

INTO THE DARK

REECE BARDEN

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A MONSTER ROMANCE

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 Created with Vellum

*For the monster loving readers who are drawn to the
darkness.*

*If you love the thrill of the chase, the rush of danger and the
allure of the unknown, this one's for you.*

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A WORD OF WARNING

This book is steamy. Not too dark but definitely 18+.

If you're new to monster romance, be aware there will be different peens, fur, fangs, and a lot of fucking.

Profanity too. The odd unaliving. A bit of stalking.

Primal play is almost a given, and monsters can be a little dubious about consent sometimes.

This book also has a man who is extremely excited about putting a baby in our leading lady, so breeding kink too.

If any of the above are things that give you the ick or could be a trigger, this maybe not be the book for you. Feel free to contact me for more info before you dive in.

If all of this sounds intriguing or downright amazing, enjoy!!!

FOREWORD

As I'm an Irish writer, this book is written in British English.

That means there might be more u's, double ll's and a lot less z's than you're used to.

It's different for some readers, but not wrong.

If you spot any pesky spelling mistakes that managed to sneak through the editing process and you'd like to let me know, you can contact me via www.reecebarden.com.

Or just contact me and let me know what you think of the book. I love to hear from readers!

Reece

xxx

CHAPTER 1

HOLLY



Thumping my fist hard against the steering wheel, I curse as my old truck coughs and sputters, before finally dying completely. I coast as far into the ditch as I dare, letting the truck roll to a stop. The engine gives one last death rattle and spews noxious smoke into the pitch-black night.

Leading from one tiny mountain town to another, this tiny, winding strip of road is endless, and there isn't a street light or another car in sight. I'm close to my destination, Sutton, an isolated town where the father I've never met lives, but it doesn't look like I'll get there tonight.

Dipping my head to look out at the inky darkness, I know it's way too dangerous to walk, especially when I don't really know how much farther I have to go.

Since heading off into the woods on my own this late at night sounds like the beginning of a cliché horror movie, I resign myself to staying put. I don't love the idea of an impromptu roadside camp out, so I force myself to be practical.

Reaching over, I pop open the glove box and pull out my flashlight and slip out of the truck. The bag I want is in the bed, and I pull out a sleeping bag, a fleece, and a hat, then rush to get back inside the cab. A shiver runs down my spine as something howls in the distance, and a gentle breeze rustles the leaves beside me.

The snap of a twig nearby makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up, and I freeze, waiting for something to

emerge from the shadows.

You're being ridiculous, I chastise, forcing myself to calm down and stop being so dramatic. Hopefully, someone will drive by. If not, it's going to be a long night. It's late spring, and while the temperatures are steadily rising elsewhere, I have no idea how low they'll drop this far up the mountain.

I'm also not keen on having to wander into the woods to use the bathroom.

It's an hour later when a pair of headlights approaches from behind. Blinded as I squint into the rearview mirror, I wonder if hoping someone would drive by was a good idea after all. I'm a sitting duck. Nobody knows where I am.

Rushing to free my legs from the confines of the sleeping bag, I sigh with relief as a flash of blue and red assures me I'm not about to meet a serial killer. A tall man exits the vehicle and tucks his hat underneath his arm, and I roll down the window, waiting as he approaches.

"Evening, Ma'am, I'm Sheriff Golden, but you can call me Scott. We're not real formal around here," he's polite, taking a quick look at my layers of clothing and the sleeping bag bundled on the passenger seat beside me. A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, and he lays his gaze on me, raising an eyebrow. "Car trouble, or did you decide to camp here for the night?"

He pulls the hat out from under his elbow and dangles it between his fingers. His eyes twinkle, amused at my attempts to keep warm and bed down for the night.

When I don't answer, he places one hand on the roof and nods his head at the mountain of snacks beside me, "At least you brought rations," he chuckles.

The movement draws my attention to the way his muscular chest moves under the thin, neatly-pressed material of his uniform. Hot mama, this is one well put-together officer. His smile grows wider as I continue to stare mutely at him, as if I've never seen a handsome man before. It must be an occupational hazard with the way he fills out that uniform.

“Yes. Sorry, yes. I broke down, and I didn’t think it was safe to walk when I don’t know exactly where I am. Near Sutton, I hope, but other than that...” I drift off, aware that I’m rambling and glad for the darkness hiding my pink cheeks.

Smiling indulgently, he reaches in and takes the keys from the ignition of my truck. I look up at him and frown. Is he allowed to do that?

“Come on. I’ll run you into town. It’s not safe to sleep out here,” he mumbles darkly, looking up and down the deserted road.

Keeping my back to him, I say nothing. I know exactly what he means: three women have disappeared in and around Sutton in the last three years. Investigations yielded no suspects, which means there is someone potentially very dangerous stalking women in this town.

As if to emphasise his point, something snaps a branch not too far away, the proximity making me jump. This place is creepy.

I bundle a few essentials into a small bag – a change of clothes, my wallet, some cash, and a toothbrush. Scott looks confused and irritated. He’s probably in a hurry and has better things to do than run a taxi service for stranded tourists.

“I’ll just grab enough for tonight,” I explain, feeling the need to justify myself. He nods politely, smiling, but somehow, he still manages to look unimpressed. When he catches me looking, he holds out a hand to take my bag. His eyes are such a pale blue, they’re captivating.

It’s hard to see his face clearly, but what I can tell is that he’s handsome, in a boy-next-door kind of way. He’s all pearly white teeth and perfect, sandy blond hair: the all-American hero, here to rescue the damsel in distress.

He locks the door and pockets my keys just as a set of bright lights approaches us from head on.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but my rescuer curses and ignores me, watching with hands on his hips as a giant recovery truck pulls in front of mine.

“Scott,” a deep voice rumbles, spitting the word with clear disdain as a pair of heavy boots hit the ground with a thud.

“King,” Scott replies with equal scorn, his charming façade slipping. The tension in the air is palpable. These guys clearly hate each other’s guts. “What are you doing out here?”

“Someone reported a breakdown. Figured I’d check it out.”

Someone reported a breakdown? I’ve been sitting here for an hour and haven’t seen another soul. *Maybe someone saw me here.* The thought makes me shudder, and I glance over my shoulder at the eerie forest.

Despite his words creeping me out, his voice is low and gravelly, and I itch to see the man it belongs to. It sounds like sex and sin in one devastating package, but I can’t see King’s face. All I can see is the outline of his massive frame, backlit by his headlamps as he moves closer.

“You want me to take your vehicle and have a look at it in the morning?”

Even though I can’t see his eyes, I can feel them burning into my face, making me feel flustered. He rubs his hands together impatiently, and the sound is like sandpaper, rough and scratchy.

“Em... I’m not sure,” I admit, looking at Scott over my shoulder for guidance, but he’s busy glaring at King. With an exasperated sigh, King steps forward.

“Let me make it easier for you. I have the only tow truck and garage in Sutton. So, your options are limited - as in, you have none.” His voice drips with scorn, like he’s already run out of patience, even though I’ve only said a few words to him.

I scowl; if I didn’t need his help, I’d tell him where to shove it. He might be right, but he doesn’t have to be so rude about it. Another distant howl, though, makes me much more compliant, and I nod, eager to get out of here.

King stares into the pitch-black forest, jaw clenched. He says nothing, he just holds out his hand expectantly, gesturing

with long fingers for me to hand over my keys. His brow quirks, surprised when Scott steps forward and drops them into my own outstretched palm. Turning, I hold them out to King, and he smirks at Scott.

