and I take the other. We rock in comfortable silence for a few minutes, watching the sun roll down over the treetops on the far side of the lake, drizzling them with drops of yellow.

“Tell me something good about shifting,” she requests, interrupting the buzz of the insects around us.

I press my lips together and use my heels to gently propel the swing back and forth while I try to decide on just one thing. “Running,” I finally say.

“Running? That’s it?” Her tone is skeptical.

Searching for an explanation, I glance over at her as I try to piece together words to explain something so much better than any description could be. “When you shift and run, your thoughts are just...free in a way that you never experience as a person. All those worries you carry at the back of your mind, the ones that never really go away, fade. Self-consciousness? Gone. Day-to-day stress rolls right off your fur. It’s just existence in its purest form. It’s you pushing yourself to your limits, finding out what you’re capable of, opening yourself completely to your instincts and power. It’s life changing.”

I can tell a bit of cheesy excitement has crept into my tone, and I bite my lip and shake my head at myself.

“Sorry. That sounded like a fucking sales pitch. It’s hard to explain. Perth is better at helping make sense of it all because he teaches it...” I trail off, feeling a little awkward and vulnerable.

Her eyes stare steadily up at me as she tries to conceive of something that’s clearly foreign to her and hard to understand. Finally, she gives a slow nod. “Running. Okay. Thanks. That actually sounds nice. I have something to look forward to then.” A soft smile curves her cheeks.

I turn back to the lake, trying to contain the tiny flicker of excitement dancing in my belly—because this is the first time I’ve heard her talk about shifting without an edge of fear or contempt.

I could dump a million other reasons to love eerie life on her right now, but I press my lips into a straight line and make myself shut up. She’s already overwhelmed enough as it is—I’m here to help her take things slow, move at her own pace.

Noah makes a small sound and I look down to find her observing me. “You’re a caretaker, Ruger,” she declares, as though she’s a touch surprised. “You wouldn’t think so just by looking at you, but I wonder if that’s by design? You know, the big tough exterior that distracts from the warm and gooey center.” She gestures at my tattoos and the space I take up on the swing. “You guard peace and safety in your own way.”

I chuckle and wave my hand in her direction, trying to hide how much her words sink into me, warming everything they touch as they go. “Takes one to know one,” I goad, and she smiles.

“Touché.” Noah is quiet for a moment, her features growing pensive. “Tell me though, who takes care of you when you need a soft spot to land?”

We stop swinging as I stare down at her. “My den,” I tell her evenly as I try to silently communicate the unfathomable bond the four of us have.

It could be hers too if she wanted.

She nods after a beat and then turns back to the lake, relaxing deeper into the swing. We languidly rock back and forth, the chain creaking, the insects singing, the leaves rustling. Her breathing grows slow and even, and when I glance back over at her, I see her wearing a contented smile, the same sort of expression that I’m certain is plastered across my own face.

“Does it get better than this?” I ask, gesturing out over the lake as it mimics the sky’s bright bands of orange. “Good conversation and watching the sunset with a beautiful woman?”

There’s a weighted moment of silence as she considers my words. “Well, maybe it can get a little better.” Then, in a move that blindsides me, she slides her hand across the swing to the empty space in the middle of the seat and then flips it over palm up. Fingers open. Beckoning.

My throat goes dry as I slowly reach out and my big, rough palm engulfs hers.

Soft.

Petite.

Fragile.

I turn back to the lake and watch the sun disappear for the night. But inside of me, something warm and bright dawns as I

sit, holding the hand of my mate, rocking back and forth while the world floats on by.

NOAH



“**T**hey thought they were rebels, Noah! Can you even believe it, and the height of the rebellion was *corn*,” Melana Arcan tells me conspiratorially, leaning across the table toward me with a wide smile, her berry red lipstick still perfect after an entire meal. All of her is perfect—she’s the epitome of a gorgeous, gracious hostess—full of laughter and, more importantly, embarrassing stories.

“Corn?” I squawk with a laugh, looking over at the bandits themselves and giggling even harder.

“Mom,” Ellery warns in the tone annoyed children use on their parents worldwide.

His warning doesn’t stop her and I’m so glad it doesn’t.

Her bright green eyes light up even brighter. “I know, I know,” she exclaims. “Most kids will steal candy—not that we want them to be stealing anything, mind you—but candy would have at least made some sense. But no, these little mavericks would head off to play in the cornfields just outside town.”

The guys all bow their heads, like they’ve suddenly grown too heavy under the weight of their own embarrassment. My cheeks hurt from grinning so hard.

“They had to be, what, six? Seven?” she asks, looking over at Alpha Morgan, who nods, a wide smile on his face. “Mr. Hendricks’s fields are great little mazes. He designed them that way, instead of rows. Anyway, these stinkers would head

out there every day and stuff themselves full of corn. We even found a little bonfire pit where they'd roast it."

"They didn't." I can't imagine Ellery being a rule breaker at any point in his life. Or Ruger. Perth and Gannon...maybe.

Mirth colors her cheeks pink as she lifts her glass of wine. "They thought they were *renegades*. Thought they were so bad. Would come home giggling. Not eat dinner. Little did they know, we'd bought out that whole crop for the fall fair, so it was all our corn anyway."

Next to her, Ruger's mom, Jordana, titters. The woman initially gave me tough as nails vibes, but under her fierce-looking exterior, she seems nice. Ruger's mom seems to be the complete opposite of Ellery's; I'd guess the beta spends more days at the gym than a salon. But they get along like two sisters.

Jordana adds, "Remember how Hendricks used to sneak down and take pictures when they weren't paying attention? Didn't they make grass skirts out of the corn husks and call themselves hula monsters?" She starts to wheeze with laughter as she recalls. "I think they'd heard about Gila monsters and totally warped that word."

Melana snaps her fingers. "Yes! I remember. I'm sure I've got a photo of that around here somewhere. Maybe it's on my wall."

"Mom. No."

I don't know if I've ever seen Ellery look embarrassed. The alpha male always seems so calm and confident. But his look right now as he takes a sip of his beer is pure chagrin. It's a little adorable.

Melana Arcan might be joining my list of new favorites next to Karen.

Sitting at her side is her husband, Morgan Arcan—Ellery's dad. He shifts in his seat. If I thought the lumberjack-chic alpha was intimidating the first day I met him, it's nothing compared to how unapproachable he seems in a suit without a tie. I'm talking mafia-don level power, which is only

emphasized by his slicked-back hair. Unrivaled authority radiates off him, and it's like his scent is embedded with shrapnel. I feel the need to duck and cover.

When his eyes settle on me, I gulp.

“So, the boys were telling me earlier that you heard someone outside of their den mindspeak to you last night.”

Well, crap. The lighthearted mood evaporates in a flash as everyone at the table turns their attention to me.

“I did,” I reply, barely able to stifle a “sir” from slipping out along with my answer. “How could they talk to me? I didn't think it worked that way.”

He shakes his head. “It shouldn't work like that. I'm not sure.”

His head tilts thoughtfully and he turns to glance at Gannon, who's seated on my side of the table a few chairs down. His watchful stare studies the younger shifter. “Didn't you install more sensors and security cameras? Anything?”

My head twists to watch Gannon too, because I knew he was off doing something earlier today, but I didn't pay attention to what.

Gannon sets down his water glass. “I did, and no. They were all online, yet not a single one picked up on anyone entering or leaving our property aside from us. It's weird. I've added more and adjusted the angles to cover the hole that must have been there. We've also increased our shifts.”

“Do you want me to assign some additional enforcers?” the alpha offers.

Wait. They already have enforcers around the house? I didn't know that.

Gannon's head tilts from side to side as if in thought. “Yeah, but until we know who the threat is, the vetting process is going to take time.”

Alpha Morgan presses his lips together. “True. But you have an inner circle, don't you?”

Ellery pipes up. “There are definitely some deputies I can ask.”

The alpha nods. “Do you want me to call the orcs, see if they can spare a team?”

Ellery looks at his den in thought and then over at me. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that, but yeah. Let’s reach out.”

Orcs. Okay. Yeah. I’m just going to sit here and take another sip of water and pretend that sounds all normal and everyday to me too.

“You said you found a footprint?” Leon, one of Ruger’s dads, asks.

Ellery pulls his phone from his pocket and swipes to unlock it and find the photo. “A partial. Looks too big to be female.” He slides it across the table to the alpha, who plucks it up and studies it before handing it down the line. Each of Ruger’s parents takes a look, zooming in and examining the photo, nodding their heads.

“Just the one imprint? No sign of others?” Jordana questions, passing the phone back to Ellery when it’s completed a full circuit around the table.

“Only one print,” Ruger confirms.

“I know you’ve been looking at dens because of the Hunt angle, but what if you’re dealing with a lone male?” another one of Ruger’s dads asks.

I try to recall his name, but it’s lost in the chaos of the eighty thousand introductions I received tonight.

“Had Fife pull a list of lone wolves. We’re working through the possibilities,” Ellery responds before giving a sigh. His blue eyes glance over at me with a look of apology, as if he’s sorry he hasn’t caught the fucker yet.

I’m sorry too. I offer a look of sympathy right back because I don’t want to be caught up in this chaos any more than I want him to have to deal with it.

Alpha Morgan strokes his chin. “A loner could make sense. Whoever got onto your property last night had an opportunity to take her, but they didn’t. From the sound of things, Gannon out patrolling was the only thing stopping them. We’re probably dealing with someone low in the hierarchy. An individual who can’t beat you in a fight, which is why they’re sneaking around in the shadows.”

I find myself staring down at my empty plate, as the whole table tosses around their theories and suggestions. Warmth colors my cheeks as I listen and absorb their genuine concern. I know the guys take my safety seriously, but to hear the others express the same worries or offer to help in any way they can, it takes me aback.

Not one of them sounds resentful or annoyed that my appearance brought on all this trouble. No one has insinuated that I might not be worth the hassle. It’s so strange. So antithetical to everything I’m used to. Despite all my fears and reservations, a part of me is starting to believe that this den and their family practice what they preach.

Community...pack.

A foreign but welcome feeling fills my chest as I settle back into my seat. I realize that I’ve been a feather in the breeze, drifting, blown around, spinning. But now? Now, I think I might have found a soft spot to land.

When I raise my eyes, I find Melana Arcan staring steadily at me. Tears well in her eyes like she can see my realization written all over my face. She offers me one of her beautiful smiles, and my throat tightens with emotion. A small tear spills down her cheek, and she lifts her hand to wipe it.

Something in the way she moves, or maybe it’s the way she’s looking at me, jars me. And all at once I’m no longer sitting at a table on Alpha Morgan’s back deck. I’m standing in a dirty, dimly lit warehouse, and someone’s crying.

I look around, completely confused, and discover a group of kids who are roughhousing quietly next to me. I can’t see any of their faces, they’ve got a tight ring going, and I’m trapped outside of it, facing their backs as they all bend over a

pair of turtles. What clothes they have on are tattered and filthy, not that the skinny bodies inside the worn fabric are much cleaner.

“I don’t think they want us to eat them,” a little emaciated girl declares sullenly while poking a stick at one of the shells, the body of the turtle locked safely inside.

An older boy with dirty dark hair snorts and reaches out to flick the girl on the head. She growls at him and rubs the spot he abused, leaning away to keep him from doing it again.

“Prey never *want* to be eaten, stupid,” the boy jeers, and several other kids his age scoff their agreement.

“There’s not enough here to feed more than one of us anyway,” a tall thin girl sighs.

“Do you think Alpha will be back soon? Think his mate will feed us?” another girl asks.

The mean dark-haired kid barks a cruel laugh. “I don’t think she’ll be alive long enough to do anything. Alpha was pissed. He’s going to do to her what he did to his den, make ’em pay for questioning him.”

A few of the littler kids whimper and tuck themselves close to one boy. He’s tall and has dark hair like the pitiless kid, but when he wraps his arms protectively around the scared ones, it’s clear the similarities between the two stop there.

I move closer to the kind boy, drawn to him in a way I can’t explain but feel on a visceral level. I want to reach out and tap him on the shoulder, force him to turn to me so I can see his face—a face, I can feel in my gut, I’ll know instantly.

“B, can you take us out hunting?” another boy asks the cruel kid, who rolls his eyes.

Before he can answer though, wails sound off from somewhere outside the metal walls of the building. I look around, the screams and cries growing louder with each passing second. A door crashes open, the boom of metal striking metal making me jump. It’s so loud that it almost drowns out the surprised cries some of the children make.

A massive man storms in, his thickly muscled arms holding a woman who's doing everything she can to get away. His greasy hair clings to his head, and his thick brows are drawn in anger. Compared to him, the woman is tiny, clothed in little more than dirty rags. A clump of her hair is missing from her head, and a trickle of blood is visible on her neck.

"You will fucking submit," the man bellows in her face, and she screams something unintelligible back.

"Where is she, you bastard?" the woman snarls, and the man tosses her away from him. She flies through the air, crashing against the metal wall of the warehouse, and the collision reverberates through the entire building.

"Mommy!" a tiny voice cries out, and then little feet are pattering across the concrete floor to get to the groaning woman as she tries to push herself up from the ground.

The vision blurs for a second, then suddenly *I'm* the one moving closer to the hurt woman, and when I look down, the tiny feet and the child's body belong to me.

The big man roars in outrage, but I don't pay the fury radiating off him any attention, my sole focus on getting to the woman on the ground. Her head snaps up and a familiar blue-green gaze fixes on me, a gaze I would know anywhere despite how long it's been since I last saw it.

My mother.

Her battered face hardens with determination, and her eyes start to glow. Black veins crawl up her neck, and a tear spills down her cheek. She opens her mouth, and with every ounce of strength she has left, she screams, "RUN!"

I slide to a stop as a brown wolf rips free from her body just in time to intercept the colossal gray wolf that starts viciously attacking her.

I scream as I watch them tear each other apart, the sound of my fear and pain ricocheting all around me until I snap out of the memory as brutally as I was sucked into it.

I gasp, alarm and terror spilling out of me as I slam my hands to my chest and breathe through the fear. I blink, and

I'm back sitting at a table with the alpha and luna, the guys, and their family—only now they're all staring at me with concern.

Ellery, Gannon, Ruger, and Perth are instantly crouched around me, guarding and protecting me. If only they could shield me from this.

I don't even know what to think.

“What happened?” Ellery presses, threading his fingers through my hair and pulling my focus to him. “Breathe, baby, just breathe,” he encourages as I pant through my shock and outrage.

Our gazes connect and I swallow past the lump of astonishment in my throat. “My mom was a wolf,” I rasp, and emotion starts to sting my eyes. “So was my dad,” I whimper, and I feel Ruger, Perth, and Gannon put their hands on and around me as though they're trying to lend me their strength. “I saw him attack her. She must have gotten away somehow and took me and ran. I think she was hiding me...from him.”

NOAH



I t's colder in Howling Rapids than it has been since the day I stumbled into this unexpectedly deceptive eerie town.

The slice of sky I can see between the blazing red maples is the muted gray that signals an impending snow storm. As if that hailstorm a few days ago wasn't enough bad weather. Everything around me feels as though it's holding its breath in anticipation of the first flakes. The air is crisp with a slight bite to it that feels good against my anxious, heated skin.

I'm about to shift into a wolf for the first time.

I bring my arms up and hug them to myself for a moment, though the puffy jacket I'm wearing kinda impedes my ability to self-soothe. Not that there's really any possibility of tamping down on the anxiety churning my breakfast into a bad idea right now. I feel like I'm dangling over a boiling ocean, about to be dropped into the bubbling sea without so much as a life preserver.

Today I'm going to meet my wolf.

I pull in a deep stinging breath, the ground beneath my boots crunching with each step as I follow Perth along a path deeper into the woods. A light blanket of frost kisses the world all around me, and I start to question if shifting in this freezing weather is wise.

Maybe I can convince Perth to do this another day?

"Stop lollygagging and trying to come up with excuses to get out of this," Perth calls over his shoulder, the same annoying smile that greeted me first thing this morning still

spread across his face. Despite the weather, he's wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt, like this cold doesn't bother him at all.

"Crap, was I projecting again?" I ask, stumbling over a frozen root and then righting myself. I've been trying to get better about controlling my thoughts. For the most part, I think I've got it down, but I wouldn't be surprised if I'm leaking like a sieve right now. I've got bigger problems to worry about.

"Nope, not that time. It's written plain as day across your face," Perth confesses, and I shoot him a glare, one that he totally misses because he's once again facing forward and not looking at me. "I saw that," he gibes, his playful excitement riding my last nerve.

"How 'bout you see this?" I mumble, flipping him a set of double barrel birds.

He just chuckles like I'm being adorable instead of antagonistic. Then he turns toward me, slowing his pace so that we can trudge side by side. I avoid looking at the way the muted sun makes the color of his hair appear deeper and showcases those freckles I'm starting to memorize, particularly the tiny one dotting his lower lip. Ogling has no place in the midst of an anxiety attack.

Part of me wishes the other guys were here instead of running a staggered perimeter to keep me safe. But they'd all headed out with stern looks and serious swagger this morning, bound and determined to be my bodyguards while I wolf out and frolic around. The coffee I had this morning feels more like cement in my stomach, so I doubt there will be much frolicking going on today, but never say never, I guess.

"It's going to be fine. I know you're nervous, which is totally understandable, but I'm here. I've got you. This is going to be epic, I promise. Well, after the pain part, but really that lasts less than five minutes your first time...ten at the most."

"Your pep talks suck ass," I grump, pushing a low branch out of my way as I follow the chipper shifter to what feels like my doom.

Perth gasps with faux indignation. “My pep talks are legendary, just ask all the pack kids,” he defends. “You need something more poetic, try this classic...” He clears his throat dramatically, throwing out a hand as though he’s on some stage instead of trekking through the woods at the butt crack of dawn. “To be or not to be...who gives a shit and shift already!” He cracks up, laughing like a loon at his own ridiculously bad joke.

But, fuck me if I don’t crack a small smile at his antics.

“See!” He points at me enthusiastically, more specifically at the smile I’m doing a bad job of hiding. “Just like I said, epic.”

“I can only imagine what teenage shifters say about you behind your back,” I declare, and I roll my eyes as we reach a clearing surrounded by skeletal maples and covered in a carpet of their ruby leaves.

He snorts and stops walking. “Oh, I can hear most of it. They suck at shielding. But you wanna know a secret?” He steps in close to my side, and I catch a hint of his scent, a musky, smoky smell that softens the quaking in my belly. His breath is warm against the shell of my ear as he whispers, “Irritation is a great distractor from fear.”

Then he boops me on the tip of my nose before darting to the middle of the clearing. His arms spread wide, his voice blasts across the space as though he’s a ringleader at a circus. “Noah Lupescu, are you ready for a day that’s as amazing as Christmas?”

I give him a wry look as I walk closer. “Bad example for a kid who grew up in the system. Even before that, holiday magic was no competition for time and a half pay. Single mom, you know.”

“Well, shit,” he mumbles, his happy expression immediately deflating.

“It’s fine,” I assure him with a small smile.

“It’s not fine. But for the sake of today’s life-changing exercise, we’ll let it slide...for now. Okay, no Christmas

comparisons,” he observes, speaking more to himself than me. He rubs his palms together as he thinks for a second. “Tell me about your favorite memory then. A time you were so excited that you were jumping up and down because you couldn’t hold it in a second longer.”

His suggestion makes me pause, and I look over through the trees as I shuffle through my memories in search of what he’s asked for. It’s not long before I have one. “When I was sixteen, I volunteered at an animal shelter.”

I don’t dive into the why, since recalling that foster family bequeaths me with nothing more than a jumbled mess of tangled hurt. “There was this big black dog, Shadow, who growled at everyone when he came in. No one could get near him. But for some reason, he liked me. He went from scared and angry to this playful puppy. He’d be so excited to see me, and I felt the exact same way. I’d always rush off the bus, running down the sidewalk to get to him.” My eyes gloss up a tiny bit at the memory.

When I glance up, Perth is in front of me. He carefully reaches for my hand and takes it, the warmth of his palm sinking into my skin. “You were a beast tamer even then,” he teases lightly, and I laugh and shake my head.

“Guess so.”

Perth’s amber eyes practically glow as he looks deep into mine. “Well, get ready, because we’re about to create memories that rank right up there with Shadow.”

He’s so close, still holding my hand as he makes his declaration, and my mind instantly goes somewhere it shouldn’t. I know he’s talking about shifting, and yet, suddenly, all I can picture is him closing the distance between us, pulling me into his arms, and giving me no choice but to lose myself in his kiss.

My breath hitches and I force myself to shake away the wayward vision, ignoring the flush that crawls up my neck. “So full of yourself,” I gibe in an effort to redirect my thoughts to an easier, safer place.

He shakes his head. “You’ll see.” He drops my hand and retreats a few paces before shucking off his shirt. A light dusting of red hair covers his chest, and his freckles are everywhere. The solid definition of his pecs and the way his arms flex have me swallowing hard.