King's fingers brush mine as he grabs the keys, and a jolt of static makes me gasp as his eyes flash to mine. I'm lost in bottomless black pools as he stares at me intensely. My entire body awakens as I'm trapped by his gaze, my vision tunnelling and everything around us melts away.

Scott clears his throat and King straightens, the spell broken.

“Any time tonight would be great.”

Averting his eyes, King looks over my shoulder at the sheriff, who's acting properly annoyed now instead of just irritated. King storms back to his tow truck without a backward glance.

“I'll drop her in Sutton,” Scott snaps at King's retreating back, then stalks away, climbing behind the wheel of his own vehicle. I follow the sheriff, glancing back to see King haul his hulking frame into his seat. Pinning me with another long stare, his eyes narrow, and his brows draw down in a frown before the truck roars to life.

Finally, King looks away with a shake of his head, throwing one arm over the seat beside him as he swivels to reverse the beast of a truck closer to my own. Gripping the headrest, he competently manoeuvres the huge vehicle off the road and parks in front of mine. He jumps down and drags large, heavy chains off the bed with unnerving ease.

“So...” I stand there awkwardly while he works, watching how the muscles in his back flex and ripple underneath his thin, grey t-shirt.

“I'll find you,” he snarls, and then sighs when he sees my confused face. “The Claw, the bar in town, is mine too. You can get me there if you need to, but I'll let you know when it's fixed.”

He continues hooking up my truck, enormous arms bulging and flexing, but a door slamming loudly drags my focus back to Scott. Time to go before my lift leaves without me—I have a feeling King wouldn't be pleased to have an unexpected passenger. He'd probably make me walk.

“Right, coming!” I scurry after Scott, sliding into the passenger seat. As we pull off and drive by, King barely lifts his eyes from his task. Scott shifts in his seat, fingers drumming on the leather steering wheel. Sighing, he briefly glances my way before returning his eyes to the road.

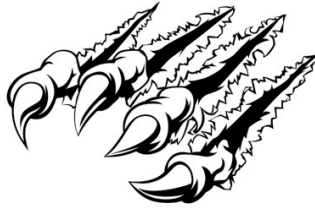
“I know I can't tell you what to do, but I'd stay away from King,” Scott warns, wearily rubbing a hand over his chin. “He's trouble. Take my advice and steer clear, okay?”

Trouble? Wide-eyed, I stare at the sheriff then lean forward to catch one last glimpse of King before the dense trees obscure my view. Scott isn't really implying... that King was a suspect, is he?

My throat is dry as I swallow hard. Despite myself, and even though King seems pissed-off by my very existence, I'm intrigued.

CHAPTER 2

HOLLY



Scott continues to look conflicted as he drives us toward town, a frown marring his handsome face. Eventually, he scrubs a hand back through his tousled hair and looks at me.

“I don’t want you to think you’re not safe here in Sutton. You are. Of the three girls who went missing, we’re pretty certain we know what happened to two of them. The last girl, well, we think someone took her, and until we can put that person away, you can’t be too careful.”

His lips are set into a thin line, his broad shoulders rigid. I’d imagine, working in law enforcement, especially in a small, close-knit village, an unsolved case like this would weigh heavily on a man in his position. The pressure must be immense.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I will. I have no desire to put myself in danger. That’s not why I’m here.

My ready agreement seems to appease him, and he relaxes, that Hollywood smile back on display. Leaning back in my seat, I gaze out the window at the dark woods, and my mind drifts back to King. The brooding mechanic. If Scott suspects him, how frustrating must it be to have him living in town and not be able to do anything about it?

Is that why he hates him?

Surely King wouldn't be able to run a business in a small place like this if everyone thought the same. People talk. Even if they couldn't prove it, he'd be a pariah.

"So, how long are you in town?" Scott lightens the mood, slipping into casual small talk as he drives the winding back roads with ease.

"Not sure yet. I'm between jobs and at a loose end. A few weeks, maybe."

It's vague and non-committal, but if Scott thinks it's odd, he doesn't comment. He nods and smiles, not pushing me for a proper answer.

"I don't think there's a few weeks' worth of sights to see in Sutton, but it should be quiet if that's what you're looking for."

"That's exactly what I need."

Somehow, though, I don't think that's what I'll get. I didn't choose to come to a town sporting three missing women for a relaxing break.

Scott turns down what appears to be Sutton's main street, which is, in reality, a short strip of road flanked by single-story, wooden buildings. It was probably quaint twenty years ago, but the dated shop fronts could do with a refresh.

The few dim street lights offer little light to see, but I can make out a general store, a diner, and what looks like a small hardware store at the end of the road. A café and a hiking supply store sit opposite, but what catches my eye is the backlit sign for The Devil's Claw. That must be King's bar.

A faint, warm glow filters through the windows, making it look cosy and welcoming on a chilly night like tonight. The door swings open as a patron leaves, and I get a glimpse of the rustic wooden interior as we cruise slowly by.

"It's not fancy. Actually, it's a dive, but there's no alternative. If you want a drink, the Claw is the place to go."

Scott gives a wry laugh and seems genuinely embarrassed, like it's his fault his town doesn't have much to offer by way

of social life. I can't help but smile as we reach the end of the road. Sutton looks quite sweet. At least I won't get lost.

"I assume you're staying at Maisy's. It's getting late, so I'll drop you there and make sure you're sorted for tonight. King won't look at your truck until morning."

That makes sense. I should get to the guest house before the owner turns in for the night or assumes I'm not coming. Turning the corner at the end of the main street, though we've left The Devil's Claw behind, my attention lingers there. It feels wrong to miss out on the opportunity to get another glimpse of King, and I know it won't be long before my curiosity gets the better of me.

We pull up outside a two-story, shiplap house, painted pale yellow, but there's no sign identifying it as Maisy's. The large driveway and the well-kept gardens are the only clues that set this place apart from the other houses we've driven by.

As if sensing that my thoughts are lingering on the bar back in town, Scott turns to face me with a put-upon look on his face. With an outstretched hand, he holds a business card between two fingers.

"If you want to try out the Claw, and you're up to date with all your shots, I'd be happy to take you."

His smile is charming, and he throws me a wink to go along with his not-so-subtle offer of a date. I blush slightly under his intense scrutiny, cringing internally when I giggle like a smitten schoolgirl. All because a handsome man is paying me some attention.

"Of course, even if you don't take me up on my offer, you can call me if you need anything at all."

He's grinning, but it could be just a friendly offer, a bit of harmless flirting to entertain himself on a boring night. In a small town like Sutton, Scott is probably the Welcome Wagon and the most eligible bachelor - all in one. I'm sure he has women fighting over him left, right, and centre. Hell, he could be married for all I know.

Nodding, I take the card. There's no harm in having his number. His blue eyes lock onto mine, and something heated passes between us that's decidedly more than just friendly.

"Thanks for the ride," I blurt, suddenly eager to escape into the fresh air. Scott quirks an eyebrow and gives me a cheeky grin.

"I'll gladly give you a ride, anytime."

Wishing the ground would open and swallow me whole, I give him an awkward mock salute and practically launch myself out the car door. The front door to Maisey's opens, and a short lady with perfectly-styled, steely grey hair appears. I'm glad for the distraction.

"See you around," Scott says with a promise in his voice, pulling off and disappearing down the road before Maisey even gets to the curb. When I turn to face her with my small bag clutched to my chest, I'm blinking rapidly. I must look dazed, because she smiles knowingly and pats my arm in sympathy.

"I'm twice your age, and he still has the same effect on me," she chuckles, prying my bag from my grasp and leading me toward her giant, wrap-around porch. "Evan called and told me you've had an awful night. Let's get you inside and have a cup of tea."

"Evan?" I'm still slightly dumbfounded at being asked out by such a ridiculously gorgeous man.

"Evan King."

I look at her, puzzled.

King.

That grumpy, growly man was considerate enough to call ahead to let her know I was delayed. Even if he instantly despised me, he obviously has a soft spot for Maisey, and some manners.

He just chose not to waste them on me.

CHAPTER 3

EVAN



Stomping my boots on the grey concrete floor, I rid them of any loose dirt before I get behind the wheel of her truck. Shoving her seat back to make room for my legs, I shake my head at the crumpled-up map thrown on the passenger seat.

Folding it neatly and opening the glove box, I curse as an avalanche of hastily-stowed treats falls onto the assorted debris littering the floor.

For fuck's sake, does she live in this thing?

Gathering the empty bottles and coffee cups shoved into the car door, I empty the rubbish into a plastic bag. Tossing it across the garage in the general direction of the bin, I growl in frustration.

Why am I even bothering?

Just fix the car and dump it at Maisy's with an invoice. Simple. I don't need to go out of my way for the dark-haired beauty.

I try to tell myself I'm just doing a good deed, something I'd do for anyone. Unfortunately, that's where my logic falls apart. I do favours for very few people.

Grabbing the charging cable plugged into the console, I make the fatal error of taking in a lungful of the delicious scent lingering in the interior. Fuck, she smells good. My body reacts instantly, like someone lit a fire under my libido. I

thump the steering wheel, not wanting to feel the urge to seek her out, which has already taken root in my brain.

Just to torture myself, I breathe it in once again, cursing and shoving open the door to climb out. Her scent on my tongue is like summer flowers and heartache, a combination I can't afford to get anywhere near.

Shaking my head to clear the fog of lust, I carry her things across the dark garage, not bothering to turn on the lights. It's a quick drive to Maisy's, and it's still early enough that she won't have turned-in. Knowing I'm weak for finding an excuse to see this woman again, I ignore the self-loathing and hit the road.

As I drive, I decide it's to be expected when you haven't had sex for as long as me. She's hot, there's no point denying that, and it's clearly been too long since I got laid.

That's all this is.

"Evan! Well, this is a surprise."

Maisy looks equal parts stunned and intrigued to find me on her doorstep, arms laden with bags. She looks like someone's sweet grandma, but she's no pushover. She's going to be all over my unexpected appearance, I just know it. This was a terrible idea.

"I'm trying not to be offended that the only time you come to visit is after meeting my latest guest," she comments dryly, standing aside to let me into the wide hallway. The walls are decorated with pretty floral wallpaper and white-painted furniture. It's a beautiful property, and anyone who stays here falls in love with Maisy.

Unfortunately, with three unsolved disappearances, Sutton's already meagre tourist business has all but evaporated.

"Shh," I hiss, frowning at her. "It's not like that. She left a load of crap in her truck, and I'll need to hang on to it for a few days. It's easier to bring it here than have her turn up at the shop unannounced."

Maisy nods along, one white eyebrow quirked and a teasing smirk on her lips tell me she's only humouring me. She's not buying a word of it. Not that I care—it's nobody's damn business what I do. I don't need to explain myself to anyone.

“Great. Well, can you make sure she gets these?”

I pile everything on top of a long bench by the door. Without another word, I turn to go, keen to escape Maisy's sharp eyes and curious stares. I'm already halfway down the steps, my strides long, eager to get away from this conversation.

“I'll tell Holly you stopped by... just as soon as she gets back.”

My steps falter, and I swear I hear her chuckle, though she's schooled her features by the time I turn reluctantly to face her again.

“Where did she go?”

Maisy only mentioned it because I won't like the answer, but I'm clearly a glutton for punishment. Bracing myself, I wait for Maisy to tell me she's with Scott. God, I hate that fucker. Only *he* would go swooping in, pouncing on her before she's even set foot in town.

“The Claw. I wouldn't have let her go, except I thought you'd be back there by now. Not to worry; I'm sure Ben will take good care of her.”

Maisy winks and my stomach falls. Ben. Scott might be quick to make a move, but Ben is a whole other level.

“Fuck.”

I jump the last three steps and take off at a jog across Maisy's manicured lawn, wincing as her tinkling laughter reaches me. It's nice to know I amuse her. Let's see how funny it is when I don't cut her grass next weekend.

A woman like that should be nowhere near my bar. Her dark hair was shiny, her nails manicured, and every piece of hiking gear she obviously bought a week ago was high-end.

When she bit her lip, holding back the urge to tell me to fuck-off, it told me everything I needed to know.

She's too good for Sutton. She shouldn't even know it exists.

I love my town. The residents are loyal and they'll take our secrets to the grave, but I wouldn't trust them to be in the same room as an attractive woman without acting like a bunch of wild animals.

With one arm, I shove the front door of The Claw wide open, anger radiating from me, and you can hear a pin drop as every person in the place turns to face me. I wave their attention away, but as they return to their conversations, their looks burn into my back as I pass. They keep a wary eye on me as I stride to the bar, slipping behind the counter and grabbing a bottle of beer to calm myself down.

Our new visitor is perched at the end of the bar, elegant hands wrapped around a cold beer as she watches me quietly. Knowing how badly I want to get closer to her, I can't even look her way. I do, however, take the time to glare at any man I see checking her out as she slowly sips from her bottle.

When I'm sure no one is bothering her, and won't while I'm here, I ignore her completely. I don't do anything to encourage more than the bare minimum contact with her. Restocking fridges and cleaning every inch of the shelves behind me is suddenly of utmost importance.

I have no idea why she's tying me in knots; I'm wound up, and I don't like it. The good news is that she's only staying at Maisey's for two nights. That'll give me time to get her truck on the road again. Her pouty lips and luscious curves will be out of town and out of my mind in no time. I comfort myself with that thought as I tend to the mindless chores I would normally save for Kali to do during the day.

When I straighten and finally give in to the urge to look her way, she's still staring straight at me, all doe eyes, glowing skin, and plump pink lips.

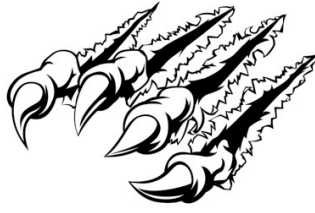
She digs her teeth into her lower lip, and I grumble, turning away. Fuck that shit. You can't tell me a woman who looks like that doesn't know exactly what effect she has on a man. She probably has men tripping over themselves just to talk to her by acting all nice and innocent.

It's not going to work on me. Behind it all, she's probably as cold-hearted as the rest of them. If she's not, well, she's better off never being touched by someone like me, no matter how much we might both enjoy it.

I might have blue balls for the next two days, but I know the darkness that's in store for both of us if I go after what I want.

CHAPTER 4

HOLLY



“Is he really going to ignore me all night?”

The man sliding onto the stool beside me shrugs, brushing away a loose curl that has fallen into his eyes. Ben has been keeping me company since I arrived, sitting down for a chat whenever the bar is quiet.