And that’s the exact opposite of what I need to knock the lust right out of my thoughts.

When Perth reaches for his belt buckle, I blurt out, “Wait. So, we’re just, like, doing this?”

“Yup.”

“Don’t...don’t you need to go through the rules again or something?” I squeak, fear constricting my vocal chords. My breath comes more quickly even though it feels like the air isn’t making it all the way to my lungs. My eyes drag across the ground, and I want to run, though my feet feel stuck in place.

“Sure. Get naked. Then call your wolf.” Perth gives me a naughty grin—he knows how fucking annoying he’s being.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.” I’m about to lay into him when he shucks his pants.

Damn.

The cold did not do a thing to shrink his goods.

“He must be a shower not a grower.”

“Wrong,” he calls out, chuckling lightly—and I realize I just projected that thought. “Totally a grower.”

I blink. “That’s not humanly possible.”

“Not human, remember? In fact, that’s why we’re out here. Because you aren’t human either. Now, let’s go. I can’t wait to see your wolf.”

The squeezing panic is back. “I’m not ready—”

Perth’s tone is soothing as he walks back over to me, fully nude. But his joking evaporates and his tone turns soothing. “Noah, you are. You’re strong and capable, and I’m going to walk you through it and shift with you.”

I breathe him in. I'm being obvious about it, but I don't even care, because the rich musk with a hint of smoke that laces my every inhale, is grounding in a way I desperately need right now.

Everything is about to change. I know it with every fiber of my being.

They've only been talking about this moment since I woke up after the Hunt. I've watched Gannon shift like it was no big deal. But *me* shifting feels more profound than anything else that's happened so far. I'm about to reshape myself in a way that there's no coming back from. I don't know how *not* to feel terrified by that, because I'm about to go from conceptually knowing I'm not human to *literally* becoming an animal.

"I don't know how to do this," I admit, sucking in deep pulls of his reassuring scent.

"That's why I'm here."

I laugh and lean into him more, nuzzling my cheek against his bare chest. Skin to skin touch soothes away the frazzled clouds of worry inside my body. They part to let a starlit sky shine through, tranquil and peaceful. He lets me stay, not saying a word, not moving, just breathing steadily as I collect myself and rally.

And when I lift my head, his eyes are swimming with an emotion so deep I can almost taste it.

Shit.

I want to taste it.

Doing exactly what Perth has been telling me I need to do, I lean into my instincts and pull his face down to mine. I lean up on my tiptoes to meet him, my arms going to the broad muscles on his shoulders. I watch his throat bob with a swallow as I move closer.

Entranced.

Ready.

I've been waiting for this moment since our dance in the dress shop. And now, before I take this massive step into a

new world, a new me, I want to savor my last truly human moment with the man who showed me that it was okay not to be one.

I let my breath ghost over his lips as I cinch my hands behind his neck. “Perth,” I murmur, stopping inches from his mouth, giving him a chance to close the distance or tell me no.

He strikes. Kissing me like he’s making up for lost time, like he’s plying me with all the passion I always should have had but didn’t.

Both hands come down to palm my ass, pulling me hard against his naked torso. His lips dive down and devour mine, and starbursts flash behind my eyes. It’s like a million stars are falling all around me, and on every one, all I wish is for Perth to keep kissing me just like this.

We fall into each other easily. Tongues dancing. Mouths worshipping. Bodies singing with the rightness of this, the stunning brilliance. My fears aren’t simply lifted. They’re erased. Obliterated.

More.

I need more.

Hunger, heavy and insistent, pulls me into him, and I scramble to get closer.

But he removes one hand from my ass and smacks it hard. The sting reverberates up my spine, shocking me a little, though the ferocity does absolutely nothing to dull my sexual ache. If anything, it intensifies.

I lean in, but Perth pulls out of the kiss with a breathy scolding. “Bad girl.”

What?

Breathing hard, he steps back from me. His chest is heaving nearly as much as mine, and his cock is standing at attention.

Holy fuck. He is a grower.

His words rip my gaze from his dick and yank it up toward his face. “Right now, I want to stretch you out on this forest floor and eat that cunt before I flip you over and rut you hard.”

Oh fuck. Yes. Please.

“We’re not going to do that.”

“But—”

“You’re going to shift. *Now.*”

“No. Please. I want the other thing. Option B. Door number two.”

My body is still singing, and that horrible fear from earlier is gone. How can he possibly want me to go back to that?

Perth runs his fingers through his hair and looks at me like I’m a dangerous livewire that demands caution and focus.

“You have no idea how bad I want that, but you’re not getting out of this,” he scolds, and I glare at him. “This is new. It’s intimidating. But think of it like your first orgasm. Once you open that door and make that discovery, there’s no going back. It’s going to be that good.”

I press my lips together as a little edge of that anxiety creeps back into my chest. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Fine,” I huff out petulantly and Perth chuckles. “How do we start?”

“Well, first, I’m going to take off your clothes,” he informs me lightly, stepping closer.

“But no fucking?” I question, and I’m not even a little embarrassed by the hint of whine in it.

“Not yet.”

A flash of heat almost melts me with the promise I hear in that statement, but I can tell by the look on his face that I’m not getting out of this.

I sigh. “Ugh. This is going to be the most unfulfilling naked time I’ve ever had with a guy.”

“No, it’s not.” Perth’s laugh vibrates in the space between us, and I have to force myself to ignore the way it resonates in this really delicious way inside of me.

Perth’s hands come up to my jacket, and he slowly unzips it. The sizzle in his eyes from everything we just did lingers in his hooded gaze. My stomach reacts, flipping and fluttering in response. “Now you’re going to open yourself up to your instincts. You’re going to search for that feeling of *other* inside of you. When you find it, I want you to make space in your head, in your heart, and in your soul for it.”

My jacket falls to the ground at my feet, and I nod as he reaches for my shirt and pulls it up over my head. My skin pebbles against the nip in the air, but I don’t focus on that. I can’t. Not with the way his eyes linger on my chest.

When his gaze darts back up, it narrows. “I said focus.” As he gently takes off my shoes, socks, and pants, I do as Perth tells me, fighting against the urgent need for him. It’s hard to do, nearly impossible while his hands are on me. But then he steps away and I feel a path erupt inside of me, one made of strong emotions like the ones he’s just stoked. I walk down it, seeking out the thing I’ve been feeling inside of me for longer than I’ve had a name for it.

My wolf.

“When you’ve got her, you’ll feel a tingle run down your spine,” Perth goes on, his own breaths slightly labored. “I want you to picture the power inside of you expanding, running from your chest out to your limbs, filling you up until it’s all you can feel.”

I close my eyes, searching through the pieces of me I’ve never wanted to look at too closely. Pieces I worried were the wild, unhinged parts of myself. The broken bits—the ones I always thought made me too sharp, too jagged, too easy to send packing to home after home because others could see the shattered ruins too. All those scraps I now realize aren’t broken tatters. They’re eerie threads. Shifter magic. Power that’s waiting to be woven together so I can become more.

The wind gusts across my face just as I feel it.

Feel her.

“Noah, we’re going to shift. We’re going to run together. I’m going to chase you.” His fingers curl lightly against the bare skin of my back at that last little promise. And somehow, the idea of a chase sends a euphoric little tickle across my skin.

“Let her out. You can do this,” he coaxes, and I feel his encouragement bolster me.

I force everything around me to fall away. Focusing only on this hidden, burgeoning piece of me that’s all too eager for acknowledgement. I’m startled to discover that it doesn’t feel like some foreign, wild invasion of who I am, but more a vital component I’ve always been missing.

A key.

She’s cold when I reach for her. Not in a frigid, painful sort of way, but in a relieving one. She’s cool, lapping waves under a blazing sun. She’s the tranquil mist that rises from a thunderous waterfall. She’s pure magic in every sense of the word.

I open myself up, making space for all the slivers of power inside me to finally fit together with a loud and resounding click.

My lids flash open, and Perth’s intense gaze is locked on me. His smile is proud, as though he too heard all my pieces fall into place. I look down to find black veins crawling up my arms and down my hands. They thrum with each heartbeat and I find myself staring down at them in fascination instead of fear. With a wide grin, I look up at Perth and fully give myself over to the wolf.

“You’ve got this,” he encourages.

And then I break.

Perth catches me before I can hit the ground, pulling me into his lap. Maple leaves crunch beneath him as he sits on the ground, holding me tight in his arms as pain ricochets through me like a wrecking ball that’s determined to leave nothing of the old me standing. I scream as the straight bones of my legs

shatter and start to reform beneath me. I can feel each jagged bit moving underneath my skin, and it's as though I'm being stabbed from the inside out.

Flocks of birds flee the trees around us, squawking their alarm as they escape from my cries.

I fold in on myself, my bones and muscles contorting and splitting in unfathomable ways. Icy cold seeps around each fracturing burst of agony until I'm so chilled I could probably create icicles with a mere touch. Agony explodes through me like fireworks and, just when I think I can't take anymore, Perth's determined tone pulls me from the wreckage of my mind and body.

"It will be over soon, Noah. This is your wolf forging the pathways she needs to shift at will. This will be the only time it feels like this. I promise it will be worth it. You're doing amazing." Perth does his best to console me.

I clutch onto his promises, letting them buoy me against the tide of overwhelming sensation that wants to tug me under.

A large, calloused hand brushes my hair back from my face, and I can feel Perth slowly set me down against the hard ground and back away. "It won't be long now; I can sense your magic building."

I whimper at the loss of him. Glacial agony finally consumes me, a heavy sheet of solid cold sliding over me, and then it all just...stops.

I lie against the frost-brushed ground, breathing heavily, my limbs and body tingling in a strange, unfamiliar way. All my bits and pieces are there, but not where they should be. My mouth and nose are wrong, my teeth sharp, my ears dislocated. The small whine that slinks out of me confirms it.

I'm a fucking wolf.

A big one, from the feel of it.

I open my eyes and it takes a moment for my vision to focus.

Whoa, I muse, thunderstruck by the changes.

Everything is sharper, clearer, easier to process on a massive scale. Movement immediately catches my attention, and I hone in on a massive red and gray wolf. My size is formidable, but Perth's wolf is enormous.

I recognize him easily from the night of the hunt. He was the first one into the fray. The wolf that stopped the other den from getting to me first. I marvel at him, observing his size, the patches of rusty red against creams and grays. His eyes are a brighter wolfy version of the amber Perth has when he's in his skin form. He's nothing short of magnificent.

The big wolf chuffs as though he appreciates my inspection of him, and then, from across the clearing, Perth's delicious voice sounds in my mind clear as day.

"Hey, beautiful, wanna run?"

NOAH



My heart is a prism of awe, fractals of happiness sparkling all around me in every shade. There's a deep blue sense of satisfaction as my paws hit the earth, claws digging in for purchase before I powerfully push off, gaining speed as I go. Red gleams of riotous energy streak through me as I fly through the forest like a soundless wraith. Bright, dancing yellow bliss bridles me, keeping me from floating away on a wisp of pure joy.

Ruger was right. Running is the fucking best.

Tree trunks rush past in a blur as I zig and zag around obstacles. The wind gently combs through my fur, and I find my tongue suddenly flapping out of the side of my mouth like a pennant.

Hell yeah!

I'm so capable, coordinated in a way I shouldn't be. It's like I've lived in this body my whole life instead of mere hours.

The adjustment from two legs to four was faster and more effortless than I would have ever thought. I'd pictured myself going full Bambi-on-ice as I got the hang of having a wolf body and all the fur, muscles, and fangs that come with it. But after the initial shock of discovering my chocolaty brown coat and getting a feel for paws instead of hands and feet, it all came so naturally.

It was always meant to be.

I'm free now, complete in a way I never knew I needed, and blazing through the woods as we take turns chasing and being chased. Perth explained it's the best way to explore all my new senses and hone my natural instincts. Plus, it's just fun.

A wild laugh erupts inside of me and morphs into a joyful howl on my lips. Perth howls back as he follows me, easily keeping pace. The sound hits my newly sensitized ears, and I can decipher all sorts of meanings just from his tone. He's saying he's happy. He's proud. He's excited.

And then, his voice sneaks inside my head, playfully threatening. *"Noah, you'd better run faster. Because I'm about to catch you. And when I do..."*

I bolt before he can finish his thought, my muscles bunching and releasing as excitement zings down my spine all the way to the tip of my tail. Pulling ahead, probably because he lets me, I widen the gap as I laugh again and embrace a profound sense of release.

It's as though all my problems—all the worry, fear, and uncertainty I've been feeling for so long—slip from my shoulders and fall completely off.

Shifting is the best feeling in the universe. Because I don't think about my existence. I just exist.

Snow starts to drift lazily down from the clouds, big fat flakes floating through the air and landing on the leaf-splattered ground, speckling my vision. There's an aggression to the cold front that's quickly moving in. It carries a distinct warning, one that's building in the air and whipping around in the wind. I welcome it. My new shifter body is running feverishly hot from all of this exertion, and the slowly dropping temperature is more a soothing balm and less a deterrent.

The thrill of the chase practically sings in my blood, and I push this body to new heights, leaving Perth even farther behind.

Take that!

I start to consider ways I could circle back and surprise attack him when I hear the distinct burble of a small stream.

Water, my mind clamors to satisfy a sudden overwhelming need. I change directions, heading toward it. Rushing, I do my best to keep my lead. If I'm fast, I could still try to stalk Perth. I quickly tamp down my thoughts, not wanting to accidentally mindspeak or project my plan and give myself away.

I spot the gleaming little creek ahead. It's no bigger than the width of a car and no more than half a foot deep. I could easily clear it in half a leap. There are a few large boulders that have rolled into its path, but the stream just happily flows around them. The water is clean, clear, and cold as I sample a few laps.

Damn. This is messy.

My entire muzzle gets soaked. I hurry to clean up the mess with my tongue as I search for the perfect hiding spot. Perth can't be too far off, and this could prove to be a perfect place to ambush him.

There.

I rush to an overhang where a bush with bright waxy leaves can serve as my cover. I crouch down beside it, surprised to see that a small blanket of snow is already coating the ground. The flakes are falling faster and thicker than I expected they would, almost like they're in a hurry to help me cover my tracks.

When I glance up at the sky, all I can see is fluttering bits of white. But my attention is drawn back to my plan when Perth's playful voice sneaks into my head.

"Where are you, Noah? Come out, come out wherever you are. I'm going to catch you..."

Anticipation curls my claws, because I sort of want him to, but not quite yet. I have this note of need humming through me to push him, to see what he's made of, to test his worth on some shifter scale I don't logically understand but seems important to my wolf side.

I think this is what the Hunt is supposed to feel like. Ellery tried to explain that to me, but I didn't get it until now, and I'm not sure what to make of that.

How different would the Hunt have been if I was eager for the chase instead of terrified? If I'd known I was a shifter, would I be mated already? Would I have chosen this den as quickly as they chose me?

Maybe.

Movement catches my eye and I turn my head, abandoning my confusing thoughts. There's a familiar figure traipsing through the woods, walking slowly, nose to the ground. He's the wolf that bit me. The wolf that trotted out of the woods the other night, shifting into a man who kissed me so thoroughly I almost forgot what a tool he is. Gannon. I'd recognize his beast anywhere. He moves lightly, carefully, eyes scanning.

I pull in his scent as he moves closer to the stream, and it's as though my nose calls up a contact list and all of Gannon's information is immediately registered with one quick sniff. There's a nuance to his scent right now, something I wouldn't have been able to identify on two legs like I can on four. The aroma plays in my mind like a low, lonely piano note.

He's uncertain, hesitant.

He sniffs at the air, stopping at the exact point by the stream where I took a quick drink, and looks around.

Is he tracking me? I thought he was running the perimeter.

I watch him search the soft veil of snow on the ground for paw prints, and I can't decide if I want to hide from him or do something to make him stop reeking of doubt.

Things between us have been strained since I didn't scoop up his snow globe. He's been quieter. Present, but nearly silent. It's like he wants to get in on the fun, he wants to engage, but he's not sure if he should. Or maybe the angst wafting off of him is because he's not sure if he'd be welcome.

Fuck.

I watch him a little longer. The more I do, the more certain I am that I'm right. My wolfed-out bits really dislike the odor of apprehension overpowering his otherwise clean and slightly spicy scent.

Before I know it, I'm uncurling from my attack position and leaping for Gannon, my plan for Perth forgotten. Barreling straight into Gannon's chest, I cause the pair of us to roll across the snowy ground and fall into an unseemly heap with me on top.

He blinks up at me.

I sense his hesitation, and I dislike it even more than his disquiet. It feels wrong.

Without questioning what the hell I'm doing, I nip playfully at his nose, wanting to snap him out of it. I'm not in the mood for any of the human complications that envelop our relationship.

Gannon and I need to have it out. He's in desperate need of a lesson on manners and boundaries, but not right now. I'm not ready or willing to abandon the happiness and freedom of my first shift to make room for anyone's baggage—especially not his.

I just want to play.

I vault off of him and prance around in the snow, leaving paw print impressions in the soft covering as I jump from side to side, waiting to see what the sable grump will do.

Will he meet me where I'm at in this flurry of excitement and instinct, or will he drag me down and ruin it?

Gannon doesn't speak to me or project the debate I see flash inside his bright gray eyes. Snow falls on his face, dappling the doubt that collects there for a moment before a snort erupts from his muzzle. He leaps to his feet faster than I can track. Then he snaps his teeth at me like he's testing the playful waters.

It's my signal to run.

I don't know how I know that, but I do, and I give in to the driving need until I'm once again a flash of fur amidst the trees.

Gannon's bounding steps are loud and determined behind me, and I hear Perth not far behind him. My instincts and excitement push me even faster. I can feel their eager tenacity through the thin bond connecting us, a bond that felt overwhelming and daunting just days ago.

Today, everything feels...different.

Better.

I race for a strange-looking mountain that's not too far off. It looks as though someone took a knife and cut off the bottom of it, the peak now having a flat wall for a base. I'm almost to the flat sheet of rock when I sense Perth and Gannon start to close in. I glance behind me to find they're even closer than I realized.

Shit.

They move like machines built solely to hunt, capture, and claim whatever they want. There's a seamless grace to how they work together. It's built from years of running through this forest, part of a den, one of the pack. Witnessing their fluid power and wild focus has me unconsciously slowing.

I catch myself before I can do something embarrassing like trip over my paws or drool, but the honed way that they're stalking and running me down...does things for me.

Hellooooo, wolf daddies.

I'm suddenly more intrigued by the impending thought of being caught than the chase.

"Look, Gan, I think we tired her out," Perth taunts me mentally as they break off wide so that each of them can come at me from the sides in a coordinated attack.

"Too bad, I was looking forward to wrestling her to the ground," Gannon replies.

With a sassy swish of my tail, I flash them some fang.

A hum of amusement trickles through the bond from them to me, but I can't tell if it's Gannon's or Perth's or both.

Spinning, I bound for a ridgeline that's steep, a scrawl of gray rock across the landscape. Gannon's right on my tail, his teeth nipping at my haunches, and a zing of heady anticipation zips up my spine.

"You ready to be caught, kitten?" Gannon presses, the dart of his words landing way too close to the bullseye.

"You ready to get bitten?" I counter, turning to snap at him when he gets too close.

A sultry laugh invades my mind, the rich sound of it like static electricity against my fur. *"Only if you bite me the way that I want you to,"* Gannon baits.

I'm suddenly bombarded with the memory of his mouth on mine and the way he'd pulled back slightly to nip my bottom lip before delving back in to deepen the deliciously molten kiss. The entanglement flashes from me and Gannon on the deck to what just happened with me and Perth in the clearing. Hot awareness ripples through me and I can't tell if one of them pushed those thoughts at me or if I summoned them on my own.

I whirl around, ready to face the two shifters head-on. They both stalk confidently closer, herding me back in a very calculated, practiced way. Snow is starting to collect on their coats, the flakes falling even faster while the wind kicks up, forcing the flurries to dance to the gale's swirling tune.

My heart races.

I position my body to pounce, bunching my muscles in anticipation of Perth and Gannon's advance. I'm not sure if wolves can smile, but if they can, I definitely am.

Gannon and Perth study me like I'm their next meal.

"Are you going to be a good girl and submit, kitten? Or do you need Perth and me to show you why you should?" Gannon mindspeaks.

A growl and a flash of heat detonate inside me simultaneously. Why do both options sound so damn appealing?

I'm careful not to let that thought slip from me to either of the two wolves in front of me, but Perth chuffs with amusement as though he heard it loud and clear anyway.

"Come on, beast tamer. It's our turn to tame your beast," Perth projects to me, an amused laugh accompanying the bad line in my head.

"Bring it. I'm not sure you've got what it takes," I quip right back. *OMG, am I wolf-flirting?*

Gannon makes a deep throaty noise somewhere between a bark and a growl, and I'm pretty sure it's his wolf version of laughter.

Perth stalks closer and my hackles go up as I bare my fangs at him.