My attention drifts back to Evan King. He hasn't spoken one single word to me since he stormed in, taking up residence behind the bar and exuding a simmering rage.

Clearly feeling my eyes on him, he stares right back before stalking off to make rounds in the tiny bar. He collects glasses, slamming them onto the bar so hard I'm surprised they don't shatter, while studiously ignoring anyone's attempts to engage him in conversation.

Ben has appointed himself my official welcoming committee. Something King seems extremely angry about. He surreptitiously watches, fuming, as Ben leans forward and helps himself to a beer.

“Don't take it personally. He's not talking to anyone.”

Ben swings an arm around and gestures to the dimly lit bar; a couple of small groups and one larger table are all drinking quietly.

“He's not usually this rude, I promise. You've caught him on a particularly bad night. He's always an asshole, but normally, my brother at least greets his customers.”

Ben raises his voice for the last part, a mischievous glint in his warm brown eyes as he watches for King's reaction. He definitely heard. His entire body tenses, and his muscular back goes rigid.

King pauses his re-stocking of the already full-to-bursting fridges for a fraction of a second before going back to what he was doing. Realising he's not going to get the rise out of his brother he's looking for, Ben sighs dramatically and stands, holding out the crook of his elbow to me.

"Come on, pretty lady. Let's sit near the fire where it's a little less frosty. We can get to know each other better."

As he wiggles his eyebrows at me, I can't help but laugh at his cheekiness. I slip my arm loosely through his and let him lead me to the plush armchairs right in front of a roaring log fire burning in the hearth.

"Ben..." King grits in warning from the other side of the room, a dark shadow falling over his face. Ben turns toward him, lifting one eyebrow in a silent challenge.

"No fun at all," Ben grumbles, and a few heads around the room lift to see what's going on. The brothers stare at each other, some unspoken communication passing between them, before King sighs and Ben smirks, victorious.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" I ask, observing Ben over the top of my drink. His wavy, dark-chestnut locks curl around the collar of his shirt and the back of his ears. Shiny and soft, any girl would kill for hair like that. He looks like a model.

"It's quiet, and Grumpy over there seems to want to do everything himself." He jerks his head toward the bar, and dimples appear as his lips twist in a half smile, knowing full-well his brother heard his little dig. I giggle, and in the amber glow of the firelight, Ben grins back at me, perfect, pearly white teeth on display behind full lips.

"So, you enjoy winding him up, then?" Ben's eyes widen in mock innocence before he winks, laughing when I shake my head at his antics. Over Ben's shoulder, I can see King

watching his brother's back, his furious gaze burning a hole in the back of his head.

“He makes it so easy,” he chuckles, but then, suddenly, his face turns serious. Ben leans forward in his chair like he has a secret to tell me. Maybe he does?

When I shift position and tip my head closer to hear what he's about to say, he reaches out and trails a finger along my jaw. I'm startled by his touch, but I don't pull away. It's almost like I can't.

King's eyes flicker to mine briefly before he scowls again, leaving the bar with an empty crate and letting the door shut behind him with a loud bang. I flinch from the jarring noise, but Ben doesn't even twitch; he just continues to lavish me with his attention. My face heats from a combination of Ben's presence and the flames beside me.

“When all it takes is having some fun with a beautiful woman, who could resist?”

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I take a few seconds to realise there was some kind of question in there, that he's waiting for my response.

“There will be no *fun*,” I state, and he grins, his smile wide and easy despite my blunt response. Leaning back in the chair, long legs spread wide and pose relaxed, he exudes confidence.

“Not tonight, anyway,” he corrects, pointing a finger at me and smirking at my exasperated expression. “You can't blame a guy for shooting his shot, especially when you're only here for a couple of nights.”

“You've gone off prematurely. I'm here for the next month,” I tease, the beer loosening my tongue more than I'd planned.

“Nothing about me is ever premature, baby.”

Rolling my eyes, I make a gagging noise.

“It doesn't make any difference. You're not my type, Ben, and I'm sure there are plenty of pretty ladies around here for you to shoot your shot with.”

Who am I kidding? Ben is everyone's type, but he's also a shameless flirt and probably only trying to fluster me.

"Good to hear," a familiar voice adds. I look up to see Scott shucking off his coat and hanging it near the door. Making a beeline for us, he pulls up a chair and positions it between Ben and me. Rubbing his hands together, he makes a show of holding them out to fire before sitting. His knee brushes against mine, and I see Ben's eyes drop to the spot, missing nothing.

"That she'll be here for a month?" Ben asks. "Or that I'm not her type?"

"Both."

Scott meets my eyes and holds my gaze. My stomach jumps and butterflies erupt, making me feel giddy, just like I did outside Maisy's. Ben looks displeased as he watches our interaction intently, taking in the way Scott edges his chair a little closer to mine, angling it so he's turned away from Ben.

Movement out of the corner of my eye drags my attention away from Scott. King stands in the doorway, arms crossed, a face like thunder as he watches from a distance, not even attempting to hide the fact that he's staring. I swallow hard and force myself to look away from his dark eyes.

"Where are you staying if you're here for a month?" Ben asks. "Maisy's is nice, but it'll cost you a fortune. You're welcome to crash at ours if you need a bed..."

"No, she's fucking not." King appears at my shoulder and slams another drink down in front of me. It hits the table so hard, beer sloshes onto the table, making a puddle on the dark wood. Ben shakes his head in disbelief at King's behaviour before picking up a coaster, using it to absorb the spilled beer, and then sliding a dry one underneath the bottle.

I stare up at King in confusion along with the rest of the bar's patrons, who are enthralled by the exchange going on at our table. When it's clear he's not going to apologise, I turn back to Scott and Ben, choosing to ignore his comment.

“Thank you, Ben, but I’m staying at the Ranger’s cabin. I booked Maisy’s for two days so I could clean up and make sure the cabin is liveable before I move in.”

If the bar was quiet before, it’s deathly silent now. The tension is palpable as every set of eyes lands on me, staring at me in horror and something else. Fear?

“The fuck you are,” King growls, his deep voice gravelly with rage. “Nobody but the Ranger is allowed to stay there. And in case you missed the news, Holly, he isn’t around anymore to give you permission.”

King bends over, his massive body forcing me back against the cushions, boxing me in with his thick arms. Ben places a hand on his shoulder and tugs gently, trying to get him to pull back and give me some space, but King has no intention of getting his face out of mine until he’s good and ready.

“I contacted Shirley in the Ranger’s office, and they said I could stay there while I go through his stuff. It needs to be cleared out before the new ranger arrives in a few weeks,” I huff indignantly.

I thought King’s eyes were brown before, but they’re not. They’re a dark, smoky grey, like a brewing storm.

“You’re not fucking touching his stuff. Nobody is!” King snarls in my face, grabbing my wrist with one big hand and yanking me halfway out of the chair. He holds me in midair, little more than an inch between us. “What gives you the right to come snooping around here? What are you? A fucking reporter?”

Fuck, this guy is terrifying. His eyes are wild, and his lips pull back in an aggressive sneer. My heart pounds as his heady, masculine scent invades my senses. I should be furious that I’m being manhandled, but I’m not.

Something about his raw strength has my body coming alive. My tongue darts out to wet my lips, as if that’s the way my neglected body thinks this interaction is headed.

This close, I can see the thick, dark stubble on his chiselled jaw, a small scar on his chin, and the fan of black eyelashes that soften his rugged features.