"Our little mate wants it rough," Perth mindspeaks to both me and Gannon. *"Good, that's how I like it too."*

He leaps for me so fast I barely have time to make sense of it. I'm not sure if I'm alarmed or exhilarated, but there's no time to think before both Perth and Gannon close in on me. I start to spin in an effort to keep them both in sight, and then a plan forms. If I didn't already have some experience with leap-frogs-of-death, I wouldn't try it, but lucky for me, I do.

Instead of facing them head-on, like they expect because they think they have me trapped, I turn and sprint for the flat rocky base of the mountain. Perth and Gannon instantly give chase, their roguish threats egging me on. I have to block them out and focus. When the wall of rock grows closer, I push myself even harder.

Go. Go. Go!

A euphoric thrill buds in my chest, petals blooming bigger and fuller with each stride I take. I can feel Gannon and Perth on my heels, and just when Perth surges forward to swipe my back legs out from under me and take me down, I leap for the sheet of stone.

In a feat of power that shocks even me, I rebound off the rock's surface like it's a trampoline and not the base of a mountain. I twist mid-air and soar over Gannon and Ruger, who are several steps behind, trying to mimic my maneuver.

My paws touch back down to the snowy ground in triumph.

Then I run for all I'm worth.

Speeding away, I'm a bullet of brown fur and elation.

They didn't really think I'd give up that easily and just let them catch me, did they? Stupid boys.

I chuff to myself as I tear through the forest, letting my paws and nose lead the way. I push my body as hard as it will let me, and I'm in awe of what it can do. Muscle and sinew, instinct and drive, power and magic.

How was I ever afraid of this?

I run until my joints start to ache, my soul feels free, and my heart is happy. When I start to slow, looking back for Perth and Gannon, I realize they're not here.

That's when the first splatters of fear hit me like slush that's been launched from the side of the road by a car driving too fast.

Instantly, I reach for the mental link between me and the den, and relief rushes through me when a jumble of voices bombard me all at once.

"Where'd everyone go?" I gibe as I take in my surroundings. The big mountain we've been playing around all day is pretty far off, and a sinking feeling takes root in my stomach. I think I ran too far.

"Thank fuck!" Gannon exclaims, and I can sense his exasperation through the mind link. *"You shut us out and took off,"* he accuses, as though that hasn't been the game we've been playing for hours.

Well, maybe not the shut out part; I didn't know I could even do that.

“You trying to break the sound barrier, Noah?” Ruger razzes, and I huff out a wolfy laugh.

“Where are you?” Ellery inquires, his voice calm, but I can feel a hint of edgy unrest at having to ask me that question at all. *“Perth and Gannon are having trouble tracking your scent.”*

I look around at the crescent of trees in front of me, and a small ravine that’s off to my left. An icy fog slowly unfurls around the small clearing I’m in, languorously folding the boulders and bracken around me into its cloudy embrace. The snow is falling faster and harder. It looks like it’s on the cusp of a full-blown blizzard, the wind and pelting flakes making it harder to see far off in the distance.

I project an image to each of them of my surroundings, and a wave of disquiet crashes into me through our link.

“Damn, you are way outside of the boundaries we talked about sticking too,” Perth points out.

Am I?

The tall trees surrounding me suddenly look more menacing than they did before. Shit.

“Sorry, I just kind of turned off my brain and ran,” I offer sheepishly, knowing—and hating—that I fucked up. *“Should I try to retrace my tracks?”* I ask, my heart dropping a little when I survey the ground and see my prints are already being wiped clean by the wind and snow. I wonder if that’s what’s making it hard for them to track me.

“No, stay where you’re at. It’ll be easier to find you if you’re stationary than if you’re moving,” Ellery instructs, and I start searching the clearing for a good place to hole up.

A line of maple trees catches my attention, the leaves still clinging to the branches, looking ominously like bloody prints against a canvas of white, green, and brown. I spot a huge ponderosa tree and trot under the shelter of the bottom branches where there’s a gap in the buildup of snow.

The back of my neck prickles with unease, and I warily look around. I can’t believe I screwed up this badly. One

minute I'm playing Catch Me If You Can, and the next I'm outside of where I'm supposed to be...alone.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Fuck, I hope they hurry.

NOAH



A Gothic-style fog creeps thicker all around me as I scan my surroundings, watching and listening. Adrenaline thuds inside my veins as my vision is obscured bit by bit as this blizzard unleashes.

But it's not the storm I fear.

Maybe my senses are playing tricks on me, but I swear something is out there.

I can't hear it, can't see it, can't smell it, but I feel it.

My ears prickle, the hairs stiffen, feeling a vibration in the air that doesn't even make it all the way down to my eardrums. There's no sound, just a very certain awareness that I'm being watched.

I feel like a sitting duck.

Careful not to make any sudden movements or do anything else that could give me away, I search for whatever pinged my senses.

Please let it be a bunny. A squirrel. A fucking wild turkey.

A growl so low it's almost lost in the furious noise of the blizzard reaches me. My heart bursts as if it's been blasted to bits by the sound, and it's all I can do to remain still and subtly search for the source of the sound without giving away my own position.

That definitely sounded like a wolf.

Shivers skitter down my body, and I reach out to the guys. “*Are you close? I think I hear someone but I’m not sure.*”

“*Everyone, reveal positions,*” Ellery immediately barks in my head.

Rapid-fire mental images blast through my mind. A boulder, an open expanse of snowy ground, a few aspen trees. I glance at my own surroundings and none of that looks like it’s here.

Which means the sound didn’t come from them.

“*I think someone’s here, and if it’s not you...*” Alarm thunders through me; it chases away all the silly unease and wary doubt and replaces it with a raw fear so potent I can taste it. “*Do I run? Maybe I can outpace them,*” I suggest, not sure if I’m ready to sprint and feel even more exposed than I already do.

“*No, stay right where you are. Don’t move. We’re coming!*” Gannon orders, a burst of possessive fury lacing his mindspeak.

Cursing myself for getting caught up in my head on my first shift, I back up further until my side brushes against the rough bark of the tree trunk. My heart thuds painfully hard inside my chest as my paws curl tight and claw the wet earth.

Another wisp of a noise emerges from the storm’s din. If I hadn’t been completely focused, I would have missed it, but the faint crunch of a foot or paw on snow rockets every sense I possess onto high alert.

Gannon told me to hunker down, to stay here and try to stay out of sight, but my instincts are suddenly telling me to get up, get big, and face whatever is coming.

I listen to them.

As I step away from the tree trunk and out from the cover of its branches, my entire body swells with anticipation. A deep resonant warning oozes out of me. *I know you’re there,* my growl cautions, and I step confidently from the big tree and a mound of large rocks so I have room to maneuver if I need it.

Nothing answers me, but I don't need it to. I know someone's there.

Intuitively, I know it's a shifter. Perhaps my magic can sense it, but I can feel the presence as surely as I feel the cold of the fog brushing past my dark, walnut-colored fur. There's something oddly familiar about whoever is out there in the woods, like I've felt them before, but I can't say when or how.

I watch the trees and the ominous shadows beneath their canopy.

"Noah."

My name, spoken inside my head, sets my fur rising with alarm because the voice speaking doesn't belong to any members of the Arcan den.

Then the hazy forms of wolves slowly separate from the shadows. They step out from the forest, silhouettes like terrifying specters. I count at least three distinct figures—maybe four, as movement in my periphery on the left makes me think someone's over there too. I don't turn to confirm it, not willing to take my eyes off the group directly in front of me.

Tension tightens every one of my muscles, and I stop breathing.

They're far enough away that the snow and fog taint their details. I think one of them has light-colored fur, but whether it's white, light gray, or blond, I can't tell. The other two that I see look to be a mix of grays, but it's hard to be certain from this distance in this weather. The snow creates a beaded curtain of ice between us.

I do my best to control my runaway heart as adrenaline and fear pump through me. The howling wind only mirrors my increasing sense of dread.

"Come with us, Noah."

The voice beckons in my mind, and I go stiff from the unwelcome intrusion.

A growl is my only answer.

One of the wolves moves closer, head down, gaze intense. All at once, the wolf stops after only a few steps, looking back at the light-colored wolf as though asking a question, one I can't hear.

I breathe deeply, trying to catch a scent in the hope it will pull up my wolfy contact list and tell me who these interlopers might be, but cruelly, the wind is snapping in the other direction, leaving me upwind, robbing me of the chance to identify them.

Dammit.

"Come with us. You're ours," the voice orders, the tone more domineering and frustrated than before.

"Who are you?" I demand, the question weighed down by more of a snarl than I intended. I want information, not a fight, and yet I feel primed for violence.

"Your mates," the light-furred wolf bays in my head.

I don't know how I know he's the one that's talking, but I do. And as soon as the word *mates* leaves his mind, I realize that his voice isn't as unfamiliar as I thought.

I know it.

I know him.

He was the one watching me from the woods that night with Gannon on the deck.

A shiver threatens to roll down my spine, but I tense my muscles because I refuse to let them see my fear. I hope they can't scent it.

The wind swoops in then, changing direction, swirling puffs of snow toward me. I try to scent this group again, taking in a deep pull of frigid air that burns my lungs. This time, when I pick up nothing, that lack of scent serves as confirmation of a dreaded truth. There was no scent at my hotel or in the woods behind the deck.

These are the shifters who've been following me, and I'd bet my ass that these are the fuckers who threw me in the Hunt.

A spike of ice punctures my gut at the realization.

A furious snarl works its way up my throat, and I start moving for the other wolves before I know what I'm doing.

"You're not my mates," I snap at them as I pick up my pace, paws stinging from the arctic slush. *"You're the cowards who jumped me from behind and left me to be hunted. You're the scared little bitches who've been watching from the shadows. What the fuck do you want?"*

"What's rightfully ours," the wolf bellows. *"You've had your fun making us jealous, and now it's time for the game to stop!"*

Game? He thinks this is a fucking game?

Rage thick and acidic pumps through me, and I'm suddenly bursting with the need to close the distance and tear into these assholes. I'm sprinting for them before I can stop myself. Focus narrowed, teeth bared, paws digging into the dirt with each powerful stride, I'm going to rip them apart. I half the distance between us in seconds, and that's when furious growls fill the air around me and I hear more wolves crashing through the brush to my left.

Shit!

Anger and alarm skewer me, my veins cinching and stopping my blood when I realize I've just fallen for an obvious trap. The three taunting me from the front were just a distraction, and now I'm going to have to fight off the ones who've flanked me.

I spin with a snarl to meet my new attackers head-on. My lips peel back from my fangs, and I stand ready and waiting, a menacing growl pouring out of me, flooding the sky with my outrage.

I have just enough time to realize I should have projected a warning to the guys, but it's too late now.

Four wolves leap out of the cover of the trees. My hackles rise and I prepare to fight with every ounce of strength I have, and then I realize I know these wolves. Ellery, Gannon, Perth,

and Ruger sprint for me, their snarled warnings flying through the air just as their scents hit me with all the force of a slap.

It takes me a minute to process what I'm sensing as they skid to a stop, the four wolves forming a barrier in front of me.

"What the fuck?" I bark as they spin to snarl at our surroundings. *"You assholes could have announced yourselves!"*

They don't answer as they scan the forest, glaring at the gaps between the trees where the other wolves once stood. Now, only shadows remain, the ghostly figures faded to nothing just like the apparitions I thought they were when they first appeared.

But they are out there.

And now I know they're watching me.

I was targeted on my first night here.

Targeted and attacked.

And followed ever since.

"What happened? We felt your panic and then your rage," Ellery demands, his amber gaze bouncing from me to the surrounding forest, though there's nothing left to see.

I can't help the way my knees go weak any more than I can help the fact that my inner voice quakes as all the strength and ferocity inside me evaporates, ripped away by the reality of what just happened.

"They were here. The bastards who attacked me before the Hunt, they were just here. It's not a lone wolf. There's an entire den. And they think I'm their mate."

NOAH



The crackle and pop of flames consuming logs is the perfect soundtrack to my brooding. I'm tucked into the middle of the long couch, hidden beneath a soft red blanket, and staring at the roaring fire the guys built in their double-sided fireplace. It's been over an hour since we got back, and everything is still in a state of frenzied chaos.

Ellery is near me on the couch, poring over my case file on his laptop. Gannon and Perth are examining camera feeds in case these bastards followed us back, and Ruger is doing his best to care for everyone by plying them with food and stress baking. Me? I'm chewing on my cheek, staring into the flames of the metaphorical dumpster fire that is my life, and wondering how I got here.

Unfortunately, I'm suffering from Swiss cheese brain. I have yet to come up with one credible answer even though I've been wracking my mind since the run back home. I've combed through every detail of what's happened to me since I stopped for dinner at Droolies. I've shined a spotlight on everything I can remember about my mom, our house, and the pieces of my childhood that are just starting to come back to me. I've got nothing.

Worse than nothing, actually, because instead of answering *any* of the questions on my long-ass list, I now have more to add. I keep bouncing back and forth between questions about my past and questions about my present.

What the hell is my dad's name? Who were all the dirty kids in that warehouse I keep remembering? Why the fuck

would someone throw me in the Hunt? Why would this other den think I'm their mate when everything the guys say makes it seem like that's impossible?

But the one thing that keeps nagging at me the most, the one question that's leaving the sour taste in my mouth right now: Why wouldn't my mom tell me what the hell was going on when she was dying?

She knew I had no one. She knew she'd be dooming me to the life of a naif. And yet I can't remember one conversation where she even hinted at eeries or shifters or that my father was alive and a threat to our safety. Not one.

Cancer sucks and I know she was in pain, but she had time. She had so much damn time. So why take all these secrets with her? Why didn't she want me to know?

I sigh and burrow deeper into the couch and the guys' clothes. I'm wearing a long-sleeved shirt from Perth. Pants from Gannon. The blanket I'm wrapped in came right out of Ellery's room, and the pillow next to me—in case I decide to nap—is Ruger's. It's weird, but I'm not even sorry.

At my forlorn noise, Ellery looks up from his laptop and surveys me.

"You okay?" he asks, for the fortieth time, and for the fortieth time I say *I'm fine*, because it's easier than saying no and then having to deal with why.

"I'm sorry." I apologize for the millionth time for getting caught up, for not paying attention, for all of it.

Ellery gets a little wrinkle of consternation between his eyebrows. He reaches a long arm out, snags my ankle from underneath my blanket, and then pulls me across the couch until I'm next to him.

Well, that was hot.

"We've been over this, Noah," he tells me softly. "You have nothing to be sorry for. You should be able to run wherever the hell you want and be safe. Your first shift should have been nothing but playing, bonding, and discovering just what your wolf is capable of. *I'm* sorry that it wasn't."

I roll my eyes at him. “Listen, if I’m not allowed to be sorry, then neither are you,” I point out, and he chuckles.

Perth comes down the stairs from the office, spots us, and walks over to plop down on my other side. I bounce on the cushion and can’t help the smile that sneaks across my face as he settles in next to me.

“She still trying to apologize?” Perth asks, like the situation is that easy to read.

“Yep,” Ellery confirms, and I scoff.

“He did it too,” I tattle, and Perth gives me a dazzling grin that makes me forget how to breathe for a second.

He grabs my hand and starts tracing the lines in my palm with his finger. “God, I can’t wait to sink my teeth into those fuckers who tried to claim you,” Perth declares casually, but the flicker of his wolf brightening his eyes for a second tells me there’s nothing casual about it.

“We’re going to rip their necks open and bathe in their blood,” Ellery growls in agreement, and I have to stop myself from fidgeting in my seat or fanning my lady bits, because *damn*.

I’m not sure when declarations of violence started to feel like foreplay. But they certainly do now. *Hello!*

I rub my thighs together as subtly as I can underneath the blanket, but I’m pretty sure the guys know exactly what’s going on. Ellery gives me a heated look before he focuses back on his computer.

Gannon clomps down the stairs and sits on the end of the massive couch, away from the three of us. His eyes hone in on the way Perth is still playing with my hand, and a nervous little flutter works through me. Ruger strides into the living room with a bowl in his hands.

“More donuts?” he asks softly before handing me my fourth serving of homemade powdered sugar donut holes. They’ve been helping me power through not just post-shift exhaustion, but post-traumatic stress.

“Thanks,” I offer warmly as I sit up. He waits while I roll back the sleeves of Perth’s shirt so I can take the bowl from him. Then Ruger reaches out and cups my cheek for just a second. His green eyes are strong and steady as his gaze roams over my face, and I soak in his strength, leaning into his tattooed hand. His thumb strokes me gently for a moment before he pulls away, turns, and heads back into the kitchen.

Each time one of the guys walks by, they touch me as if they can’t stand not to. Their palms sweep across my upper back, their hands cup my shoulders. Once, Ellery even buried his fingers in my hair and massaged my scalp.

They’re comforting me, but I’m pretty fucking sure they’re also scent marking me, because each touch leaves behind a lingering bit of their essence.

I’m totally here for it.

After the horrid, terrifying feeling of being stalked by another den, after hearing their delusional determination inside my head, I want all the safety and security I can get.

Ellery’s phone rings and he answers it, greeting his dad.

I turn to whisper a question to Perth. “If Ellery and the alpha can mindspeak, why do they call each other on the phone?”

Perth huffs out a small laugh. “Mindspeak can feel intrusive at times, so we use it sparingly, mostly for really important things. Our den has a ‘no mindspeak interruptions at work’ policy. Unless it’s an emergency. There are some limitations when it comes to distance and things like that, but for the most part, everyone tries to be respectful and courteous,” he explains, and I nod my head.

“The orc operatives are on their way. My dad’s stuck at the pack house, but he sent a beta to bring them over,” Ellery announces, setting his laptop aside and getting up. “They should be here soon.”

“I’ll go talk to them with you,” Ruger volunteers from the other room.

“Sounds good.”

“It’s time to check in with the enforcers and run the perimeter again,” Perth declares, and he leans over and plants an innocent peck on my lips before getting up and walking out with the other two.

I stare after them, slightly astonished as I lift the hand that Perth was playing with and press my fingers to my lips. You’d think he just kissed the ever-loving shit out of me with the way I’m sitting here stupefied, and in a weird way, he did.

That little no-big-deal peck was just so natural and easy, and it has me suddenly thinking of all the quick everyday kisses that could be mine. They’d line up next to the silly little nicknames that always pop up in a relationship and the inside jokes that become part of a couple’s vernacular over time.

I look over to see Gannon still watching me, and I drop my hand from my lips, trying to cover up the girly shit I was just daydreaming about by popping a donut in my mouth. I close my eyes and give a satisfied groan, savoring the perfect bite the way it deserves. I go to pop another one in my mouth and catch Gannon adjusting himself on the other side of the couch.

An awkward silence seeps into the room and pollutes my peace while I eat. He and I haven’t spent as much time alone as I have with the rest of his den, and it keeps things from feeling as relaxed as they do with the others. It also doesn’t help that our alone time has been mostly contentious up to this point.

But we ran together today. That’s something, right?

It was surprisingly fun. There was no sense of lingering hurt or friction then. Our attraction to one another seemed to overpower everything else.

My nipples tighten as I remember our kiss out on the deck. Attraction nearly overpowered everything else then too.

My eyes drift over to Gannon, and I meet his steely gray gaze. He inhales deliberately and I can tell that my scent has changed. My cheeks color because he knows exactly what I’m thinking about, and he doesn’t need to go digging in my head to find it.

He's wearing the most casual outfit I think I've seen him in—a white T-shirt and loose black gym pants. He stretches one arm across the armrest while the other stretches along the back of the couch. His intense gaze watches me as though I might implode at any moment.

I just might.

I shift on the couch and avoid his eyes as I mutter, "How's a girl supposed to freak out around here when these damn shifter hormones keep interfering with my well-deserved breakdown?"

I can hear the smug smirk in his voice when he counters, "Maybe your hormones are telling you *how* to deal with that breakdown."

An incredulous snort sneaks out of me.

Gannon's judgy eyebrow flicks up. "Weren't you the one who wanted to fuck things out earlier? Does that only work for one kind of tension?"

I roll my eyes but can feel his stare burning into me as his proposal takes root in a very naughty, tempting way.

"Blink already," I order when his staring grows even more intense. "Stop gawking at me like you're trying to figure out how to crack my head open and play around in my thoughts."

"I'm just trying to figure you out, kitten," he retorts calmly.

"You and me both," I mumble. "Well, Ace, you could simply ask me a question. Or are big boy words too hard for you?" I mock lightly, falling back into our antagonistic pattern without any of the previous animosity that fueled it.

Gannon smiles an arrogant smile that's entirely too attractive for such a pain in the ass. His dark hair drifts down over his ear, and he shoves it impatiently back in a move that would make me look like a hot mess, but simply makes him look—well, hot.

I clear my throat and try to stave off the flush I feel climbing up my chest.

“Are you doing okay with everything?” he asks me, genuine concern radiating in his eyes and tone.

I’m touched by the earnest warmth he’s showing me, but I’m annoyed by the question all the same. I shove the blanket off me and gather up my empty donut bowl.

“I wish people would stop asking me that,” I grumble, abandoning him in the living room and wandering into the kitchen in search of something to do other than fester under his intense stare. “What does it even mean anyway?” I lob over my shoulder while I turn on the sink and start rinsing the dishes.

“Well, last time I looked in my *big boy* dictionary, it’s a question that checks someone’s emotional temperature,” Gannon answers, ditching his comfy seat in the living room to follow me into the kitchen. His bare feet make almost no sound on the wood floors, even to my newly sensitive ears.

I scoff and roll my eyes. “*You* want to check my emotional temperature?”

“I figured this would be easier than the old-fashioned method of shoving a feelings thermometer up your ass, but if you’re old school, I’m up for it.”

I shoot Gannon an unamused look and leave my dishes in the sink, turning on the water and plucking a sponge from its fancy little holder on the counter. Leave it to Ruger to have a top-of-the-line setup just for washing dishes.

“You’d be the last person I’d let shove anything up my ass,” I snark, soaping up my bowl and then a mixing bowl that was left to soak in the sink.

“You keep telling yourself that, kitten,” he counters without missing a beat.

Gannon moves closer, much closer, and I stiffen when he brushes up against me. I open my mouth, ready to tear into the presumptuous prick, when he reaches up and opens a cabinet next to me. His torso skims my back in a way that’s hella fucking distracting. My breath catches just as he presses in further, pinning my hips to the counter.

What's he doing? Images of him grabbing my hips, spinning me around, and kissing the life out of me flicker through my head.

He pulls out a rolled drying mat and sets it next to the sink.

Bastard.

I expect him to step away then, anticipating the separation. I ignore the disappointment that flickers through me at that thought. But his body continues to bracket mine.

Awareness heightened, those shifter hormones that have been flaring all day start buzzing impatiently. His left arm reaches around in front of me...

And joins his right arm as he unrolls the drying mat.

“Ruger doesn’t like water spots on his counters,” he practically whispers in my ear, and goose bumps skitter up my arms at his tantalizing tone and proximity, the words themselves irrelevant. My fingers grasp the bowl so tightly that I’m surprised it doesn’t crack.

My eyes become glued to the way the veins in his forearm move and his muscles stretch as he takes the bowl out of my hands and puts it onto the mat.

I’m panting by the time he steps back.

Spraying a can of Raid on the butterflies fluttering around my stomach, I take a deep breath to center myself and try to think of something else other than how good he smells.

“How did that wolf in the woods mindspeak to me?” I ask, proud of how steady my tone is as I scoop my mind out of the gutter it’s trying to slink into. My libido hisses at me. That wanton hussy doesn’t want to crawl out of that trench, she wants to swim in it, lounge around in every debauched, obscene moment she can think of.

Not on my watch.

I turn to study Gannon, who’s leaning back against the island countertop, arms crossed over his wrinkle-free white T-shirt that’s clearly been ironed to perfection. Weirdo.

His brow furrows at my question as if he's confused.

"I thought you all said mindspeak didn't work with just anyone," I explain. "We can use it because your den bit me. But I thought it required a connection between wolves. Unless you're the alpha. How did that wolf talk to me today? Is he an alpha?"

I've asked this question before to Alpha Morgan, and he said he wasn't sure, but they have to have some theory or guess, and it's bugging the shit out of me. I don't want those bastards in my head.

Gannon's muscles tighten with anger, and fury settles in his eyes. "There's *no way* another alpha entered Arcan territory without us knowing. That would be an act of war."

I gulp but can't quite manage to swallow down the boulder that appears in my throat. I have to speak around it, voice narrow and strained as I ask, "Okay...then how?"

His lips twist in frustration. "I don't know," he admits, echoing Alpha Morgan, the last word more snarl than speech. I get the impression that Gannon likes unanswered questions about as much as I do. "He shouldn't have been able to," he adds, fist clenching and then unclenching.

My stomach dips. Some of that fear that I couldn't seem to muster up when all four men were in the room wriggles through the cracks in my defenses. It widens them and makes them bigger fractures full of worry.

I grab a dish towel from the island and start drying the bowls, trying to contain the barrage of possibilities floating through my mind.

"Does...does that mean they *could* be my mates, like he said?" I ask hesitantly, my stomach knotting up at the thought.

The silence stretches out so long that I end up repeating my question, under my breath, almost to myself. "Could they be my mates?"

"No," Gannon answers resolutely.

“But how do you know?” I challenge, annoyance riding my tone.

“Because I know. That’s not how *this* works,” he gestures from me to him. “You were claimed by *our* den. Unless another den bites you and overrides that claim, your connection is to us, no one else.”

“Could they have bitten me when they attacked me? Before they left me in the forest?”

“Even if they did, it doesn’t matter. Because *I* bit you. And right then and there, our claim, our bite, would override any others. Trust me. You’re ours, Noah. No one else’s. I don’t give a shit what some mongrel says. If they wanted to claim you the honorable way, they could challenge our den. They haven’t and they won’t. And that tells me all I need to know about these spineless fuckers.”

The declaration and his vehemence has heat dipping low in my stomach and warming me from the inside out. I start wiping the counters with the dish towel in my hands, fighting against the toe-curling sensation that washes through me.

Why do I like that so much?

My inner thighs tremble at the idea that he’s staking a claim.

Gannon shadows me, following me around the kitchen, but keeping his distance. I can’t tell if he’s stalking me or being protective. Maybe both. But it makes some primal desire rise up. My cheeks heat as I pretend not to notice what he’s doing, pretend to be casual as I walk over to the far counter next to one of the fridges and wipe away imaginary specks of dust.

I lick my lips as I try to think of a question, to continue our current conversation and keep my rational side engaged so that the wolf side doesn’t rip away my good sense and inhibitions and beg Gannon to take me on this counter. “So, if one den bites me, I can only mate with the men in that den?”

“Yeah.”

“And they only mate with me—”

“Our den only wants *you*.”

“You guys don’t...with each other?”

A wicked twinkle shimmers in his eyes. “No, the only one taking our cocks would be you. But, you should know that our bond as a den means I’ll enjoy my brothers fucking my mate and cumming all over you almost as much I’ll enjoy doing it myself.”

Well, set me on fire and melt me down like a candle...shit.

I clear my throat and shake my head a little in an effort to clear it too. My entire body is suddenly taut with need, but I’m not done with my questions yet.

“Is...sex the way the mate claim gets settled?”

Gannon visibly startles. He blinks a few times before giving me a disbelieving expression. There’s a hint of caution and maybe even a bit of hope in his voice when he softly asks, “What?”

“You heard me. A den and their mate fuck and it’s done... or...?”

He probably thinks I’ve lost it. Fuck. Maybe I have. But despite our previous friction, I know Gannon will give it to me straight with no chaser. I don’t want to be handled like I’m fragile about this. I want to know exactly what I’m walking into, and regardless of all his hard edges, I know he’s a soft place to land.

“Sex is part of how a mate claim becomes a mate bond, but a mating is sealed through a pair bite, which means you bite us and we bite you and it locks the bond.”

“So it’s a group activity?”

Gannon chuckles. “The pair bite is, but the fucking doesn’t always have to be. And since you’re tiptoeing around the question you really want to ask right now, I’ll throw you a bone,” he gibes, looking annoyingly smug. “Fucking can be no strings. I could bend you over the counter right now if you wanted me to. There wouldn’t have to be any biting involved.”

A shiver of pleasure tickles down my spine, wrapping around my hips and diving between my thighs.

I give a dubious look around the kitchen. “I thought you said Ruger didn’t like water spots on his counters; I don’t think he’d take too kindly to me cumming all over them.”

“I suspect he’d make an exception, or I could always fuck you on the drying mat.”

I half choke, half laugh in response. I know I’m playing with fire right now, but I’m drawn to the burn like I’m drawn to Gannon.

I smile a teasing grin. “So, you’re not a bunch of virgins who’ve never touched a girl and need to be taught all about the clitoris?”

“Clitoris.” He furrows his brow. “That’s a constellation, right?”

I give him the finger.

He smiles. “No. Not virgins. You can test drive our stick shifts all you want.”

I laugh at his horrible pun. “And if I’m on the human shot for birth control? That—”

“Won’t work, but we can scent when you’re fertile. You’re not.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks, but I ignore it.

“Condoms?” I ask.

“Still work.”

“STD tests?”

“Shifters don’t get human diseases.”

I’m on a roll now, questions sliding easily off my tongue. “Okay. Any...uh...unusual things I need to know about shifter sex? Like...are there secret shifter erogenous zones or anything like that? Are you working with all the same machinery as a human man?”

His hand comes up to cover his mouth, but he can't completely hide the fact that he's chuckling.

"Hey! This is serious!" I mock-scold him, barely managing to keep a narrow-eyed look planted on my face as I snap my towel in his direction.

Immediately, his laughter dies and his eyes flare with heat as he tilts his head. "Did you just snap at me, kitten?" he asks, his chin jutting in the direction of the dish towel still in my hands. His scent fills the air and I can practically taste the lust rolling off him, his warm amusement flaring and transforming into hot desire.

A tantalizing charge zips through me as our eyes connect and hold. His gaze is feisty, causing a flush to rise on my cheeks and—before I know it—my wrist is out, snapping the dish towel at him again.

"Kitten...careful or I'll think you're challenging me."

His tone tempts a shiver to run across my skin.

"If there's one thing you should know about wolves, it's... a challenge can't go unanswered." His words should be a warning, but something in the way he says them sounds more like an invitation.

I picture running with him earlier. The way we teased, taunted, and tagged back and forth. The urge to do it again bounds through me. I pull in a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, but all that does is fill my lungs with the overwhelming spice of his need.

Just like that, all rational thought flees and I know exactly what I want to do.

I *run*.

NOAH



With a laugh that sounds more like a squeal, I pivot and bolt out of the kitchen. Elation turns my knees to jelly, but adrenaline forces my limbs forward. I run for the stairs like my life depends on it, snapping the rag behind me for good measure. When it doesn't make contact, I toss it, hoping it flies into Gannon's face and distracts him for a second. Maybe he'll even trip on it, knocking that ego down a peg or two.

Gannon's amused growl follows in my wake as he darts after me, but I don't dare look back. He's got longer legs and I feel him gaining already.

I have to be quick.

The stupid-ass sweatpants of his that I'm wearing sag as I take the steps two at a time. I have to reach down and yank on them just to keep them in place. Fingers clenching the fabric at my hip, I jump and land on the balls of my toes. My nerves light up with impulsive glee when I make it up to the landing and dart into the first room with an open door.

I don't even take in the decor. Diving headfirst across the king bed, I grab a pillow for ammunition as I slide across the sleek black comforter with all the grace of a ninja and drop down on the other side.

Gannon appears in the doorway, his dark hair disheveled, falling into his eyes, which gleam with predatory intent.

He stalks slowly into the room, each footstep making a gentle thump against the rug. Tense and swallowing the

anticipatory giggles that swish and swoop around inside my throat like tiny birds, I wait until he rounds the edge of the bed to launch my missile.

Take that! I throw the pillow right at his face like it's a frisbee, but I don't watch it spin through the air. I'm already moving before it gets to his grinning face.

Gannon's forced to lift his hands to catch the pillow, and while he's distracted, I leap onto the bed and use the insane shifter strength I now have to launch myself all the way back to the door.

Fuck yes.

I glance back with a haughty grin to see the pillow sagging, forgotten in his hand.

Yeah. Be impressed.

But then I realize that his sweatpants have fallen to my thighs and even though Perth's shirt covers the fact that I'm sans underwear, I know that Gannon's well aware there's nothing underneath. He is absolutely not stunned into statue-like stillness for the reasons I thought he was. Those smoldering gray eyes of his are trying to burn a hole right through my shirt.

I can work with this.

"You know," I whisper breathlessly as I reach down and yank the pants off one ankle at a time. "These things are holding me up anyway." I toss them at his frozen form with a baiting laugh before booking it down the stairs.

A gust of wind.

A gust of wind is my only warning before I'm slammed into the wall beside the stairs, Gannon's hot hands are underneath my thighs, his body sliding between my legs. His eyes blaze with a need more intense than I've ever seen before, and his mouth descends on mine in a punishing, wild kiss.

I give as good as he does and we savagely fight for control. I yank on his hair and he retaliates by driving his hardness

further into me, rubbing up and down against my core until I'm caught up in that sensation—only for him to take it away.

Rude!

Scraping my nails down his back, I nip punishingly at his lips. He thinks he has the upper hand, but we can't have that now, can we?

His palms clutch my ass and his fingers drift closer to the center of it—

I gasp and stiffen, pulling away from him and staring down the stairs toward the front door with wide, startled eyes.

Immediately, Gannon pulls away, letting me down as he turns to face the threat I'm staring at.

Only—there is no threat.

Sucker.

I dart past him with a banshee's laugh, a screech of victory that doesn't become a howl only because I need all that oxygen to escape. But inside, I'm spinning like a pinwheel, sparkling like a firework, bursting apart like a piñata full of delicious candy—my entire being is full of buoyant joy.

"Not cool, kitten," he grumps, somewhat disbelieving, somewhat annoyed as I leap off the bottom of the stairs and dart for the kitchen.

"You didn't think I'd give up that easily, did you?" I tell him with a waggle of my brows as I round an island and put a protective barrier between us.

He takes the stairs slowly, one at a time, allowing my eyes to appreciate his tall form and the very obvious bulge in his pants. "When I catch you—"

"If you catch me," I challenge.

Wind again. But this time I'm expecting it. I duck and a shrill squeal of pure delight escapes my mouth as I pop back up and pump my arms as I race across the living room.

One step, I'm running for the back sliders, making plans for a snowball fight the likes of which Gannon has never seen

before. The next, I'm in the air, plucked up mid-stride like I'm not some formidable beast but a house pet.

I have only a millisecond to feel surprised before he's spinning me to face him and then dipping me like a dancer over the back of the couch. I'm upside down, my head resting against the buttery suede of the seat, my spine compressed against the back cushions, and my legs are dangling over the back.

Gannon quickly pushes my thighs apart and steps between them. Then, with an evil grin that makes my insides clench, he grabs my wrists and pulls me until I'm sitting up on the back of the couch, and all the blood that was rushing into my head starts rushing back down to the rest of my body. He draws closer until we're nose to nose.

I'm abuzz, my nipples are tight, and I'm thirsty for Gannon's lips—ready to drink down every kiss.

“Did you even try to outrun me?” he murmurs, a cocky smirk curling up one side of his mouth, making it clear what he thinks of my efforts.

“Pretty sure the point was never to get away,” I respond, mimicking his air of superiority and loving the brazen grin that breaks across his face as a result.

“You wanted the big bad wolf to catch you?”

That should be cheesy as hell, but his hands are releasing my wrists and sliding up my bare thighs, making my nerves scream. So I play along. “I want him to huff and puff and then blow me until I come.”

“Fuck.” Gannon surges forward, and I can feel every glorious inch of him press against me. I'm so wet that I wonder if he can feel it through his pants, but I don't bother asking, because he's pushing Perth's shirt up from my waist, planting his hands on each of my knees, and licking his lips as he stares down at me.

His eyes dilate and I can smell our scents combining, our lusts battling to control the very air. “I'm not stopping until you scream for mercy,” he promises.

Before I can so much as open my mouth to snark something in return, Gannon pushes me back until I'm ass over tits again, and then he bends down and devours me.

My shoulders bracing me on the seat of the couch, my hair splayed out like a mermaid around me, I stare up at him as his tongue darts out and swipes up my seam, parting me like his only mission in life is to get to my center. I gasp as he buries his face in my pussy, lapping at me until he reaches my clit and sucks it into his mouth. My moan is almost guttural, the heat of his touch like a brand across my skin. I close my eyes, allowing myself to sink into the tantalizing sensations as he shows me why shifters do it better.

I don't know if it's my heightened senses or if Gannon just has a gift, but each drag and swirl of his tongue is more potent than anything I've ever felt before. Every lick, suck, and nibble makes my muscles clench until I'm biting my lip and fighting the need to beg. It's too damn early for that.

He trawls his fingertips down from my knees and across the softer skin of my inner thighs. Pushing my legs further apart, he strokes back and forth gently, tormenting me with the possibility of those fingers getting closer. His touches erode my mind, creating sinkholes that swallow my thoughts and make me quake.

Fuck yes!

This man definitely does not have a virgin tongue, and I thank my lucky stars for that as I reach up and latch onto his hair, pulling his mouth tighter against me, demanding everything he's got.

He growls when I try to take control, nipping each of my lips in rebuke. But I ignore the censure, because Gannon and I seem to thrive on challenging one another. I simply tighten my grip and shove his face exactly where I want it.

I buck and grind against him, planting my feet on the back of the couch, arching my back into bridge pose as I steal control, wresting my orgasm away from him and claiming it as my own.

His teeth are sharper this time when he nips me, but little does he know, I like it rough. The tiny edge of pain only makes me grit my teeth and erupt into an encouraging mewl before twisting and wrenching his hair as pleasure overtakes me.

When my shaking has subsided and I've loosened my death grip, he pulls back and mumbles, "The kitten has claws. My turn," he challenges, and then he grabs my ass and picks me up like I weigh less than the throw pillow in the corner of the sofa. He scoops me up so that we're face to face and carries me around the couch, this time laying me down normally—lengthwise—down the seat. He crawls on top of me, kissing me mercilessly.

"Taste how wet I've made you?"

I can only murmur in response because his lips and tongue become so all-consuming. When he roughly wrenches away from me and sits up, I fully expect him to undress and demand that it's my turn to *blow him until he comes*.

And, *yes, please*.

But he doesn't. Gannon scoots back down the couch and dives for my pussy again like he's starving. Like he can't get enough. He scoops my hips into his iron grip, and this time, he's rougher in all the best ways. Immediately, his mouth suctioned so tightly against my pussy that I'm gasping—close to the edge.

As soon as I start to buck this time, he backs off.

"Asshole," I seethe in mock fury.

"What's that? Need a finger in that ass? I've got my emotional thermometer ready," he says, wiggling his finger at me.

I flip him off, glaring, and he chuckles as he leans back down and laps at me, drawing it out. This time, when I lose control, Gannon drives a thick, long finger into me.

It slides in easily, wet as I am, and rubs deliciously inside of me as he once again sucks my clit into his mouth.

There.

I go limp in appreciation as a spiraling, sparking need starts to tingle through me.

“Fuck, you feel good,” I moan, and Gannon groans his approval, the other noises he’s making between my thighs deliciously lewd.

He slips another finger inside of me, and I close my eyes, savoring the feel of him. His languid pumps grow faster and faster, his mouth matching the tempo. I gasp and moan my encouragement. When I open my eyes, they land on an intense amber gaze—and I freeze.

Holy shit. When did Perth get home?

He stands there, snowflakes in his red hair, rivulets of melting snow running down his naked torso, watching us.

And fuck me, he’s hard.

Gannon notices me stiffen and glances up, but just for a second. Unbothered, he immediately goes back to licking my pussy as if Perth’s entrance isn’t a big deal.

“Help her out of that shirt and suck those tits,” Gannon mindspeaks.

Perth bites his lip and stares at Gannon feasting between my folds. His eyes drift up my body, hunger blazing in his amber gaze, but he doesn’t move.

When Gannon curls his fingers inside of me, I have no choice but to whimper and grovel with need.

“That’s right, kitten. I want you to cum all over my face while you scream my name. Can you do that for me? Are you ready?” Gannon speaks inside my head.

Before I can answer, a third finger joins the other two, tightening the fit and amping up the pressure and friction. I glimpse Perth’s expression of raw, unfettered desire. Lips parted, his eyes lock on mine as he watches me writhe in pleasure.

I reach for him, suddenly needing more and completely unashamed to ask for it.

Without hesitation, Perth walks toward me, his dick jutting straight up. I suddenly want him in my mouth, his cock deep in my throat while Gannon fingers and eats me into another plane of existence.

Both Perth and Gannon groan, and I'm pretty sure I just broadcast that little fantasy loud and clear.

Good.

"You need us both, Noah?" Perth asks huskily as he closes the distance. He perches on the seat of the couch behind me.

"Yes," I gasp when he leans closer, his torso just above my head.

"You look beautiful on your back with my brother between your thighs," he croons at me, big hands reaching for the hem of my shirt. He starts to slowly pull it up. The soft fabric drags against my hard nipples in an agonizing, torturous tease.

When I'm free of the shirt, Perth tosses it aside and reaches down to cup my breasts. His hands still carry a tiny bite of cold from outside, and the chill plays lusciously with the heat swimming through me. He kneads and cups, pressing my tits together and then releasing them before his fingertips pinch and pluck my nipples.

As he plays, he sends a mental image of me sprawled naked on the couch in the firelight with the two of them playing me like a fine-tuned instrument.

Another round of shudders make me buck.

"Hold her," Gannon orders. "She's got more orgasms left. And I want all of them."

One of Perth's hands slides from my breasts to my ribcage, helping pin me. As he leans over my body, he goads, "Need us to tame that wild wolf, Noah?"