“I’m his daughter,” I whisper, and King drops me instantly, sending me crashing back into my seat. I fall onto the cushions as he steps back, staring at me in shock. My hand rubs the red mark on my wrist where he held me, and I see him flinch. His eyes follow the movement to the imprints left behind by his fingers.

“I... fuck, sorry.” He drags a hand back over his head and looks at his brother for help, but Ben just shrugs.

“John doesn’t have a daughter,” King mumbles, but he looks unsure as he inspects me, looking for the family resemblance.

“It was news to me too,” I reply dryly. “He didn’t know I existed. I only just found out about him myself.”

King’s jaw sets in a hard line as he takes one last, suspicious glance at me before storming out. I turn in my chair and find every set of eyes in the bar watching me with unease. Not feeling quite as welcome anymore, I shiver as, despite the fire burning in front of me, a chill runs down my back.

“I think it’s time to call it a night,” Scott says diplomatically as he stands, his concerned expression leaving no room for argument.

“She’s welcome to stay. Any family of John’s, is family of ours,” Ben says before reaching out to squeeze my hand. “Holly, I mean that. Evan’s just... processing.”

“You can tell him the next time he pulls a stunt like that, he’ll be processing behind bars. Again.” Scott shoves his chair out of the way, and it screeches along the wooden floor.

“I’m sorry, Holly. He shouldn’t have done that.” Ben grimaces as he glances at my arm again. “He’ll apologise himself when he’s calmed down.”

It looks worse than it is. There won’t even be a bruise once the red dies down, but I still feel rattled by his temper and my reaction to the fire in his eyes.

“I’m fine. It’s fine.” I stand and force a smile. “It’s been an eventful day and I’m beat. I’ll see you around.”

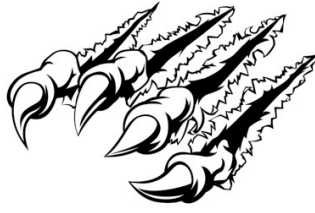
Suddenly, I just want to get out of here. Ben nods reluctantly and gets to his feet too, watching as Scott walks me through the bar. He stays close to my side, like a bodyguard shielding me from the other patrons. I nod at a few of the friendlier faces as we make our way past, but few return my greeting. Outside, I’m relieved to feel the frosty evening air, away from suspicious eyes.

“So that was the Devil’s Claw,” Scott mutters, “and that was Evan King. I did warn you,” he looks at me like a disappointed parent and shakes his head. His tousled, sandy hair falls in front of his blue eyes as he sighs and offers me a supportive smile.

“I hope you’re ready to be famous, because you’re going to be the talk of the town by morning.”

CHAPTER 5

HOLLY



“John’s daughter. I can see it now that I know,” Maisy says kindly with a big smile. She pulls out a chair for me to sit while she finishes making breakfast. This place isn’t like a guest house at all. It feels like she adopted me as part of her family for as long as I’m staying.

“News travels fast here,” I watch Maisy fry bacon and eggs with ease while simultaneously making pancakes. It’s a sight to behold. My mouth waters at the delicious smells while my head pounds viciously. Drinking on an empty stomach is never a good idea.

“It does. I also heard Scott walked you home.” She winks at me, laughing when my jaw falls open in disbelief.

“Jeez. Yes, he did. Right to your door, where he bid me a polite farewell.”

That’s not exactly true. He lingered for a second or two, his breath mingling with mine in the frosty air as we stood too close on the porch. Long enough that I thought maybe he was going to ask me out. Kiss me. Especially after his comment in the bar. My heart skipped a beat while I waited to see what he’d do. I still can’t decide whether I was excited or scared, whether I would have said yes or no.

Not that it mattered. Scott was the perfect gentleman. Thoughts of King still lingered, but in comparison to Scott, he’s a loose cannon.

“Evan was less than thrilled when he heard I’d be staying at the Ranger’s cabin while I clear it out. Is he always such an

ass?” Maisy looks at me over her shoulder, laughing at my brutal assessment.

“Yes, he is; but, he’s a good one deep down. Deep, *deep* down.” Her face turns serious as she goes back to turning the bacon. “John was like a father to both him and Ben, I suppose, but Ben has more people to turn to, other friends, where Evan really only had John. He’s taken his disappearance hard. It’s not an excuse to be rude to you, John’s actual family, but still...”

The loud rumble of a diesel engine pulling into the driveway catches Maisy’s attention, and she leans forward to see who arrived.

“Speak of the Devil and he shall appear.” Maisy washes her hands quickly before handing me her spatula. “Keep an eye on those for me.”

I try to protest, to warn her that she doesn’t want to entrust the safety of her guests’ breakfasts to me, but she’s already out the door, intercepting Evan before he even reaches the bottom step.

Peering out the window, my heart skips a beat the second I see him. A worn and dirty cap hides his dark hair, his thick thighs clad in dark, heavy-duty work trousers, torn on one knee. A quilted black jacket adds to his immense bulk. When he looks up and sees Maisy heading him off at the pass, he sighs heavily. Looking bone weary, he rests one big, black boot on her bottom step and peers up from under the brim of his hat.

“Not now, Maisy. Please. I’ve already had it both barrels from Ben.”

That voice, low and husky, has my spine straightening and my insides purring. He hasn’t shaved, and I bet his beard is scratchy and rough to the touch. My fingers practically itch to find out.

“John would be furious,” she hisses.

Gone is the flowers and sunshine version of Maisy from a few minutes ago, and in her place is stern, school teacher

Maisy. Her index finger points right at him as she continues.

“Putting your hands on a woman, John’s kin? He taught you better than that. And with Scott right there, for God’s sake...”

His head snaps up at that, and he looks genuinely regretful as his gaze drifts to the kitchen window from which I’m spying.

Shit.

I duck my head out of sight, but I hear his next words. Somehow, I know he means them for me.

“She’s not my family,” he’s firm but calm, “but you’re right. I was out of line.”

“Fine. Take off those dirty boots and come in for breakfast. You can tell her yourself.”

Maisy’s offer has my pulse racing and my hands turning clammy. Still in loose tracksuit bottoms with my hair in a messy bun, this is not the way I want this walking thirst trap of a man to see me, but then I chastise myself for worrying. He was awful to me last night. Why do I care what he thinks?

“Can’t. Have to keep on moving. Just tell her I’ll be done with her truck this evening and I’ll drop it back here at 5.”

That’s it? He’s not even going to apologise to my face? All I get is some half-baked offering he knows I heard through an open window? Maisy huffs and folds her arms over her pink spotted apron, giving him a disapproving look.

“Don’t give me that, Maisy. I’m busy. If she wants her damn truck working today so she can get up to the cabin and check it out, I don’t have time to stop.”

“You are impossible, Evan King. Absolutely impossible.” He doesn’t wait for her to continue, turning to walk away instead. “Wait!” she calls after him.

When he stops walking, back still turned to the house, Maisy stomps inside, grumbling and grouching. She fills a Tupperware with pancakes and bacon, grabbing some cutlery

rolled in a napkin from one of the tables. I sneak a look out the window again, only to lock eyes with Evan.

Instead of looking as surly as he did earlier, he looks almost sad now. He'd probably love to come in and have breakfast with Maisy. The reason he won't, is me. I just can't tell if it's because he can't stand me, or if he thinks I won't want to see him after his behaviour last night.

He pats Maisy's arm, giving her an appreciative half-smile, and dips his head in thanks when she thrusts the food at him. He pushes away from the steps and strides back down the driveway.

"That man," is all Maisy says with a shake of her head, rubbing her hands together to get the heat back into them. Her tone is one of exasperation, but I hear the undercurrent of affection.

"You like him," I venture, "but Scott kind of suggested he was trouble."

I broach the subject carefully, waiting for her reaction as I take a sip from my hot mug of tea. Maisy glances at me from the corner of her eye and sighs before nudging me away from the oven with her hip and taking up position, once more, at the helm.

"I'm sure he did. Evan King is as surly as they come. For a bar owner, the man has virtually no social skills, but if I need anything, he's the first person I call. Scott isn't exactly impartial when it comes to Evan, so I'd take what he says with a pinch of salt."

She flips the pancakes with ease and moves to the fridge, pulling out a bowl of chopped fruit and berries.

"But he implied King's dangerous."

Observing me shrewdly, Maisy scoffs, lifting the bacon and pancakes onto plates. Handing them to me, she nods at the syrup on the counter, and I move to add some to each serving.

"Dangerous to Scott's ego, maybe. I can promise you, Evan had nothing to do with those girls going missing, if that's what you're really asking. If there was even a shred of

evidence that he was connected, Scott would have nailed him. He's just itching for the chance."

"Then why would he allude to it..."

"They're two alpha males, Holly. Everything is a competition, especially when it comes to women..."

"Ha!" I can't help the laugh that escapes me at the notion that they're competing over me. "Believe me, Evan is not interested in me."

Maisy shrugs. "But Scott *thinks* he is. Always has, and a pretty thing like you just appearing in town... well... they can't help themselves."

I can't even imagine Evan flirting, but maybe that's just because he's been so cold in my presence.

"They're both single?" I try to pretend I don't care either way, but she perks up instantly.

"Mm-hmm," Maisy confirms with mischief in her eyes before checking out my left hand for jewellery. "Interested?"

A couple entering the kitchen interrupts our conversation, beaming from ear to ear with that newly loved-up glow. They're wrapped around each other and giggling like teenagers.

"Not today," I mutter, and she laughs, leaving me to eat my food as she seats the other guests.

Evan and Scott have a history of arguing over women, but that doesn't seem to be the case this time around. I shouldn't be upset that Evan doesn't deem me worthy of fighting for, but dammit, I am.

CHAPTER 6

SCOTT



King glares at me as he pulls out of the guesthouse driveway and turns slowly down the street. I've given up attempting to conceal my surveillance of him. King is no ordinary man, and no matter how far away I am or how well I hide, he always seems to sense when I'm following him.

He complains every now and again about harassment and unfair treatment, but he knows exactly why I do it. I know his secrets, and with as much on the line as I have in this town, I have no peace of mind unless I know exactly where he is and what he's up to.

Although, that's easier said than done.

This is a small town by population, with an even smaller law enforcement presence, but we cover a massive geographical area with difficult terrain. Terrain that Evan is much more comfortable with than me, unfortunately.

Holly would run screaming if she knew exactly who, or what, she was getting involved with. I can't tell her, being bound by my role within this community to maintain his privacy, but I'll sure as hell be watching him.

As he rolls past me, he lowers his window and leans out, looking side to side to see who else might be around and listening.

"This is fucking bullshit, Scott. Nothing better to do than ruin my morning?" His enormous bulk seems to grow bigger before my eyes as his temper rises. He dips his head, keeping the anger in his eyes hidden from me. I don't rise to the bait.

“Morning, King. You’re up and about early today,” I cheerfully lift a travel mug of my sister’s scalding hot coffee to my lips, purposely winding him up as much as I can. Running the bar means Evan is rarely on the move at this hour, but something told me he wouldn’t be able to resist seeking *her* out to apologise. I know this guy better than he knows himself.

“What do you want?” Straight to the point, as always, King waits.

“I’m not here to tell you to stay away from Holly if that’s what you’re thinking.” He lifts his head to look me in the eye, scepticism clear on his face. “After your little display last night, I don’t think I need to.”

He scowls, and the muscles work in his jaw. I know he’s itching to tell me to get lost, but he can’t.

“Still, you can’t go around putting your hands on women. Holly was clear that she didn’t want to make anything of what you did and that’s the only reason I’m not taking it further.”

There’s a cloud of suspicion hanging over him, ever since the second woman went missing. Grabbing Holly in a public place was a dumb move. She has him rattled, and I’m here for it.

“Don’t fucking threaten me, Scott.”

Cold slate grey eyes narrow at me, and I glare right back. Turning on my ignition, I decide there’s no point trying to have this conversation with him.

“It’s not a threat, King. I’m just stating the fucking obvious.”

Every time I try to help him help himself, he throws his walls up. There’s no talking to the man, which suits me just fine. One day, he’ll do something stupid in the heat of the moment, and I’ll be there to make sure he pays for it.

He guns his truck and takes off down the road. Sometimes, I wish he wasn’t so easy to mess with, because when I put him behind bars, I’m going to miss how much fun it is to piss him off.

CHAPTER 7

EVAN



Scott's right, and that's why it's so fucking annoying.

The last thing I need to do right now is give him ammunition. Every time I turn around, every time I take a fucking piss, it feels like he's there, watching. He's just waiting for me to do something, anything, he can use to justify locking me up, or at the very least, ruin my reputation. Unpaid parking tickets. Late payment for my liquor licence. Whatever.

I'm stupid enough to let him get under my skin. Thumping the steering wheel in frustration, I curse.

Who am I kidding? This time, it wasn't Scott who got under my skin. It was her. She already had me on the verge of losing control, just by joking around with Ben. When she mentioned John, the sense of wrongness in my gut skyrocketed. Not only was she flirting with my brother *and* Scott, she was going to throw out my dad's stuff.

Except, with a sigh, I can admit that she wasn't really flirting with them. She was being friendly, something I've never been good at. I had myself all riled up over nothing really, and even if she was, I've been nothing but rude since the second I saw her.

As I drive further and further into the mountains, putting distance between myself and the latest mess I've created calms me down. I could go back to the workshop and have Holly's truck fixed by lunchtime. Working out my frustration by going back to the garage until the wee hours of the night, I got most of the work done last night.

It's what I should do after being such a dick, but I've never been good at doing what I should.

So instead, I'm standing at the edge of the forest, letting my beast out for the first time in weeks. Since John went missing, I've spent every spare minute searching for him, looking for any trace of him. "Missing and presumed dead" is the official term Scott used the last time I attacked him over the lack of resources being put into finding John. The police couldn't divert more resources into what they considered a body retrieval after an unfortunate accident.

John knew these hills like the back of his hand. There's no way he got lost. If he had met his end through a fall or a heart attack, we'd have located his body. I'd have found him.

Which leaves foul play as the only option in my mind. With three open missing persons cases, it's hardly a stretch to imagine all four disappearances are connected. He knew who was doing it, and they decided to cover their tracks.

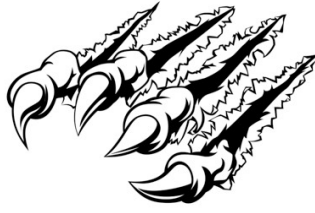
With so much attention on Sutton lately, between search parties and renewed interest in the unsolved cases, I haven't been able to get out and run. The need to protect the town's secrets is greater than my own. Still, the beast inside me lives for the hunt and the thrill of the chase.