"God, she fucking tastes like heaven," Gannon sends through our link, and I'm not sure if he mindspoke on purpose or if that thought just slipped through.

“Is that right?” Perth asks, a one-sided grin quirking up his mouth as he leans down further. “Gan thinks you taste like heaven, but I suspect you taste like perfection. Let’s see which one of us is right.”

His lips are on mine before I can finish gasping in surprise—kissing me upside down like something straight out of a Spiderman movie. His bottom lip is full and juicy, and his scruff rough in the best kind of way. I open for him eagerly, swallowing his groan as our tongues tease and twine and the kiss deepens.

I’ve always been free and confident when it comes to sex and my body, but this is everything I never knew I needed. Perth’s big hands cup my tits again, and he starts kneading them as he expertly plunders my mouth. He pinches my nipples in perfect timing with the suction of Gannon’s mouth and the thrust of his fingers. I swear to fuck I almost leave my body.

I don’t even get the chance to ask them if they’re mentally coordinating with one another, because their assault on me is ruthless. Unrelenting. Sublime.

Both men feel so good as they worship my body like they’ve been building shrines to it their entire lives.

Gannon said there wasn’t anything different about shifter sex, but I’m quickly discovering that’s not true at all. With heightened senses and the mental connection we have, it takes everything to a level I never knew could exist.

Both men’s sexual appetites give off scents so potent I can taste them melting on my tongue like decadent chocolates. Gannon’s is spicier and Perth’s sweeter, but somehow, scent has become a new and very erogenous experience. The swirling air fills my lungs and makes every breath shallower than the last until I’m panting, pulsing, pushing toward that final mindless moment.

“*Ready?*” Gannon asks, and I’m not sure if it’s aimed at me or Perth, but when Gannon bites my clit at the same time Perth pinches my nipples, I get my answer. I’m launched hard into the most intense, life-altering orgasm I’ve ever had, and I

do just as I'm told, screaming Gannon's name while I drench his face with my cum.

Their avid excitement feeds my own, looping me into a cycle of overwhelming pleasure that leaves me howling, my thighs clenched around Gannon's face, while Perth leans over and sucks the sensitive peak of a nipple into his hot mouth. I instantly burst again like I'm nothing more than the clouds outside—too full to contain themselves—falling apart into tiny fluttering flakes of ecstasy.

There's no coming back from this.

I know it immediately as I float in pure bliss. Gannon said there were no strings, that sex was just sex, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

They hunted.

I was caught.

And it's clear now that this claim they have on me goes more than wolf-deep...

Because I want more.

NOAH



I come down from my trip to nirvana like a feather drifting on a breeze. But instead of being sated and spent, my body is still buzzing with need, my mind whirling with want. Hungrily, I reach for Perth's cock as he moves his mouth from one breast to the other. Gannon is licking my release from my thighs with a satisfied growl, and all I know is if I don't get them both inside of me right this minute, I'm going to implode.

My hand wraps around Perth's thick shaft just as Gannon shoots up. His head tilts slightly and turns...like he's listening to something.

"Shit. We're about to have company," he growls at the same time that Perth grabs his shirt from the floor and helps me get it on.

"What's going on?" I sit up, still slightly dazed as I take in the concern etched on both Perth's and Gannon's faces.

"Ellery just told us the enforcers are bringing up a den. They live down the mountain from us, and something's wrong with their mate," Perth explains, looking from me to the front door and back again.

"Do you think it's the den from the woods? Is this some kind of trap?" I question, alarm coursing through me, my gaze flitting between their faces. Perth's brow is furrowed and Gannon's impenetrable mask is back in place.

"No. It's...something else," Gannon answers, his hand reaching for mine. I take it, traces of my release still coating

his fingers as he pulls me up until I'm on my feet. He waits a beat for me to steady myself against him, and then steps away.

"It might be best for you to go upstairs and wait for us," he urges, just as a booming knock sounds from the front door.

Perth puts his hand on the small of my back and starts to guide me quickly to the stairs. "I'll walk you up," he offers, his gaze intense and serious as he and Gannon exchange a loaded look.

Worry pools in my gut, all too quickly replacing the euphoria I was just floating in. My limbs are heavy with anxious alarm, and my heart hammers with fear. We've barely reached the landing at the top of the stairs when I hear Gannon open the front door, and a cacophony of voices rush to fill the entryway.

"Ellery! We need Ellery!" a terrified male voice demands. His plea overpowers the screeching wind that barrels into the house through the open door, rushing up the stairs and colliding with my bare shins.

"He's headed back now, Ezra. Come in, let's get her comfortable in a room until he gets here," Gannon instructs, but that's all I hear before Perth hurries me down the hall to my room.

"What the hell's going on?" I press, spinning to face Perth as he shuts the door behind him, trapping us both in the room.

He runs his fingers through his hair, his eyes far away for a moment before they focus back on me. "That's the Hudson den downstairs," he starts to say as he strides toward the ensuite bathroom.

I follow.

"They claimed a mate in the last Hunt too. The short story is that her bite isn't working like it's supposed to, and it's making her very sick."

I look back to the door as though I can see the other den and their mate through it. "Is it the moon sickness you guys told me about? I thought there was still time?"

Perth flips on the light and heads straight for the shower, turning it on. Sorrow trickles through our connection, and I'm on the cusp of worry.

"It's not moon sickness," he answers, pulling me into his arms and rubbing my back. I'm not sure if I need the comfort or he does. "She has something we call the Fade or Fading. It happens when a bite doesn't take like it's supposed to and a shifter can't transition. It's...it's not good."

His voice is sad, resolute, and I cup his cheek with my hand, needing to smooth away the worry I don't like seeing on his face. Agitated voices and heavy steps pass down the hallway as Gannon leads the Hudson den to one of the other guest rooms on this side of the house.

"Bites can fail?" I ask, looking down at my leg where there should be puncture scars, but smooth skin and sharp memories are all that's left. "Why do they need Ellery?"

Perth steps away, and the loss of contact nips at me. He reaches into the big shower, testing the temperature of the water. "Bites can fail. If we catch the Fade early though, a bite from an alpha or a celestial can sometimes help."

He turns back to me and there's a heavy *but not always* hanging between us unvoiced. It's written all over his face though.

The reality of what's going on further down the hall hits me.

The other den's mate is dying.

Shards of devastation nick my insides. I must be projecting it through our connection, or maybe my face gives it away, but Perth pulls me in for another hug. I soak up his comfort before he pulls away.

"We're going to try to help her. Gannon is leaving to get a healer. And Ellery is racing back here as we speak," he assures me. "Get cleaned up and hang in here until one of us comes to get you." He brushes a quick kiss against my forehead, and then he's gone.

I stand in the bathroom, steam slowly gathering around me, feeling adrift. All I can think about is the look of elation on Perth's and Ruger's faces when I first woke up. Ellery screamed something about *fading* when he freaked out in his office after I said my head hurt. I thought he was being overdramatic. But he was talking about this.

They weren't just shocked and happy that I was awake, they were relieved.

I sigh at that realization. The guys didn't even know my name. Didn't know what kind of person I was or how my presence would impact their lives. But I have no doubt that they would have done anything, given anything to ensure I made it. And if I hadn't, they would have mourned me, felt my loss in a way the rest of the world never would.

I felt so safe that morning I woke up in their bed.

That truth got lost in the chaos of everything that came next, but I remember feeling wrapped in secure contentment. It was warm and gentle and unassuming.

I can't recall any other time in my life where I've felt that way.

Somehow, I found something precious with this den of strangers after waking up from the most horrifying, insane night.

Of course the universe would throw the worst and the best things at me simultaneously and say, *here, fucking catch.*

I've spent all this time wandering. Never connecting with people, or jobs, or places. I've been searching aimlessly for this thing I needed but couldn't explain or even identify. Yet here it is. It's been waiting right here in Howling Rapids this whole time.

My wolf.

Them.

Peace.

Stripping out of Perth's shirt, I step into the shower. I squeeze some body wash into my palm but hesitate to scrub

myself clean. I don't want to wash the scent of Perth or Gannon off me. I analyze that strange thought for a minute and then force myself to stop being weird. Soap is good, especially in a house where everyone's noses would give a bloodhound a run for its money.

I think I hear Ellery and Ruger in the hall as I step out of the shower and dry off. I brush out my hair and toss it up in a messy bun, and then I pull on a crimson sports bra and undies, leggings, a tank, and an oversized hoodie. I shove my feet into a pair of wool socks and stand.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps running down the hall. I freeze, staring at my closed door. My heartbeat quickens as another flurry of sounds go by, like someone is rushing past my room. I hurry over and crack open my door, peeking out.

I watch and listen for a few breaths, the large hallway quiet and painted with the palate of sunset. The den's rooms are all on the other side of the house, while this side is reserved for a few guest suites and a large office that the den seems to use at different points. I hear Ellery's voice come from a closed door at the end of the hall. An instant later, my sock-clad feet are moving toward him without a second thought.

I suddenly need to see him.

You'd think he and Ruger had been gone for weeks with the way excitement and relief shoots through me. My new wolfy instincts are making me way too obsessive for my liking.

On a scale of one to stalker, I usually prefer to hang around a four. But with all the shit that's been happening, I'm hovering between eight and nine. I'm fully giving into this need to cling with zero shame.

I push the door to the guest room open and am immediately inundated with the scents of fear and anguish. The sharp bite of pained longing is so overwhelming that it burns my nostrils. The hair on the nape of my neck lifts with ominous warning, and a pitiful whimper greets me as I step in.

My eyes land on two large shifters as I enter the room—a tall blond with shoulder-length hair who looks like he could easily be a Hemsworth, and a guy with worried hazel eyes and caramel brown hair that's been pulled into a knot at the back of his head.

I don't spot the third guy in the space until I follow the sound of a menacing growl to the shifter that's sitting on the bed underneath the comforter, baring his teeth at Ellery. He has black curly hair that's all over the place, and his cinnamon-colored eyes are lit with warning while his large arms gently hold a limp woman like she's the most important thing in the world to him.

She has a light gray sheet wrapped around her, but it's dappled with large patches of sweat. Pale ginger hair is tangled around her face, and there's an ominous blue tint to her lips and eyelids.

I gasp as cold recognition washes over me, my stomach dropping with realization and horror.

"I know her," I whisper, completely stunned.

Everyone's eyes snap in my direction, everyone's except for hers, because her gaze is trapped behind closed lids and her face is contorted in pain.

"From the diner, right?" Ellery asks, his gaze jumping from the woman to my dumbfounded face.

"Yeah, Zara. I met her at Droolies." My shocked stare meets his as I recall how happy and bubbly she was.

Oh god. She mentioned the Hunt to me. I didn't understand then what she was talking about, but she was so excited, and nervous.

Fuck.

She must have run in it...and now she's here.

Now, she's pale as death.

A weak, fluttering scent hits my nostrils, one that smells like sickness. It's a scent that's accompanied by a sharp taste, like biting into a clove of raw garlic, and it turns my stomach.

My shifter senses overwhelm me, and I wish for the first time since they grew stronger that I could turn them off. Especially when all of this forces me to recall how my mom had that same hollowed out look to her cheeks and blue-tinged pallor. That same smell just before—

I shut down my thoughts and clap my hand over my mouth, trying to hide the intensity of the distress amassing beneath my ribcage. But it swells until it feels like there's no more room for my ribs, the misery causing swift jabs of pain with every breath.

I'm eleven years old again, tiptoeing silently into my mother's room. I've had a nightmare, the kind only her presence can chase away. Carefully I scoot into bed next to her. She hasn't been feeling good lately, always tired and drained. So I make sure I'm gentle and don't wake her up. When I rest my cheek on her arm, I'm surprised by how cold it is, and that's when I realize she's breathing funny. Each inhale and exhale is accompanied by a scary rattling sound, and then, all of a sudden, the sound just stops.

My eyes sting as I blink the memory away.

Is she going to die?

I didn't mean to project my thoughts, but I know that's exactly what I've done when Perth strides across the room and pulls me into his chest.

Ellery tugs off his jacket and hands it to Ruger before he moves toward Zara, announcing, "Not if I can help it."

NOAH



“Don’t look at her like that,” the guy from the bed snaps, his cinnamon gaze fixed angrily on me. “Don’t you dare look at her like she’s already lost. She isn’t going to die. That’s *not* going to happen. Don’t come in here with that fucking negativity, do you hear me?”

I drop my gaze and bite my tongue, knowing all too well how delicate and difficult it is to traverse loss or the threat of it. I don’t know if this guy is an asshole by nature or if all the stress and fear is bringing it out in him. Either way, it’s not the time or place to take anything personal. Grief can make monsters out of the best of us.

“Brice, I get that you’re losing your shit with worry, but we’re here to help. Watch how you talk to my mate. Do *you* hear me?” Ellery bites back, and I don’t know if I feel bad or grateful for his words.

Maybe I shouldn’t have come in here.

Perth told me to wait for them. I didn’t and now I feel like some intruder, unworthy of seeing this other den’s panic, pain, and vulnerability when I can’t do anything to help. Their emotions are as potent as smoke from a wildfire, and I try to breathe through the thick cloying sensation. I school my features as best I can and hope that the scent of my own emotions doesn’t cause more trouble.

Brice is still pissed, but he doesn’t say anything else. He simply turns and refocuses all of his intense energy on the pale woman in his arms.

Ellery steps closer to Zara, and a deep growl reverberates out of the Hemsworth brother in the corner.

“Cut it out, Reid,” the man I haven’t met yet orders. “You know he’s going to have to get closer to her, so stop.”

Perth releases my side and moves deeper into the room. He looks casual and calm, but I notice that he positions himself so he can intercept Reid if necessary.

Shit. Will it be necessary?

Glancing around the room, I realize that not all of the strain rolling off these men is solely agonized worry. There’s a fair amount of aggression here too, and my heart speeds up in response to it.

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” a large man with tan skin, a shaved head, and a thick black beard growls. “I know he’s the celestial, but he’s also unmated and too close to Zara. It’s fucking with me.”

“If you can’t keep it together, Milo, you need to leave. Same goes for you, Reid,” the man with the caramel brown hair orders, looking first at the bald guy and then the blond in the corner.

Ruger is suddenly at my back, guiding me over to a wall opposite the bed where we’re out of the way. The adjustment places me at the center of what I instinctually recognize as a triangle of defense. Ellery and Ruger are farther away from me now, but there’s no one between us. If things escalate, they could be by my side in a few strides.

While the other den doesn’t group around Zara, I can see from their stiff postures and the wary way they watch us that they’re fighting the instinct to encircle her and keep us as far from their mate as possible.

It makes me hesitant to breathe too deeply or make any noise and risk accidentally setting off this powder keg of a room.

“It’s okay, Noah. We’ve got you. We won’t let anything happen,” Ruger mindspeaks, and I lean back into him in need of some physical reassurance. *“It’s hard for male shifters to let*

anyone near their mate when the claim is tenuous,” he explains, and I nod even though that confuses me a little.

“You guys have let me be around other people and haven’t acted like this,” I point out, thinking about the hotel, the clothing shop, the alpha’s house.

“True, but you weren’t in danger then. And you’ve never been as vulnerable as Zara is now. We’ve kept it together, but it doesn’t mean it’s been easy. After what happened in the woods today, you might see us acting a little more caveman than before.”

Ruger’s big hands press against the tops of my arms, and he slowly rubs his palms down and then up, the gesture comforting in the otherwise volatile space.

“Where was her initial bite, Ezra? When did the Fade start to set in?” Ellery aims his questions at the caramel-haired man I suspect is the den’s leader. Before he gets an answer, the sheriff swivels his gaze and adds, “Brice, I’m going to need you to move away from her,” as he cautiously closes the distance to the bed.

“Not a chance,” Brice declares with a glare, tightening his hold on the weak woman, pulling her even closer to his chest.

“What are the three of you not getting?” Ezra demands from behind Ellery, his hazel eyes focused on his denmates and alight with frustration and fury. “The celestial is going to have to bite our mate. It’s that or she fucking *dies*.”

Menacing growls resonate through the space when one of their own says that dreaded word aloud. Every single one of his denmates turns furious glowing eyes on Ezra.

Their anger scrapes at my skin.

I’ve been dealing with my fair share of shifter emotion since I landed myself in Howling Rapids, but this level of concentrated aggression is staggering. Their responses ramp up possessiveness and jealousy and take them to a level humans would consider downright deranged. I feel like I’m sandwiched between a slice of roid rage and a full-on psychotic break.

The room starts to feel like a preheating oven when their body temperatures flare with their tempers. Black veins appear and disappear with the den's intense surging emotions. Everyone is teetering on a knife's edge, and it's becoming more and more apparent that, no matter which way things fall, some of us are going to end up butchered and bloody.

Ezra doesn't back down from the challenge that's so intense my toes are curling in my socks. What shocks me even more is that I'm not cowed by it or eager to get out of the line of fire. Quite the opposite actually. I want to engage. I want to push the leader of this den and his members even further, like I can taste the chaos in the air and I'd like a big bite of it.

Don't let the intrusive thoughts win, Noah.

Ezra holds Brice's glare before snapping, "Stop fucking posturing and let the celestial do what he needs to do."

"The longer she waits for a bite, the harder it is for her to fight the Fade. I'm not a threat to your claim. My mate's standing right there. Just let us help you," Ellery tells Brice firmly, but it's clear his words are for all four Hudson den members in the room.

For a moment, I don't think Brice is going to listen. His shoulders rise and his fingers curl into fists. But then, on an exhale, he relents.

With a quiet, animalistic whine that almost breaks my heart, Brice gently lowers Zara. He drags a hand slowly over her hair, staring down at her for a moment before he slides out from under the covers and strides over to stand next to Reid.

"I bit her leg, the outside of her thigh on the left side," Ezra offers, answering Ellery's earlier question as if no time has passed and we were never on the brink of battle.

Ellery nods as he studies Zara for a breath, like he's trying to solve a puzzle when he knows he's missing pieces.

"How does this work?" I ask Ruger in his head.

"Ellery will line up his bite with the original. We don't know if that helps, but it's what the alpha who first fixed a

Fade did. Since it worked, everyone else follows those steps to a T."

"And you don't know why some bites fail? There's no way to prevent this?" I ask. Perth said they weren't sure, but I wonder if there's a pattern or factors they suspect might contribute.

"Shifters think that the power to facilitate our other forms is passed down from parent to offspring, kinda like DNA. But sometimes that magic mutates or dilutes. There's no way to know if there's a variant in a shifter's magic until something like this happens, and then it's a scramble to try to fight the Fade and kickstart the transition."

I stare at Zara and hope for her sake, and her new den's, that this works.

Ellery looks over at Perth and then back at Ruger before his gaze settles on me. "Do you think you can help me?"

My brow furrows and my eyes widen with surprise.

Me? I look behind me to be sure there isn't someone else he could be looking at, but there isn't. I turn back, not sure what the hell he thinks *I* can do.

"Zara isn't...uh...dressed, and I think it would be safer if you're able to move the sheets and blankets around so I can see her bite."

Understanding crashes over me like unforgiving waves at the beach. She's still nude from the Hunt. Immediately, I nod and step away from Ruger. I expect some sort of snarl or growl of objection like before, but the other den stays quiet while they watch our every move with intimidating focus. It makes the very air around me so thick that I practically have to wade through it as I step over to the side of the bed.

I waste no time pushing the heavy duvet at Zara's feet down further, grabbing the gray sheet and pulling it until the bottom untucks. Careful to keep as much of her covered as possible, I expose just her left leg.

I find red, angry-looking puncture marks just above Zara's knee, the skin around the bite swollen and pink. I'd bet

anything it's hot to the touch.

Sorrow settles heavy in my chest, and I reach up and brush strands of sweaty hair from Zara's brow. Gone is the bright, vivacious woman I met. Her once lovely hair is dull, her pallor sickly, her beautiful face contorted in pain. She was so quick to offer me a friendly smile, but now her lips are chapped, her complexion sallow.

She'd been so excited for the Hunt. I had no idea what she was talking about at the time, but now that I do, it makes what's happened to her feel all the more like a tragedy. She went out that night hoping to find her future. She expected to wake up celebrating, adored and showered with attention from her mates.

Instead, doom is nipping at her, and if Ellery can't stop it, death is going to clamp down its jaws and drag her away.

A surge of anger hits me—harder than it should because I hardly know her. It might be shifter hormones or the heightened emotions of everyone in the room, but I'm mad that this is happening to her, that it's happened to others. Maybe it's the fact that Zara has one of those sunshine souls, the kind that touches you even if only in passing.

Whatever it is, I don't want her to go.

Ellery and I trade places and he studies the bite while I move to the opposite side of the bed. I find Zara's hand under the sheet and hold it, offering her a quick squeeze of silent support.

"Hey, it's Noah," I tell her softly, using the sleeve of my hoodie to blot some sweat from her forehead. "We're going to get you all fixed up and feeling better in no time. And, girl, when that happens, do I have a story for you."

I smile, my attempt at girl talk a little rusty.

"I could use a woman's perspective on all this craziness, so I'm going to need you to fight. Your guys are right here fighting alongside you. So do what you've gotta do to wake up."

Ellery starts to pull off his shirt, the unexpected action cutting off my prattling. Concern and confusion trickle through me, but when he reaches for the ties of his sweatpants, I go into a full panic.

“What are you doing?” I demand, my eyes flitting nervously around the room. These guys were ready to tear his throat out for standing too close to their mate—and now he’s stripping?

Three of the other shifters have glowing eyes, one of them visibly clawing at the wall like that’s going to keep him from leaping for Ellery.

Has the sheriff lost it?

“I have to shift to bite her, Noah,” he tells me gently, and I immediately feel like a complete dumbass.

Of course he does. What did I think was going to happen? He was going to go at her thigh like it’s corn on the cob?

Ellery calls his wolf and starts to shift.

There’s an uneasy edge in the air that cuts in and out of my lungs with each jittery breath, and my spine stiffens in expectation. His shift is fast and fluid, which is good because I’m fully expecting one or several members of the Hudson den to lose their shit at any moment.

I’m so prepared for an act of aggression to come from behind me, so convinced that a brawl is about to break out at my back, that I give absolutely zero thought to my own reaction when Ellery’s massive white and gray wolf fits his open mouth around Zara’s thigh.

A feral snarl rips through the room as Ellery lines up his fangs as close as he can to the first bite pattern on her leg.

One second, everything is normal—strained as shit, but normal.

The next second, all I see is red.

Overwhelming rage detonates through my body. Ice burns a path across my skin and—before I can think twice about what I’m doing—I leap for Ellery.

I swipe at the huge wolf with claw-tipped fingers, missing him by centimeters because strong arms band around me from behind and pull me back at the last second.

“Mine!” I half growl, half bellow like some possessed demon from the depths of hell. The circumstances of why we’re here, what we’re doing, who’s with us—all of that vaporizes, vanishes, evaporates in the blazing heat of my fury.

Outrage overwhelms everything else, and all I know is that Ellery’s fangs and his bite don’t belong on anyone but me.

Not unless he’s killing them.

“Ruger, get her out of here before she sets them off!”
Ellery orders, but that just blasts my rage into the stratosphere.

I fight Ruger’s efforts to pull me away, my claws digging into the backs of his hands, legs kicking out at him as I snap my blunt teeth at the unconscious waitress, no longer seeing the friend I was hoping for, but an enemy, a usurper who’s trying to claim what’s mine.

“My mate!”

My mate?

Shock ricochets through me at the thought—the word somehow penetrating through the haze of my all-consuming instincts and tapping into sense and reason.

Holy fuck, what’s wrong with me?

I shake my head, trying to untangle some form of logic and separate it from my unhinged and irrational reaction. I go limp in Ruger’s arms as I blink and find reality and control slowly filtering back in.

And that’s when I realize that all hell has broken loose in the room.

Brice and Reid are surging forward, black veins bulging in their foreheads as they swipe out with clawed hands at Perth and Ezra—who’ve both moved to block them.

Brice suddenly shifts, his clothing shredding as his bones snap and twist and a snarling wolf emerges.

Perth immediately follows suit, his massive red wolf blocking the other from leaping at me. The two wolves start to fight, growling and chomping—forcing all the humans in the space to take a step back as they roll across the floor until all I can see is a blur of fur and fangs. Perth gets in a good bite that makes Brice yelp with pain, and some of his other denmates snarl a warning.

“Out!” Ezra commands. “If you don’t have control right now, you need to get the fuck out!”

Only a few of them listen.

Brice stumbles up and bolts from the room, Perth hot on his tail.

Meanwhile, Milo ducks his head and rushes at Ezra.

Ruger scoops me over his shoulder and turns, sprinting out into the hall. It’s bedlam. Nothing but snarls and mania as I lift my head in time to see Ezra clock one of his denmates in the mouth.

Like a siren’s song calling me to the depths of a cold and deadly sea, my frenzied gaze finds Ellery. A pained howl crawls up my throat, but it doesn’t breach my mouth before I see him sink his teeth into another woman’s skin.

NOAH



A red-hot brand of rage sears my chest and head, pressing through my flesh, my bone, my brain. The vision of Ellery biting Zara echoes in my mind, each iteration setting me off more. I howl and scream, my throat raw with wrath. Anger climbs the column of my spine and shoots out to every limb, striking through me like bolts of lightning.

My body cracks as a shift starts to wash over me. The cold kiss of my wolf rushes to the forefront, and I barely hang on to the thin thread of rationality as I fight the change. I don't pay any attention to where Ruger takes me, too lost in my consuming instincts and wild urges.

Ice cold water suddenly rains down on me.

Frigid shock frees me from the turbulent, violent need to tear everything apart. I gasp, filling my lungs and coughing on the water that slips down my throat.

What the fuck!

Like a rubber band against my skin, reality snaps back into focus with a stinging crack. The bubbling torment I was feeling drops to a simmer.

I look around to find that I'm sitting in a large shower surrounded by black gleaming tile. A freezing stream pelts sense into me from a copper showerhead high up on the wall, and Ruger is crouched in front of me.

His presence makes the oversized, glass-paned stall appear much smaller than it is. He swipes his hand down his face, clearing water from his eyes, while his other hand is pressed

against my ribs. I should probably feel some satisfaction that I'm not the only one sopping wet, but I'm not sure yet if I want to thank him or throttle him.

Pinpricks of cold crawl over my limbs. My leggings and hoodie are drenched and sticking to me in a heavy, uncomfortable way. I force myself to take five deep breaths before I speak, sinking my metaphorical claws into the patch of calm I find among the quilt of feelings I'm experiencing right now.

"Better?" Ruger asks, his green eyes shining with concern as they scan every inch of my face.

"Debatable," I rasp as a shiver crawls over me.

My voice sounds dried up and brittle, and I swallow a sip of water from the downpour to restore it.

"You're no longer howling like you're going to kill someone, so I can work with *debatable*," Ruger counters, and the enormity of what just happened smashes into me with all the ferocity of a frying pan to the face.

"What. Was. That?" I whisper, horrified, staring at the wall behind him. There's a trickle of satisfaction twisting through me too, which is nuts. I don't even know where to begin analyzing the insanity of that gloating. It's as though a part of me is really fucking proud of that tantrum I just threw and eager to kick off again as needed.

"That was you getting a bit territorial," he tells me evenly, not an ounce of judgment in either his tone or face. In fact, when I glance up, there's a smug tilt to his lips and a glimmer of triumph in his eyes.

"Territorial?" I scoff. "You're really going with *territorial* to describe the complete batshit crazy that just went down?"

Ruger's smug tilt turns into a full-blown smile, and he reaches up to turn off the glacial downpour. A heavy silence settles between us as the sound of rushing water disappears.

"Fine, if *territorial* doesn't satisfy, how do you feel about the term *claiming rage*? Because that's what people around here call it."

Disquiet starts to flap around in my chest like little sparrows looking for a place to land.

I clear my throat, stalling so I can think and regroup. “*Rage* feels accurate...” I concede, “but I’m not so sure about the claiming part. I’m not a possessive psycho.”

Or at least I wasn’t before.

Dropping my gaze from Ruger’s, I watch beads of water fall from my leggings to crash against the shower floor like it’s the most profound thing I’ve ever seen. I feel his eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to meet them when his revelation and my denial hang heavy in the air.

“Not so sure about the claiming part?” he questions, his tone slipping from casual to something far more sensual with each syllable. “Then why do you smell like my brothers and orgasms?”

Startled—and slightly mortified—my wide-eyed stare crashes into Ruger’s confident, assessing gaze. A warm flush works its way up my neck, and I struggle not to open and close my mouth like some hooked trout as I flounder for a response. I smell myself, questioning how he’s picking up any of this after I showered.

“The living room reeks of what you three were up to,” he tells me with a wicked glint in his green eyes. “Smells fucking delicious.”

“There was no *claiming* involved, just...playing,” I defend and then try not to cringe at how ridiculous I sound.

Ruger reaches up and brushes a wet strand of hair from my face. He traces my cheek and then the line of my jaw with the tips of his tattooed fingers.

“Think what you want, Noah, but your reaction in the room just now has everything to do with claiming and not an ounce to do with playing. Or are we going to pretend that you didn’t snarl words like *mine* and mindspeak *mate*?”

I want to deny it. I really want to, but I’m not a liar, so I say nothing.

Ruger chuckles, enjoying my chagrin a little too much.

Ass.

A loud splat next to me makes me abandon my inner turmoil, and I look up to find Ruger is missing his shirt.

His body is as insane as I feel right now. Seriously, who looks like that?

His chest is covered in a black and gray tattoo of a snarling wolf. Its fangs are biting down onto a bright red rose. The rest of his chest is covered with silhouettes of black trees and winding filigree. I've seen him without a shirt before, but I was too busy freaking the fuck out to really appreciate the caliber of art inked all over his massive body.

I barely stop myself from reaching out to trace it, remembering that I'm supposed to be finding the holes in his *claiming* accusation. It's too soon. All of this just came out of nowhere. I have no idea what I'm doing on my best day, and now I'm just supposed to figure it out with *four* guys?

Except, none of my reasons feels as big as they once did.

So why am I *really* fighting this?

Ruger's right. This isn't about playing anymore.

His hand appears in front of my face, and I look up to see he's offering it to me. I take it, letting him pull me up. We stand nearly touching, my face close to his chest, water dripping from our clothes and our limbs, eyes locked.

We're on the edge of something—I can feel it skitter across my senses—but I don't know which of us will be brave enough to leap first.

With a sigh that sounds almost like assent, I guide my hands to each side of his waist and lean my head against his hard chest.

I leap—even though I'm terrified.

Ruger runs a comforting hand over my hair and holds me against him, letting me simmer in his serenity.

“I don’t know if I’m losing myself or finally finding what’s always been missing,” I confess quietly.

His lips softly brush the top of my head, and I close my eyes and revel in the fluttering inside my stomach. My thumbs trace the outline of his ribs, and his breathing grows more shallow.

“How is it possible to feel so lost and so anchored at the same time?”

Ruger rests his warm cheek on my wet hair.

“I want to give you an answer that explains everything,” he tells me, his rich tone dripping over me like summer rain. “I want to tell you something that makes you feel better. But I’m not good at the flowery shit. You want Perth or Ellery for that,” he informs me, and I smile at his honesty. “I can’t pretend that I understand everything you’re going through, but I can tell you what I know.”

He lifts his hands to my face, his fingers threading through my hair as he tilts my head back until I’m staring up at him. His green eyes flit back and forth between mine, like he’s searching for something. I don’t know what he finds in my stare, but it makes his gaze settle and fill with a warm certainty.

“You’re mine, Noah. And whether you’re ready to see it or not, you’re Ellery’s. You’re Gannon’s. And you’re Perth’s.”

His declaration wraps around me like a warm hug. But I’m at a loss for words because I am ready to see it, even if I don’t know how to say that to him.

Ruger’s calm expression tells me he’s not expecting me to magically dig up the perfect words. Instead, he tugs at the bottom of my sopping hoodie, pulling it and my tank top over my head. It plops down on the black tile floor of the shower, and then he drops to his knees and proceeds to pull my socks off one by one. Looking up at me, his green eyes are alight with assurance and something deeper that calls to me on a primal level.

“That pull you experienced tonight. That undeniable need and rage that shot through you when you saw a threat to your claim? I’ve felt that from the moment you woke up and ran from us,” he confesses. “I’ve been crippled by worry that I’m going to lose you somehow. But I’m going to stop doing that now. You’re not fragile. You’re strong. This world isn’t going to break you. And I’m going to show you all the ways you fit right here,” he tells me, pressing a fist to his heart.

My entire body feels like it’s been dipped in warm marshmallow fluff. Ruger’s words stick to me in a way I know is going to change everything. With deft fingers, he pulls my wet leggings down my thighs, past my calves, and off my feet.

His large palms skim up my legs, reaching for my sides, his touch feather soft as he stands and moves closer. My breath hitches when he unexpectedly lifts a hand and wraps it around the front of my throat, gently squeezing. The move’s not threatening or painful; it’s almost like he’s showing me *I’ve got you, you’re in capable hands*.

The wolf in me fucking loves it.

He steps into my space, backing me up until I’m pinned against the cold tile of the shower wall. His towering, muscular body presses against mine as he traces his nose over the apple of my cheek, slowly breathing me in, scenting me.

A needy whimper flutters up my throat, and I squirm, rubbing my thighs together until Ruger drops a hand to cup my pussy through my panties. I gasp as he applies the faintest bit of pressure to his palm.

“You need to lead and sometimes you want to follow,” Ruger whispers against the shell of my ear before he nuzzles the side of my face. His other hand tightens around my throat before loosening again. “I can take whatever you want to give me, Noah. I can be hard when you need hard, and soft when you want soft,” he purrs against my jaw, his palm firmer against my clit, and his fingers start to stroke my folds over my wet panties softly. “Just tell me that you’re mine.”

I whimper at the feel of him, the dominant hold around my throat, the gentle strokes between my thighs. Longing dances

across my skin, and I rub my cheek against his.

“I’m yours,” I whisper against his ear, and then his mouth is on mine, and I’m pulled deep into his passion and set alight from the inside out.

I groan into Ruger’s mouth and he inhales the lewd sound like it’s better than oxygen as he kisses me stupid. His fingers slide the crotch of my panties to the side and dip into my folds. With a needy mewl, I wrap my arms around his neck, and he drops his palm from my throat and lifts me with one hand so I can wrap my legs around his torso. His other hand never leaves my pussy, his long fingers seeking access to my core.

His mouth stamps ownership all over mine, and I happily hand over the deed. The way his tongue caresses mine and his lips devour me is addicting in all the best ways. He slips two fingers into me, growling with approval when I moan and grind down on them.

He pulls his mouth away from mine, panting against my fevered skin, and draws his fingers out of my pussy just to drive them back in again.

“You sure you’re not ready to be claimed, love?” Ruger growls against my lips, his mouth brushing against mine with each word. “Because your pussy is milking my fingers like you *need* it. Do you need more, Noah? Do you need me to show you how good it could be?”

I gasp and groan when he starts to finger me faster and harder, his palm clapping against my clit with each thrust.

“God, Ruger,” I pant, and he hums his appreciation.

“You feel so fucking good,” he rasps against my lips, and then he kisses me wildly as the pressure between my thighs starts to build until it’s spilling through me like a crashing tidal wave. I cry out his name and writhe on his hand as I tip over into rapture.

As my orgasm ebbs and I relax in his arms, still panting, his mouth traces a line down my jaw. I stare down at him, dizzy with gratitude but also with something more. He slides

his fingers from me and moves my panties back into place while I marvel at the tender way he takes care of me.

The door behind Ruger opens, making me jump. But when the man in my arms slides over slightly, I can see Ellery stepping into the bathroom.

Immediately, I rake my gaze over every inch of the sheriff like I can see some tangible evidence of Zara on his skin. Sweats once again hang low on his hips, and just like Ruger, his chest is bare. The sight of him sets ire sizzling in my gut once again.

“You taking care of our girl, brother?” Ellery asks, his eyes banking with heat as he takes in my heaving chest and the way I’m wrapped around his denmate.

“You smell like her,” I growl, irrational fury rising in my chest like a perfectly cooked soufflé of *fuck that*.

“Then help me not to, baby,” Ellery challenges sensually, and he stalks across the bathroom with a deliciously determined stride.

Ruger carries me out of the shower and then unhooks my arms and legs. Spinning me to face Ellery, he pushes me forward until I’m nearly sandwiched between them. I bite back a groan of satisfaction at the manhandling and focus on Ruger asking Ellery if Zara is okay.

Her name makes me want to growl and rage, but I manage to swallow down the possessive insanity and revel in the fact that they’re here with me, not her.

“My bite seems like it’s taking. She was looking better when I left. The guys are getting ready to take her back home for the rest of her recovery. They can’t stand our scents or us being anywhere near her. I think she’ll pull through.”

“Don’t talk about biting her, or I swear I’m going to lose my shit again,” I warn, closing my eyes and breathing through my mouth so the faint scent of Zara doesn’t send me crashing back into crazy.

“You need to mark your territory. You’ll feel better after that,” Ellery murmurs, and the way he says it has all kinds of

dirty images flashing in my mind.

He slowly steps closer as though he's giving me time to decide if I want him there. I tilt my head back as Ellery claims my space, his bare chest brushing against my wet sports bra and my peaked, sensitive nipples.

I allow it.

"Mark me with your scent," he urges. "It won't be enough for me to simply *not* smell like her; you'll need me to smell like you before your instincts will stop riding you so hard."

His gaze drinks me in like I'm water in the desert. I'm pretty sure mine does the same.

"I can smell your hunger. I won't push you, but if you don't soothe your wolf's needs, it's just going to trigger another rage. Then we'll be right back here again."

"Not that we're complaining," Ruger adds as he pulls my wet hair out of the tangle of a bun it's in. Instead, he lets it fall down against my back.

"What do you need, Noah?" Ellery whispers, his nose skimming mine, his lips so close and yet not nearly close enough.

"I still want to kick your ass," I whisper back, my anger and frustration not ready to completely disappear, although the two of them are way too good at distracting me from it.

Ellery and Ruger both laugh.

"Then kick my ass," Ellery easily concedes. "I promise to stand there and thank you for touching it at all."

I snort and then almost choke as Ellery runs the tip of a finger just barely inside the top of my underwear. Ruger smooths his hands over my ribs, sliding down until he's slowly stroking my stomach.

I force myself to focus on my breathing so I don't hyperventilate and pass out before things start to get really good.

“What do you need, mate?” Ellery asks me again, his lips skimming lightly over mine on the last word, like he’s daring me to deny it.

But fuck me, that word sounds so damn good falling from his lips.

His pupils dilate as I flood the bathroom with the scent of my undiluted desire. Black overtakes the bright blue of his eyes, leaving only a tiny glowing azure ring. The desperate ache inside of me expands.

“You. I need you,” I finally admit, and then I thread my fingers through his golden locks and kiss him.

Furious possessiveness overtakes everything else. Need becomes as powerful as gravity and grows heavier with each passing second. The word *mine* rings through our connection, and my hungry kiss spells out the message. Then my tongue repeats it. And my hands.

I nip and bite and punish—relishing Ellery’s moans. At the same time, I push my ass back against Ruger’s hard cock, needing to feel both of them at once. He sucks on my pulse, his tongue fluttering in time with my pounding heart.

There’s a sudden shift in the air that sends me mentally spinning, caught in a whirlpool of impulse and yearning. All of the shifter needs that have been brawling with my rational mind surge forward and take over completely. I sink. I drown in them, and I don’t care if I ever come up for air.

My fingers knot behind Ellery’s neck as I pull him even closer. The desire to use my tongue to lap away all traces of anyone else on his skin grows stronger. I rub against him, dropping my hands to his body and stroking my scent all over him. His pull is magnetic. Power radiates off him in warm waves. He’s a force to be reckoned with.

A force that could be my alpha.

My mate.

My future...if I let him, let *them*.

Something suddenly changes between us. It's as though Ellery can taste the direction of my thoughts, because one second I'm kissing the shit out of him, and in the next, he takes control.

My brain stalls. My toes curl. My knees actually go weak. Ruger's presence at my back, his hands around my waist, are the only reason I don't drop to my ass.

"*Noah.*" That's all he says—just Ellery's voice in my head, my name floating from his thoughts, unfurling like a flower in my mind, delicate, beautiful, and so full of meaning that I can't fully comprehend it...and yet I *feel* it.

A brilliant, all-encompassing surge of power sizzles through our connection, and for a split second, I feel invincible. Immortal. I feel everything.

Him.

Me.

Ruger, Perth, and Gannon.

They fit into little nooks in my soul. Everything they are expands into those carved-out pieces of my heart. What I always thought of as holes suddenly become spaces...spaces that were simply waiting for them. Like these men were always meant to be a part of who I am.

Ruger retreats as Ellery's hands clasp my ass, lifting me until I wrap around him. He walks us out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. His lips are gentle against mine, softening and withdrawing until they're the barest whisper of touch, drawing me in until I whimper an objection.

Ellery pulls back, his blue eyes glowing with shifter magic and desire as he sets me on my feet. I pant, confused as I stare up at him, pressed against his chiseled body, my own senses humming.

"More," I demand, so breathless with need that it comes out as a mewl.

"More," Ruger agrees behind me, and then he spins me and claims my mouth again.

Ruger kisses me like he's an expert on the subject. His lips suck and nip, his tongue twining and taunting like he did research on the best kiss ever and then said, *hold my beer*.

His large hands cradle my face, guiding my mouth to all the perfect angles to be wholly devoured. I eagerly follow his lead, each stroke of his tongue and touch of his lips melting me into a puddle of desire. It's the perfect balance of dominance and submission, of passion and reverence. It's everything that Ruger is...and promises so much more to come.