He craves it.

If I don't satisfy the urge, I haven't got a hope in hell of keeping him away from Holly.

CHAPTER 8

HOLLY



Trailing my fingers along the wooden porch railing, I look around at the once well-cared-for but now-neglected garden.

Weeds wrap themselves around the spindles of the porch and choke the plants in the overgrown flower beds. It's amazing how quickly nature takes over when it's left to its own devices. A shed sits to one side, door closed, an older model flatbed truck blocks the way inside.

I can't take my eyes off it. I imagine the man from the pictures I've seen going about his day-to-day business, climbing in, and heading off to work. It's cruel that he won't get to drive it again, that I'll never get to see the real thing.

When I halt, feet rooted to the spot, King extends a hand, expression unreadable. For a second, my heart flutters as I think he wants to take mine. He places his other hand on the door handle, rattling it to show me it's locked before thrusting his hand in my direction once more.

Mentally, I kick myself. *He wants the keys, not to hold your hand, dumbass.*

Arriving at Maisy's at five on the dot, King told me he'd bring me to John's cabin on the way to collect my truck so I would know how to get here.

After seeing how unkempt this place was, he offered to make sure the power was still working and that everything was okay inside. Those were the only words he spoke the entire trip.

Yet somehow, in the silence, I understood this was his version of an apology. He's a man of action, not words. That's all I'd be getting, and to be honest, I'm glad; if he told me he was sorry, I wouldn't believe him. He might regret grabbing me, but he still doesn't want me around, and I'd prefer him to say nothing rather than lie.

Dropping the keys into his palm, I step back. Arms crossed over my chest, I move further away from the door. King watches me curiously, perhaps sensing how weird this is for me. As he pushes the door open, he stands to one side, his confident demeanour faltering for a second, a flash of pain crossing his face. It's not easy for him to be here, either. I step inside, aware of his massive presence as I brush past and take a steadying breath.

My father's home.

It's small and cosy. A worn, tan leather couch is shoved up against one wall, and beside it sits a large wooden desk, almost buried under books and folded maps. A reading lamp and a mug full of pens are tucked into one corner, a stack of notebooks sit to one side. It's cluttered and well-used, and I feel the urge to sit in the torn office chair, just as he would have, and try to get some sense of who this man was.

I wander through the room, letting my fingers drift along the sideboard, feeling completely overwhelmed. There's a photo of John, my father, with his arms around Evan and Ben as teenagers. I pick it up, turning it to show Evan, then carefully placing it back in exactly the same spot. Evan's jaw clenches, and he swallows hard.

"I don't know anything about him," I admit, continuing to wander around the living space, looking at the dozens of pictures and photos lining the shelves. I take in the books, the knickknacks and furnishings, all his belongings. Nothing valuable, but priceless just the same.

I feel like I'm intruding. It's like reading someone's diary.

"How did you find out he was your dad?" Evan is still loitering just inside the door, as though afraid to come in. His

expression is tense, and he doesn't smile when I hold up another picture of him and John together, fishing.

"My mom. She saw the story on the news, about him disappearing, and completely fell apart. Said he was the love of her life."

Evan snorts in disbelief, and I narrow my eyes at him.

"But she kept his kid from him? That doesn't sound like love to me."

I pause, letting the flash of defensiveness for my mom pass before I respond. What does he know?

"I asked her why she didn't tell him. Or me."

He meets my gaze, those dark eyes intense. He's trying to look like he's not interested, but this man was a father figure to him. Keeping a secret this big was not something I thought my mother would do, and I don't blame King for feeling betrayed on John's behalf. He can join the queue. I'm not too happy about it myself.

"And?" There's impatience in his voice, alongside a harsh edge. "He would have wanted to be involved, even if they weren't together."

His fists are clenched so hard, his knuckles are turning white, and his jaw is tight. I glance at the photos again. Where were King's own parents, if John was a father figure to him?

"She said he had two boys to look after, that they needed him more. He'd have left the mountains for her, but she couldn't let him do that to them."

King blinks, stunned and slowly drifts into the room. He looks around, all his confidence and bluster gone. His shoulders drop, and he perches on the arm of the sofa, an elbow resting on his knee. He shakes his head sadly. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was choking up.

I knew from his reaction in the bar that he and Ben must have been the two boys. My mom was sick, really sick, and she was devastated by the news of his disappearance.

Before she passed away, she managed to get that much out, but it was painful for her to talk about it. I felt bad pushing too hard when she was already so weak. She was adamant that John needed to stay here, that he had a duty to take care of these kids, but that she *had* to leave Sutton. There was no point in telling him about me and making it harder than it already was.

I'm not sure I agree, but I can accept she did what she thought was right.

But what about me?

I loved my mother, and the thought that there was this wonderful man who would have wanted to know me is heartbreaking. Every time someone asked me about my dad, instead of making up a story, I could have told them his name was John. I could have visited him. He could have visited me. She stole that from us. She had her reasons, but it still hurts.

The ache has only grown since stepping inside this cabin and seeing pieces of his life, including King and Ben.

There's a large map pinned to the wall, and I drift toward it, trying to make sense of the pins and topography. King's expression is softer when he looks at me this time, and he glances around the tiny cabin once more.

"What are you going to do now?" He tilts his head and gestures to the space I'm going to call home for the rest of my stay.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know."

When I tried to find out more about what happened, the rangers invited me to come up and go through his stuff before they cleaned the cabin out for his replacement. John had no other relatives. I thought the boys my mom mentioned were his from a previous relationship, that I had half-brothers here, but clearly, they weren't his by blood.

"If you need a hand cleaning this place up... Ben and I could help." King clears his throat, and my heart goes out to him. His sadness is palpable as he stands and shifts awkwardly on his feet. The brusqueness in his tone is back to hide his

discomfort, but I can see the sorrow in his eyes. “If there’s anything you don’t want, let me know before you toss it.”

“Of course. Have you gone through it all already?”

King shakes his head and pushes his hands deep into his pockets, gaze lowered to the hardwood floor.

“Just trying to work out where he went. It didn’t occur to us that he wouldn’t be coming back.”

There must be things here with sentimental value to him that he’s too stubborn to ask for. I make a mental note to not remove anything without giving him and Ben first dibs.

“Come on. You don’t have to babysit me while I clean. Let’s go get my truck.”

I walk a couple of steps away from the map before I stop and retrace my steps.

Three red pins.

“Are these...?”

“The missing girls? Yes.” King comes to stand behind me and scans the board, pointing to the furthest two pins. “They never found them. One was out hiking; the other was last seen walking this road. John used to go out whenever he could to keep searching. The whole town did, probably still should, but it’s been tough.”

He reaches over my shoulder and traces the pencil lines drawn lightly onto the map with his finger.

“What about the third girl?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me. King turns and fixes me with a hard glare that makes my insides drop. The change in temperament is jarring, and Scott’s hints about King’s involvement fill my head. Adrenaline floods my veins, and I feel my muscles twitch in anticipation. The sheriff warned me about him, and yet, here I am, in a tiny cabin on my own with him, asking too many questions.

“Amanda isn’t missing. She just doesn’t want to be found.”

Turning to the side, I look at him over my shoulder as his mouth twists in what looks like a mixture of anger and regret. I don't know why I can't keep my mouth shut, but the words are out before I can stop them.