When Ruger pulls his mouth from mine, I swear I don't even know who I am anymore, let alone how to breathe or function. Ellery chuckles and Ruger's grin grows cocky when it takes me a minute to figure out how to brain again.

"That's it, everyone get naked right now," I order, turning to leap for the bed and freezing when the faintest hint of Zara hits my nose.

My eyes slam shut and I force myself to breathe through the wash of anger that ripples through me. I round on Ellery and fight the urge to rip my underwear off and rub my crotch all over every inch of his exquisite body.

"I'm losing my mind," I declare, dropping my face into my hands as though it will hide me from the truth of what I'm saying.

"You're not," Ellery assures, but his calm tone just pisses me off.

"It's not normal to want to rub my pussy all over you because you helped someone, Ellery. You saved a woman's life. That's not a betrayal, but I want to rip her apart for it."

Ruger lets out an amused snort, and I aim a glare at him.

"Don't you dare smile about this," I warn, pointing an angry finger in his direction. "It's not adorable, it's fucked-up. I want to literally tear someone limb from limb because they got their smell on him," I groan, gesturing to Ellery. "Where does it stop? Am I going to lunge for the grocery store clerk if

your hands accidentally touch while they hand over your receipt? Who's safe from this kind of mental instability?"

"Tucker can be a bit flirty; maybe it's time someone put him in his place," Ruger jests.

I growl at him. "You are not funny."

"My mom would disagree," he counters without missing a beat.

I groan.

"This is just part of the claim. Once the bond is sealed, everything won't feel this intense. Yes, you'll still have moments where you feel possessive or territorial because that's our nature, but we'll bite and fuck it out and you'll feel better," Ellery explains, pulling me into his arms and kissing the top of my head sweetly.

"How does any of that help me now?" I grumble. "I'm not solidifying this mate claim tonight, not with another den still here and their mate is sick in the guest room at the end of the hall."

I ignore the rush of euphoria Ellery and Ruger emit when I say the word *tonight*, instead of the word *ever*.

"Don't worry. I can think of a few ways we can help you feel better." Ellery's tone is full of naughty promise.

My mind may be a mess of conflicting thoughts and instincts, but when Ruger leans down and drags his lips over my neck, my body erupts into flames. All I want to do is escalate everything until I'm screaming their names while I cum all over them.

I look up at Ellery and feel a surge of satisfaction when I spot my faint teeth marks on his lower lip.

His pecs could use a few marks of their own.

Ellery grins as if I projected my thoughts, even though I'm pretty certain I'm shielding the shit out of everything I'm thinking right now. Either way, it's impossible to disguise the lust pouring off me as I gaze at his perfect body. Those

washboard abs and the happy trail leading down to his...
sweats—why does he still have clothes on?

“We can feel what you want,” Ruger tells me, his voice deep with the same longing I’m swimming in. “Take it, Noah. Take whatever you want, it’s already yours anyway.”

NOAH



Ruger presses in closer from behind me, his fingers tickling my ribs as he drags them up my sides and tucks them under the hem of my wet sports bra. He waits a moment, giving me a chance to stop him.

I don't.

When he drags off my bra and my breasts drop free, Ellery's sharp intake of breath is music to my ears. With a small splat, the bra hits the wood floor, and I lean back into Ruger's chest, reaching for his hands and pulling them up to cup my breasts.

Ruger's calloused fingers are gentle as he palms me. His touch makes me grow heavy with need, and when his huge thumbs circle my nipples, the sparks that shoot down to my core leave me gasping.

"So fucking gorgeous," Ruger practically purrs.

Ellery's expression says he agrees. He bites his lip as he watches his denmate touch me.

"You too," I urge, my eyes dipping down to my panties—which he hasn't removed yet—the look a very unsubtle hint.

"You want us both at the same time?" Ellery's eyes spark, the bedside lamp lending them a golden glow. He steps forward, his fingers deliberately tracing the waistband of my bikini briefs. "Can you handle two men at once?"

I stare at him, a playful challenge in my eyes and my smirk. "Ask Perth and Gannon what I can handle."

A dirty grin flashes across his face, and he leans closer as his finger hooks my waistband in the middle and runs his finger underneath the waistband. His finger drops down, down, down.

“What did you let our brothers do to you?” he inquires, his voice dripping with hungry promise, his eyes glinting with desire.

I get lost in the feel of him, but just when he starts to press right where I desperately need, he pulls his finger away and holds my panties tented away from me, that finger a good two inches from my slit.

“Did they kiss you?” he questions, leaning forward like he’s going to do just that to my jaw. Instead of skimming his lips over my skin, he drags the barest edge of his teeth across it and—*holy fucking hell*—does that leave me a panting mess. “Did you let them play with these tits?”

My breasts heave in Ruger’s hands, my body responding to Ellery’s lurid words and Ruger’s touch. He tweaks my nipples in perfect sync with the salacious talk, expertly plucking, pulling, and pinching.

Who knew the upstanding sheriff had this naughty mouth? This discovery makes it feel like it’s my birthday and I’m unwrapping the best surprise present ever.

“Yeah, they kissed me,” I murmur drunkenly, overcome with pulsing desire.

“How about this pussy, Noah?” he asks, his lips barely brushing mine. I almost whimper in protest when his hand and fingers don’t dip to play with my other lips. That mouth of his grazes over my gasps as he follows up on his first question, the words ghosting across my skin. “Did they play with it? Taste it? Did you let Perth and Gannon fuck this pretty pussy?”

His words pour over me like gasoline.

Then his kiss lights the match.

And I fucking burn.

As his tongue plunders my mouth, I project mental images of Gannon bending me backward over the couch and lapping between my thighs. The memory plays like a video in Ruger's and Ellery's heads, though Ellery still doesn't touch me the way I want. His fingers skim along the outer edges of my pussy, cruelly taunting.

"Give me those goddamned fingers!"

"Earn them."

Oh, no. He did not.

I mentally project how Perth joined in, bending over me. Ruger moans, grinding against my ass. When I cut off the image abruptly, Ellery pulls back from our kiss to glare. But I simply smile up at him.

"See, Sheriff? Two can play this teasing game."

Ellery moves his hands until he grips my underwear on either hip. Then he rips them off me with a quick brutal tug.

Fuck. I'm so damn wet I'm practically dripping.

The slow, meticulous way his gaze sweeps over me makes me feel like stalked prey. I both love the sensation and want my turn being the predator.

"More," Ruger requests as his lips suck on the base of my neck.

And while I like the face off against Ellery, I can't resist Ruger's soft plea.

I mentally feed them every salacious second of my fun on the couch with Perth and Gannon. As I do, Ruger grinds against me, and I can feel his cock throb when I relive my prior orgasm.

Afterward, Ellery's hot palm rubs against my core. Just that basic touch nearly brings me to my knees. I tremble when his middle finger bends slightly to check how wet I am.

"You like being a dirty girl, Noah?" he asks, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Because I'm going to ask you to be a very dirty girl."

God. My thigh muscles clench. I have to resist the urge to tilt my hips and force that finger deeper. Ellery's need is an entirely different flavor than Gannon's or Perth's was. There's a darker undertone to it—not malicious—but far more deliberate.

I'm not certain I've ever been slow-played like this before, but it's doing all kinds of things for me, and I want to savor every second.

It's Ruger who surprises me with his next demand, his breath caressing the shell of my ear as he decrees, "Ride my face. I need to fucking taste you."

The words are barely out of his mouth when I know exactly what I want. I want to fuck Ruger's face while Ellery fucks mine.

"On the ground," I order Ruger, and he wastes no time pulling off his sweats and lying back on the soft blue rug.

Ellery strips down too. Neither of them are even a little self-conscious about their nudity. Then again when you look like they do, there's nothing to be shy over—and *plenty* to be cocky about.

Very, very cocky.

I lick my lips at the sight of the sheriff. His golden skin and perfect muscles are on display as dusk paints the room and our bodies with light that's both fading sun and rising moon. It's magical and promising.

"Come here. I want to tongue fuck that pussy," Ruger orders.

Oh waiter, table for one!

I move to stand over Ruger, my feet on each side of his head, and leisurely crouch down over him before lowering my knees to the ground.

"Fuck, that's hot," Ellery declares, flashing the sight of my ass as I drop down onto Ruger's face into all of our minds.

Ruger runs his hands up my body, his arms wrapping around my back as I kneel above him. For a second I'm

worried about how he's going to breathe with me on top of him like this, but Ruger must not give a shit because he grabs me and pulls me firmly onto his face.

His humm of approval buzzes up into my clit, and the heat of his mouth shoots through me like a torpedo. He buries his face in my folds like he no longer breathes oxygen, he breathes wet cunt. I moan and then mewl when his clever tongue starts to twist and turn, his lips sucking and kissing, taunting me to the point of madness in only a matter of seconds.

Looks like Ruger is an expert at kissing all kinds of places.

Greedily, I press down on him, grinding my hips as my mind hollows out, filled only with the sensations of his mouth and tongue.

"Don't let her come so easily," Ellery calls out as he strides closer.

His cock bobs near my face, and though I glare at him for his words, I don't protest out loud. If I did, he might step away, and I want him down my throat so badly I groan with need. I'm desperate to choke on him while I rub my scent all over Ruger. I want the smell of sex to waft from both of them so that when they leave this room, anyone who comes near knows exactly what we were doing in here.

I imagine one and then the other trying to make me squirt, trying to make me come so hard I gush all over them. Projecting that thought, I tease, "*Up for the challenge, boys?*"

They both feed hunger and longing back to me through our connection. The intensity of the emotions swimming through the room threatens to make my vision waver.

I smile wickedly as my possessive gaze travels over the sheriff. Every part of him seems designed to drag me deeper into mindless lust. The sharply defined planes of his pecs, the light dusting of hair that travels down his navel, those abs. I'm even in awe of the shape of his fucking thigh muscles. And between those thighs? His cock is swollen and dripping, skin stretched so tight that the veins bulge on either side of it.

“I need you,” I half order, half plead.

Ruger tilts my hips so he can suck my clit into his mouth, and I throw my head back, lost to the ecstasy of him, until Ellery threads a hand through my hair and demands all of my attention.

“You’re fucking exquisite,” he declares, his blue eyes molten with need. “Ruger, tell me when she’s getting close to coming. Noah’s earned some delayed gratification, don’t you think?”

I glare up at him, because the bastard has already been edging me for what feels like a decade. Defiance gleaming in my eyes, I roll my hips against Ruger’s face and run my hands up my torso, fondling my tits just as I get the perfect amount of friction against his mouth. I tweak my nipples, sending a shower of hot sparks down my spine to meet with the pulsating fire below.

A second later, my wrists are manacled by Ellery’s hands and wrenched away from my breasts. Ellery leans down and captures my angry mouth, delighting in the way I bite him.

“I promise, we’re going to make you explode so hard that you won’t remember your own name,” he whispers, pulling back slightly. “But you’re going to have to be good and wait for it.”

Dammit all. What he’s saying sounds insanely hot and yet so fucked-up at the same time.

Ruger’s tongue doesn’t ease up, only adding to the pleasure that’s tempting me to tip over the edge. His tongue lashes beautiful patterns across my most sensitive skin, and it only takes about thirty seconds before my insides heat and a brilliant vibration shoots up through me.

“*She’s close,*” Ruger states.

I growl at him. “*Snitch.*”

“Slow down,” Ellery orders, and Ruger’s tongue gentles and becomes a dreamy remnant of what I want it to be.

Instinctively, my body moves to grind against him, desperate for more.

But Ellery whispers, “Just wait. Trust us. And wait.” Then he captures one of my nipples in his mouth. He sucks hard, the contrast stark against Ruger’s tender lapping. My body blazes, sensation draping itself across my limbs.

“Right there,” I whisper, my words the merest drag of air because I’m panting with the effort of resisting.

The celestial releases my nipple, breaking the momentum and leaving me gasping.

“That’s our girl. You’re being so good,” he murmurs before leaning toward the other peak and latching on, once again sucking and flicking in time with Ruger’s tongue. His praise warms me in a different way, and I’m on the cusp of begging for more.

Ruger intensifies his teasing, his fingers joining his mouth. They don’t dip inside of me but skim along the edge of my cunt as his tongue starts to press against my slit. Then, so damn slowly I want to scream, his tongue goes deeper.

“Oh fuck, I need to come, I’m so close!” I warn, and Ellery’s mouth instantly bites down on my nipple, hard.

“*Not yet,*” he commands.

The zing of pain from his bite combines with the heat of pleasure from Ruger. I pitch forward and struggle to stay upright as my entire body starts to tense and release.

Ellery’s mouth leaves me. He releases my wrists and stands up.

“*We’re going to come at the same time.*” His voice brooks no argument, but I have none to make anyway. I’m so fucking greedy for him that I reach out and yank him closer by his cock.

I want that dick stuffed down my throat *now*.

“Open so I can fuck this mouth and mark every inch of you.”

“Fuck, yes,” I pant, loving that I’m not the only covetous psycho in the room. Opening for him, my lips close around his velvety length as he finally slides into my mouth. He’s perfectly salty and sweet as his precum drips over my tongue before he hits the back of my throat.

Yes. This is what I needed.

I pull off his length, winding my tongue around his tip a few times before sucking him deeper. When he bottoms out in my mouth again, I swallow him down. Ellery cries out as my throat clenches, and when I glance up at him, there’s a smoky cast to his eyes. Unfocused. Exultant.

I think he might be close already. Good. I pull off of his dick and then let my tongue lick a long, slow stripe up the underside, showing him just what this edging torture feels like in reverse.

“*God. Fuck. Noah.*” His words are sharp and short, but his emotions are euphoric. I definitely have the celestial right where I want him.

Not to be outdone, Ruger rubs his face along my folds before sucking my clit deep into his mouth. My concentration falters and I take Ellery’s dick back into my mouth in order to stifle my own moans of pleasure. Instead, I let them vibrate against his thick cock.

Mimicking Ruger’s suction, I draw a gasp from Ellery when I feed them both hints of my pleasure through our mental link.

Ruger’s fingers finally dip inside me, and it has never felt so good to be filled. My eyes close when he starts pumping them in and out faster and faster as he sucks that clit and flicks it with his tongue.

In a lust-drunk daze, I stroke the base of Ellery’s shaft, playing with the inches I can’t swallow down.

“*Close,*” I murmur mentally. “*So close.*”

The alpha pulls my hair with his hands and starts thrusting into my mouth, taking control, and I swivel my hips on top of Ruger.

The teasing, taunting, terribly wonderful tingling starts to spread across my body. Wild abandon rises up and riots against self-control, and my bobbing on Ellery's cock gets quicker and sloppier as I chase both of our pleasures.

"I need to mark you," Ellery half groans, half growls. "I want to cum all over your tits and then rub it all over you. I fucking need it," he confesses, and Ruger growls and mentally flashes me his own image. He wants to spray his cum across my ass.

The erotic picture and keen animalistic drive we share sends me racing toward the peak.

"Come for us, Noah. I want you to come," Ellery commands, his hips moving faster, just as mine do the same.

Ruger is everywhere all at once. He has a hand in my pussy, his mouth sucking on my clit, and one finger gently circling my ass. It takes everything I have not to pull off Ellery's cock and scream at how good it all feels. Somehow, I manage to keep my teeth sheathed and my tongue dragging across the underside of him even as my hips rut against Ruger's face.

Like a rogue wave, my orgasm hits hard and sudden. One moment, I'm floating on a rising swell of passion, and the next, I'm bowled over by a thirty-foot tidal surge that carries me to its crest before crashing me down and stealing my breath.

I cry out against Ellery's cock as I buck and twist and feel more things than my body's capable of containing.

Ellery pulls out and backs away quickly, but instead of reaching for his dick and stroking himself to completion, he watches me writhe on top of Ruger until my breath is a juddering mess of gasps and my hands fall to the floor because I don't have the energy to stay upright.

That's when he reaches down and grabs my arms, yanking me to my feet. "Oh, no. We're not done." He manhandles me over to the dresser and bends me over in front of it so that I

can see in the mirror just how flushed my face is, how my eyes are aglow, and the way my tits hang.

“Ruger, our girl needs you, come help.”

In the reflection, I watch the huge, tattooed shifter crawl until he’s repositioned underneath my body. His tongue darts out and he laps at one of my nipples, flicking it.

“Noah, are you ready to watch your alpha fuck you?” Ellery’s question draws my attention back up to him as he positions himself behind me. I feel the blunt tip of his cock against my soaked slit, and my back automatically arches.

Oh shit.

“If you’re ready, say it,” he demands, sliding his hot thick length over me.

My eyes flutter shut as need overtakes my ability to speak.

“Say it,” he repeats, this time more gruff.

Prying my eyelids open, I stare up at his reflection in the mirror. The dominance wafting from him right now is breathtaking. “I want you to bottom out inside of me. I want that thick cock in me as far as it can go. And I want it now.”

A roar fills the room as Ellery’s fingertips dig into my hips and he drives into me. His first thrust would be brutal, but after my afternoon full of orgasms, it just feels so fucking right.

Finally.

I cry out, the sound tapering to a wanton moan as he fills me. The heat of his cock is more intense than a human man’s. The drag of that heat against my pussy lips, back and forth as he ruts me, has me clutching at the dresser’s edge on the verge of breaking it.

Ruger pushes up and latches onto my breast as Ellery pistons in and out. I can see the back of his head in the mirror as he sucks and my other breast swings with each thrust.

The sensations are stacking up brick by brick, building another massive orgasm inside my body, another temple of

mindless bliss.

“Ruger, show her what that pussy looks like when it’s getting stretched by my cock,” Ellery mindspeaks.

Instantly, Ruger’s mouth unlatches from my breast, and my mind’s eye is filled with his perspective as he looks between my swinging breasts and shows me my swollen slit. My pussy is a sopping, creamy mess around Ellery’s thick cock, which has a bright sheen of my cum on it. I see him pull back and feel the associated thrill of that dick-drag darting up my spine.

I’ve never watched myself get fucked before.

“See how wet you are? Think we can make her come again, Ruger?” Ellery asks.

Inside my head, I watch Ruger’s thick, tattooed fingers reach out, and I tense in delicious anticipation just before his thumb swipes over my clit.

Fuck.

I buck back against Ellery, who digs his fingers deeper into my hips. “You like that, baby?”

“Yesssss.” The word comes out of me as a desperate hiss because I’m currently struggling to breathe, to think, to do anything other than feel a vicious sense of need. It snarls through me, the most beautiful, raging, merciless desire.

Ruger sends me an image of his fingers pinching my clit, but before they even get there, I’ve detonated. The very thought alone had the power to send me.

I clench on Ellery’s cock, my pussy contracting as an orgasm bowls me over, making me sag against the dresser, nerves sparking, breath coming in short, tiny bursts.

“You’re taking my cock so well, baby.” Ellery soothes me through my aftershocks.

I fold my arms over one another and I rest my forehead on them while I catch my breath. After a minute, I glance back up.

“Worth the wait?” Ellery’s proud gaze tells me he already knows the answer to that question, but I nod anyway.

“Good. Then it’s my turn.”

My eyes widen and my mouth gapes in disbelief. “You didn’t come?” How is that fucking possible?

He gives a brisk laugh as he slowly slides out of me, careful to be gentle. That’s when I can see that his dick is still rock hard.

“I told you I was going to cum all over your tits and mark you with it,” he reminds me smugly.

I just blink because what the fuck? “Do shifters have better stamina than human men?” I ask, because it has to be asked.

“Let’s show her what stamina looks like, Ruger. I want her tits bouncing when I come on them.”

Ellery lowers his hand and helps his denmate up so that the other man can fuck me. I swallow hard at the sight of them naked and side by side, trying to imprint the image in my brain forever.

Ruger’s eyes rake over my body like fingernails, leaving sensitive trails along my skin.

His gaze is hot with lust. But when he meets my eyes in the mirror, he attempts to tamp down on his own emotions, and he laces his tone with concern. “You good for another round?”

“Ruger, it will be a cold day in hell before I’d say no to fucking you.”

His answering smile is wide, and he licks his lips, his gaze falling back to my body as he moves into place behind me. Fuck, I love how big he is.

“Warning. I like it rough,” he announces in the fucking sexy as hell growly voice they’re all so good at.

The taunting quip on my lips is instantly swallowed down when he reaches up and wraps my hair around his fist, pulling

me so that my back arches, leaving only my hands still on the dresser.

“Reach down between your legs and put my cock inside you,” he orders before letting up on my hair enough so I can eagerly follow directions.

Ellery smirks as he moves to my side, his hand sliding up and down his shaft, using all my cum as lube.

When I reach back and grab Ruger’s cock to position it at my entrance, one of his hands starts caressing my ass. As I guide him inside me, that hand lifts and smacks down hard. The sting joins his hard thrust, and intense sensation barrels through me, leaving me gasping.

“Yes,” I breathe. Guys never want to be as rough with me as I like, but during sex, getting thrown around and held in position is so fucking hot. I meet his eyes in the mirror as he tries to judge the effect that swat had on me.

“More,” I urge.

I watch in sensual fascination as my sweet caretaker transforms into a wild caveman, taking what he needs from my body.

He ruts me ruthlessly for a minute, his thrusts so hard that I’m clamping down on the dresser so that I don’t slam face-first into the mirror.

Fuck. The impact vibrates up my spine, through me in ways that I didn’t even know were possible. So. Fucking. Good.

“I want your ass red with my marks. You tell me if it’s too much. But until then...” His hand crashes against my ass, and it feels like every drop of blood remaining in my body rushes to where we’re connected. The sensations there multiply and I moan, and mewl, and beg.

“That’s it, Noah. Take it,” Ellery encourages as he jacks his dick quicker.

Ruger drops his grip on my hair so he can swat my other ass cheek. I lose count of how many times he spanks me. All I

know is I'm on fire in the best way, and my pussy is dripping around his thick shaft. Every delicious slap and thrust leads me closer to the edge until I'm dangling over a canyon of ecstasy. I'm holding onto a rope, just waiting for that moment when my muscles slip and I lose control.

All of a sudden, he's reaching around me, those fingers strumming my clit as pain and pleasure clash together inside of me.

I burst apart just as Ellery shouts, "Yes," and a hot stream of cum splashes sideways across my chest.

Consumed by my own orgasm, I can't even watch his, though I'm certain Ruger sees it. Because the minute his denmate's done, his hand is at my back, pressing me forward. "Bend down and let Ellery smear his cream across your tits. I'm going to cum on your ass, love."

The sheriff's hands shoot out, massaging my heaving breasts as Ruger fucks me so hard that my feet slide a bit across the carpet. Unlike the feral look of the man in the mirror, the expression on Ellery's face has relaxed. He's intensely focused as he paints his cum across my writhing body.

"This pussy was made for me," Ruger growls.

I feel myself start to contract again around his cock, another orgasm hovering right after the first.

Is it possible to die from too much pleasure, because I might be there...and what a way to go!

Ellery's fingers slowly drag across my nipples like they're works of art. He coats each one in cum until they're completely glazed, dripping. And then he leans forward and sucks on one.

I gasp as I fly headlong into bliss.

Ruger grunts and pulls roughly out of me, his hand flying to his cock as my body starts to go limp. I have just enough strength to hold myself in place as I watch Ruger spray his seed all over my ass.

Then I crumple into a heap as both men fingerprint their scents onto my skin. Boneless and more sated than I ever thought possible, I marvel at how much *I* like it.

If there was any doubt left in my mind about these men, it was just fucked out of me.

They're mine.

And holy fuck...I'm theirs.

NOAH



The moon is beautiful as it rises over the mountain. Its silvery light beams through the window, making the white wicker furniture in my room glow around me as I stare at a cellphone Ruger just let me borrow.

Sitting on my bed, I stare at the screen and chew my lip.

“I like them,” I confess out loud, as though speaking it into the universe makes it more real. It’s not like the cosmos are going to scream *no take-backsies* at me if I change my mind, but it feels important to say it.

Shit. I more than like this den, if I’m being honest.

I didn’t see it coming, which is probably stupid because they did bite me in the Hunt and tell me that they chose me for a mate, and they’ve been looking out for me ever since.

But I was certain that their interest was going to stay one-sided. To even consider the alternative seemed insane.

It doesn’t feel crazy anymore though.

I’m not sure exactly when it changed, but it has. I can admit that. My heart was like a battered antique before, but now it gleams. I feel restored and whole and just...so fucking hopeful.

If I listen to my wolf, all of this is a done deal. They chose me, and I choose them, easy as pie. But I’m not just a wolf. I’m a person too. A woman. Someone who had a life, a job, and a somewhat hazy future, but it was mine, and I worked hard for it.

Now, as I stare down at the phone, at the number I've typed into it, I realize this is the first step I'm taking as a woman. From here on out, everything I was will be left behind. The human, the orphan—they'll disappear into the depths of old memories. And what's left will be me—Noah Lupescu, wolf shifter, mate to the Arcan den.

Okay. I'm doing this, I declare like I'm some athlete in a locker room getting myself all hyped for the big game.

Fuck.

I can do this.

My fingers shake a little—from either excitement or the nerves—as I tap the green call button. It starts to ring, and my heart begins racing like it's going for gold in the Olympics.

Please let me get voicemail. It's late. It'll definitely go to voicemail.

“Hello?” Patrice's bitchy tone startles me and I jerk up, back stiffening.

“Oh. You're still there.” *Dammit. Even with the time change, I thought I'd be safe.*

“Who is this?” she snaps, as if she doesn't have an ounce of patience, not even for an unknown caller who could be a new customer.

“Is Dr. Jindra still in?” I ask, not wanting to deal with her but also feeling the need to speak directly to the doctor.

“No. What do you need?” Her tone has all the charm of a swarm of flies.

“I can call back tomorrow—”

“You're the new tech, aren't you?” she huffs, disdain dripping from the question. “I recognize your mousy voice.”

I reel back and pull the phone down, staring at it in shock for a second before pressing back to my ear.

Did she really just say that to me?

I don't know if I want to tell her to fuck off or laugh.

“You’re not coming, are you? I knew it. I told him, look at that resume! She’s not reliable. That girl has no loyalty.”

“I ran into an unforeseen detour. I thought it would be temporary, but it turned out to be something permanent,” I try to explain, hoping to steer things back to a professional lane.

I was already planning on emailing Dr. Jindra; I was just calling as a courtesy to give him a heads-up about the email, but maybe I shouldn’t have bothered.

“I don’t care what your excuse is. You’re never going to go anywhere in life if you don’t honor your commitments,” she bleats, like I give two fucks what she thinks about me.

“Patrice,” I interrupt, getting her attention. “You are the human version of menstrual cramps,” I tell her. And then I hang up.

I can still hear her outraged gasp as I toss the phone on the bed and run my fingers through my hair. With a shake of my head, I start to laugh, because damn, did this den just help me dodge a bullet.

My den.

My mates.

A little thrill bounces in my stomach as I stand and head for the door. I’m staying. It’s official. And I need to tell them right now, because I’ve got big plans. Plans that involve pair biting. Claiming the fucking shit out of each of them. And hoping that helps these stalkers to fuck off.

Either way, I’d like to spend the next few days screaming my mates’ names and marking them up to my wolf’s satisfaction. Maybe we can do some running and chasing too, more fucking, a little face train...each of them taking a turn eating me out, and then I return the favor.

The possibilities are endless.

A stupid, wide grin is stuck to my face as I descend the stairs. I spy them all seated at the table, looking so badass and serious, laptops open in front of them. I can’t wait to watch their jaws all drop when I tell them.

I touch down on the bottom step and head toward them, a giddy little spring in my step. New-start butterflies have escaped my stomach and are spiraling up my throat because I'm about to tell this den I'm ready for the biggest new start of them all.

“FUCK!” Ellery curses and shoots out of his seat, nearly tipping it over. All around him, the guys stand, turning toward the sliders that lead to the deck. A surge of panic taints the air with a coppery scent that's quickly followed by a dark burst of violence. Every single one of my mates has black veins running up and down his neck.

“Wait!” I call out, running toward them as they spin away from me.

Ellery turns back, his eyes glowing, his teeth already the sharp, feral fangs of his beast. In a low tone that's so guttural I almost can't understand him, he orders, “Stay here. Do not leave for any reason. ANY REASON.”

“What's going on?” I ask, eyes darting around in search of someone who's not quite hovering so close to his shift.

“Something happened with the orcs and they're attacking the enforcers,” Ruger rushes to explain as Ellery's massive gray wolf bursts through. The crack of the celestial's bones fills the space as he transforms. Meanwhile, the rest of the den eye me.

“Deputies are coming, okay? Stay here. Don't let anyone else in. Understand?” Perth's amber eyes blaze around his expanding pupils, resembling the sun during a lunar eclipse.

I shake my head. “Wait. No. Why can't I come with you?”

Gannon opens his mouth to answer, but his explanation is cut off when a massive pine tree flies out of the forest nearby. It zooms up through the sky, launched like a spear. My jaw drops and I gape at it as it grows closer. And closer. It falls with a thud just shy of the deck, and I can feel the ground shudder as hundreds of pounds of ponderosa pine smash into it.

“Fuck, they’re in a rage. This is not good!” Gannon curses as Ruger shifts into his wolf.

Perth opens the slider and the two wolves go bounding out as he starts to shift on the deck.

Gannon steps closer, grabbing my wrist and looming over me. I can feel ferocity emanating from him in waves so strong that it nearly buckles my knees. “When orcs rampage, they can be incredibly dangerous. Do *not* go outside.”

I nod, silently assuring him that I won’t. A bellow tears through the forest and invades the house. It’s as loud and percussive as thunder, and I jump in shock. Gannon cups my cheek for a second, then his hand glides down to clamp gently around my neck.

The spot that’s aching for his bite pulses.

His grin is dark with malice, but not aimed at me, for me—on my behalf. “Now, stay here. Stay safe. And when we get back...you can tell all of us that you’re finally ready.”

With a swift and brutal kiss that leaves my lips feeling bruised, he disappears. Running through the slider and slamming it closed behind him, he twists and shifts into his wolf in less time than it takes for me to blink.

In a shocked daze, I walk over to the sliding glass door and lock it out of habit. When I stare down at the lock, though, I almost start bitterly laughing. What good is that going to do against an orc who can throw whole-ass trees like they’re toothpicks?

Deciding it’s probably best to get the hell away from the windows, I wander back into the dining room and sit at the abandoned table. I huff out a sigh, worry for the guys corroding my stomach.

If an orc can do that to a tree, what the hell can they do to a wolf?

They didn’t seem concerned about themselves though. I got more anger and protectiveness from their scents than anything. It makes me wonder about the more violent side to eerie life. The guys haven’t lost their shit too much around me,

but the possessive urges *I've* felt, the call to violence when something you care about is threatened—it's a side to this life I know exists but hasn't really been addressed yet.

I should probably ask them about it, make sure I'm up to snuff in the badass department.

I snort out a laugh at that thought. Pretty sure no one who's actually a badass would ever say those words.

I reach for one of the open laptops on the table and decide to get my email to Dr. Jindra out of the way while I wait. The front door swings open, a little alert from the alarm letting me know.

"Hello?" I recognize Karen's voice as she calls out from the living room. "The party can start now that I'm here."

I roll my eyes. You'd think this was a girls night and not a *red alert* kind of situation.

"I'm in here," I call from the dining room.

"Gonna need you to be more specific. This is a big house and there's an echo," she calls back to me.

"Head toward the kitchen."

A handful of seconds later, Karen waltzes in through the entryway. Deputy Dillon is at her side. His hat is off and held in one hand as he scratches at his buzzed head and glances around the space.

Karen hops up to sit on the dining table. "Hey, Poodle. Long time no see," she declares as she wags her eyebrows at me and gives me a knowing smirk that has heat crawling into my cheeks.

Shit. Witches can't smell sex too, can they?

Or maybe it's just the afterglow. Either way, Karen knows more than she needs to, and she's not the type to let a thing go.

I lift a finger in warning. "Don't go living up to your namesake and stick your nose where it doesn't belong," I razz, and she shoots me a glare and gives an indignant huff.

“Everyone’s always coming for Karens,” she grumbles under her breath. “It’s nonsense. I’ve met more bitchy Michelles in my life than Karens. Tiffany,” she shouts out. “Who’s met a nice Tiffany?”

Dillon launches a look my way that says *look what you did*, and I chuckle.

Another house-shaking roar rips through the air outside, and each of us sobers quickly.

“Think they’re okay?” I ask quietly, as though if I speak too loudly, the universe will hear me and decide it’s time to fuck things up.

“They’ll be fine,” Dillon dismisses my concern, a hint of temper in his tone.

Sounds like he had somewhere better to be tonight.

His lack of worry and Karen’s lighthearted attitude help me to slightly relax. They know this world and eeries far better than I do, and they don’t seem to be fussed about what’s happening.

“What a mess,” Karen complains. “They’re supposed to be here to help, not make everything worse. I hope the Arcan den has rage insurance.”

Karen hops down and moves to the fancy coffee machine and starts messing with it. I’m uncertain she actually knows how to work it, because she keeps making noises like *beep-boop* as she presses the buttons. Either because she finds it entertaining or she’s trying to speak the machine’s language.

Meanwhile, Dillon slowly wanders around the kitchen like he’s taking it all in. The way he peruses makes me think that he hasn’t been inside his boss’s house before. That could definitely be awkward. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small red crystal, the kind I saw in the interview room, playing with it in his hand as he looks around.

Maybe he’s stimming.

“Anyone else want a latte?” Karen asks, plucking a large mug from a cupboard, and both Dillon and I shake our heads.

“How are you holdin’ up?” Dillon inquires, brown eyes glancing at me briefly as he ambles from the kitchen to peer out of the wall of windows on the opposite side. “The Arcan den treating you okay?”

I hit send on my email and let out a deep breath, closing the laptop and pushing it away. “I’m good, and yeah, no complaints,” I answer casually, looking over at the deputy as he nods and moves back around the table.

“You still haven’t claimed them,” he declares, tapping his nose, but I’m not sure if he’s asking a question or making an observation.

“That’s none of your business, deputy,” Karen warns as the coffee machine starts making all kinds of noises like it’s preparing for takeoff instead of preparing a cup of joe. “Dillon,” she barks out. “Dillon would be a far better name for someone that’s nosey than Karen is.” She waves in his direction like he’s just made her case for him, and I chuckle.

He aims a sullen look her way and then peeks out into the living room like he’s checking that no one’s in there. He seems a lot more interested in doing this whole guard gig than Karen is.

“What can you tell me about—” I start to ask about orcs, but in pure Karen-style, she interrupts.

Gesturing with the hand that’s not holding her steaming cup of coffee, she admonishes, “I thought we talked about you wandering around like some street dog.”

I scoff and look down at my outfit. Apparently, my red knit wide-leg pants and matching cropped sweater aren’t up to snuff. “I’m in loungewear, Karen,” I argue, and she rolls her eyes. I lift the batwing sleeve of the cute top and wave it at her. “The witches made this for me, so don’t even start.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt a snarky comment already loaded on her tongue. But it’s never voiced, because in that instant, Dillon steps up behind her, reaches around with a clawed hand, and rips out her throat.

NOAH



F rigid shock slams into me and tears a startled cry from my throat. Blood sprays across the floor and table, droplets painting me the same color as the alarm and horror pounding through me.

Porcelain shatters and coffee spills everywhere as Karen crumples to the ground, her wide eyes blinking with pure shock and terror. She grabs her throat with both hands as though she can stop her blood from abandoning her. I dive for her as she starts to mouth something. My horror-stricken gaze bounces from Karen to Dillon, who's just standing there watching all of this like it's no big deal.

What the fuck is going on?

I look back at the witch, who's looking more listless by the fucking second, and see that she's attempting to speak. I lean down to try and catch what it is, but all I can hear is the bubbling of air in her ruined throat and the steady pumping of blood out of her body.

“Can't spell yourself better if you don't have a voice,” Dillon taunts, and my enraged gaze flashes up to him. That cruel smile I first saw on him at the diner resurfaces and sends fear screaming down my spine.

Just then, I feel Karen's shaking hands grab at me. Her weak fingers slide past mine, and she slips something into my pocket, but I don't look down. I don't draw attention to it as I snarl up at the deputy.

“What the fuck!” I screech, at a loss for what else to say. Hot tears of rage and loss run down my face, and I look back at Karen as she starts to twitch and relax, her body fighting death with all it has and losing.

Panic pummels me as I helplessly watch Karen’s last seconds. I roar in my head for the guys. Screaming about what Dillon’s done, that they’ve been betrayed, but there’s no answer. That, more than anything, makes it hard to breathe and overruns every one of my senses with terror.

“What did you do?” I snarl at Dillon, hot coffee and blood seeping into my pants. I pull Karen closer to me, but the life in her eyes is gone, her body’s still, and I’m left reeling about how any of this fucking happened.

My eyes dart around, landing on the entryway that leads out to the living room and front door.

Dillon moves to block it, his gray uniform and flat expression making him look as heartless as a man made from stone. My eyes narrow on him. Heartbroken as I am to leave my friend lying here in a puddle of betrayal, I know I’m in serious fucking trouble and I need to focus on getting out of it.

I try again for Ellery, Gannon, Ruger, and Perth, but they’re gone. I hope they’re only out of reach and not...

I shake away that thought and focus on the motherfucker in front of me.

One thing at a time, Noah.

“If you’d just come with us like you were told, none of this would have happened,” Dillon drawls, his brown eyes searing me, disappointment and arrogance pooling in their dark depths. Blood drips slowly off his fingers, the claws of his wolf gone.

“Why the fuck would I have come with you? I don’t even know who you are,” I bark at him, fuming, and then immediately chastise myself for losing control of my temper. I need to be smart about this. I need to buy myself time to get away or stall long enough for someone to come looking for me, *four* someones hopefully.

But my wolf is practically pacing with feral agitation in my chest, and the fear walloping my heart and head are making it fucking hard to think. *Out. Get out!* every emotion inside me clamors.

“Stop the bullshit already,” Dillon snaps at me. “Brooks told us all about you two. It’s time to come home, Addison!”

The name jerks at something inside my head, but rage pulls at my heartstrings harder.

He’s one of them.

One of the stalkers.

“My name is fucking Noah,” I seethe. “And I don’t know Brooks, or you, or the other asshole in your den!” A growl rumbles from my chest, my patience running entirely too fucking thin.

This mental case is two left turns past Insane Boulevard, and I’m done with this ride.

“Your name is Noah *now*, but that’s not what it’s always been.”

My stomach drops like an elevator that’s lost its brakes. I physically jerk back at his statement like he just socked me in the stomach with it.

“Who are you? What are you talking about?” I ask, confusion and dismay so heavy in my tone that it’s weighed down to almost a whisper.

His eyes soften slightly and his stance relaxes just a little. “If you want to know, you need to come with me,” he orders confidently, stretching out his hand as though he expects me to take it. His eyes flash to the windows at the back of the house, and I realize all the roaring and tree tossing has stopped. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad one.

Glancing at Dillon’s hand and then back up to his face, I grind my teeth. I want answers, but not bad enough to trust him for a blood-coated second.

Murderer.

Hitting my limit, I give up on trying to stall him anymore and go with plan B.

Time to fight and try to run.

Rage radiates off me as I call on my wolf. I open myself completely to our connection, inviting her to take over and give this fucker a taste of his own medicine. I wait for her strength and raw power to fill me...but it doesn't come.

I take a deep breath, recalling everything Perth taught me out in the clearing, and try again.

Nothing.

I close my eyes, begging for my magic to surge forward and protect me, but there's a wall separating me from it.

My lids snap open and Dillon is smirking at me. His eyes trail behind me, and I follow them to a red crystal that's sitting in the window frame. I look around and spot several red crystals positioned all around me, and then I look back to the bastard who put them there and notice that he's standing outside of their circumference.

Without thinking, I take a step back, aiming for the crystal behind me.

"Ah ah ah," Dillon tuts, pulling something else from out of his pocket with his bloody hand. I can't tell what it is, but the implied threat is clear.

I breathe through my panic, once again surveying the crystals keeping me from my wolf. I won't be able to shift as long as I'm standing at their center, and if I try to destroy them, he's going to stop me.

But...

Without second guessing my instincts, without even looking in the direction I want to go, I leap. I spring with every ounce of rage and fury in my body, tense with anticipation for the second I'm free of the crystals and their effect.

Magic and my wolf surge through me as I soar past the magical barrier, and I beg my beast to take over.

Something big and hard crashes into me, and I go careening into one of the kitchen islands. The edge of the counter cracks and breaks off from the impact, and pain flares through me. My shift stalls with the shock of agony, but I reach deeper for my wolf and she answers.

Hope explodes in my chest when I see the black lines crawling up my arms.

But then a massive gray wolf is in my face, fangs bared, a terrifying growl pouring from between his canines.

It happens so fast I can't do anything to stop it. Teeth sink into my arm, clamping down viciously as they pierce me. Something in my soul—in the core of who I am—shatters.

I scream at the loss, and fire ignites under my skin as something new, something unwelcome fills the void in my chest.

"There you are," Dillon boasts in my head, his voice slimy, wrong...unwanted. *"Now you're ours, just like you always should have been."*

Agony swells in my veins.

Pain tortures me with its touch.

Anguish mocks my loss.

And then everything goes black.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ivy is one badass mofo who somehow tolerates Ann's weird jokes. Ann is brilliance personified who graciously doesn't judge Ivy's bossiness or overall disarray. With a friendaversary that goes back to pre-publishing days, these bitches like to write dark and sexy stuff and laugh with each other over their horrible, eye-gougingly bad stick figure drawings as they try to map out scenes.

This is their first book together but they both have a shit-ton of other books for you to check out.

Stalker Links

Ivy:

[Amazon author page](#)

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