“How can you be so sure?”

My voice is a whisper, but he hears it and leans forward, his words spoken low and deadly, so close, I feel his breath on my skin. The hair stands up on my neck, and I shiver, my body aware of the potential danger at my back.

“Because Amanda was my girlfriend. She left Sutton to get away from me.”

CHAPTER 9

EVAN



Holly's back goes rigid as I blurt out the very thing I know I shouldn't tell her, although it's pointless trying to keep something hidden in a town as small as Sutton. I'm amazed she's been here twenty-four hours and someone hasn't told her the whole torrid tale already. No doubt Scott has planted a seed of mistrust, but he's too high and mighty to stoop to outright gossiping.

While she contemplates how to respond to that bombshell, I can't help but admire the curve of her slim neck and the scent of her wavy, chestnut brown hair. She has it pulled up in a high ponytail, and I'm tempted to grip the long length and wrap it around my fist.

This beautiful woman would be completely at my mercy, all alone in this isolated cabin. Holly has no idea who she's dealing with.

John knew, and it sounds like her mom did, too.

Which is probably why she left town and never came back. Who'd want to raise a child side-by-side with someone like me? Like us. We were practically feral when John took us under his wing.

"Why? Did you hurt her?"

Holly's voice is quiet but strong. I begrudgingly admire her for staying calm and not freaking out. I'm purposely trying to scare her, to get her heart racing and that adrenaline firing throughout her body. She clearly has no sense of self-preservation, letting a man twice her size, who she barely

knows, into her house. We're in the middle of nowhere. There's a killer on the loose. She has no transport, and I have her keys.

I could do whatever I want, and there are a lot of things I'd like to do to her.

"I didn't, not physically, but she sure as hell never wants to see me again."

I wait for her to ask me more about my cryptic answer, but she doesn't. Maybe outside of Sutton, people aren't so nosy all the time. Or maybe it's just Holly. A little tension leaves her shoulders, and she gathers enough wit to look over her shoulder at me again.

"It seems a bit extreme to disappear completely because of a fight."

I can't help the bitter smirk that creeps across my lips. If she knew what made Amanda leave, she wouldn't think it was an overreaction at all. It was no ordinary argument.

"She knew I'd try to find her."

Shrugging, I hold her gaze and let her try to figure me out.

"And did you?"

When I nod, she turns back to the map, and her gaze traces the pencil lines once more. She's a clever girl, so I wait, knowing what's coming next, even though it pisses me off every time someone asks.

"What about the others? Did you know them?"

Just like her father, she can't help asking questions. An inquiring mind is an attractive thing, but in a town with unsolved missing person cases, it's dangerous, too. Curiosity killed the cat and all that.

"They came to the bar, but everyone who wanders into town does. So, to answer your question, no, I didn't really *know* them."

Content with my answers, she nods, the scent of some exotic fruit wafting toward me from her freshly-washed hair.

Leaning in just an inch or two, I suck in a deep lungful of her scent, imprinting it in my mind as I brush my finger across the ends.

Her eyelids flutter closed as she senses I've moved closer. I see her breathing stutter as the heat of me this close to her back sends her senses into overdrive. Her fight-or-flight mechanism is telling her to run. It recognises the apex predator within me, even if Holly's human mind only believes what it sees.

“Should I be afraid of you, King?”

She already knows the answer to that. Her intuition has picked up on the energy we ignore as adults. It's there to keep us from harm, if we actually listen to it.

This woman shouldn't feel comfortable around me, or anywhere in Sutton. The best thing would be for her to pack up John's belongings quickly and get out of town. Female visitors who linger here have a tendency to disappear.

Holly turns slowly and gazes up at me. Our bodies are far too close, and an unnerving urge to touch her creeps down my arms into my hands. I clench my fists to stop my fingers from reaching out for her silky skin.

“Absolutely.”

My voice is barely more than a growl as I lean in and whisper close to her ear. Instead of moving away as any sensible person would, her eyes drop to my lips, and I hear her pulse quicken. She's excited, I can feel it. She's loving the thrill, getting off on the sense of danger. Just like me.

This needs to stop right now.

Stepping back, I force some distance between us and fold my arms.

“Unless you have more questions, let's get your truck so you can poke through all his crap on your own time.”

Her plump lips squeeze together as irritation replaces lust on those pretty features. There we go. That's much better. The moment is well and truly over.

“Fine. I won’t keep you any longer.”

Her pride is wounded. With her head held high, she marches past me and stomps down the steps. Locking the front door behind me, I turn to see she’s already climbing into the passenger side of my truck, giving me a fantastic view of her tight ass in her leggings. I wince as she slams the door with a loud bang. *Damn it.*

Blissful silence reigns as I drive the already-darkening roads up to my house and the large workshop out back. Holly’s old classic is parked off to the side, the freshly-washed paint gleaming under the security lights blinking on in the dusk. It’s a beauty, but it’s a bit long in the tooth to be doing heavy mileage.

“You washed it.”

The surprised gratitude in her tone sets my teeth on edge. I feel her eyes on the side of my face, and it makes me anxious. This woman sees right through me, and I hate it. When she was talking about John earlier, it was like she could see my pain clear as day, no matter how I tried to hide it. Refusing to look at her, I stare straight out the window at the dark trees surrounding us. She doesn’t belong here.

“Someone had to.”

That does it. At my petty barb, she shoves open the door and slides out, huffing as she once again slams the door as hard as she can. When I follow her, it’s her turn to avoid eye contact, even though I can practically see the steam coming out of her ears. It must be killing her not to tell me to go fuck myself.

“How much do I owe you?”

Her natural fiery instinct wars with those polite manners she’s been taught. It’s very tempting to poke at her again; I’d love to witness that fire when it erupts, even if I’m on the receiving end. I’d bet it’s magnificent.

“I haven’t worked it out yet. I’ll drop the invoice to you soon.”

I know exactly how much her bill is, but as much as I just convinced myself I want her out of my hair, this gives me an excuse to see her again. Holly grits her teeth, clearly not jumping for joy at the thought. Maybe that's why I want to.

“Fine.”

When she thrusts her hand out in my direction for her keys, I dangle them between my index finger and thumb instead. She curses when I don't immediately turn them over to her and snatches them away from me. Her patience is completely gone as she stomps over to the vehicle, immediately putting her keys in the ignition, and smiling in relief when her means of escape rumbles to life.

It's better this way, I remind myself. She'll soon realise John didn't own anything valuable. He lived for the job, for me and for Ben, and for this community. There's nothing for her here.

I watch and wait, arms folded across my chest, saying nothing. Holly raises her eyebrows at me as if to say, *what's your problem?* When I wave an arm toward the road, showing we're done here, she shakes her head in disbelief. I doubt many men show Holly the way out.

Staring at me as though I'm the devil incarnate, she slowly drives off my property and down the road. As she passes, I'm disappointed when she doesn't give me the finger. I deserve it.

As soon as she works out John's definitely not coming back, she'll be gone. There's no point in getting attached.

CHAPTER 10

HOLLY



I'm still fuming by the time I get back to Maisy's and pack up my things. She's not around when I leave, so I write a little thank you note with a promise to visit again soon. I didn't know what condition the cabin would be in, but it's perfectly liveable, if a little dusty so I may as well move in straight away.

Parking outside the general store on the main street, I spy a cute little bakery a few doors down. As soon as I finish stocking up on essentials and cleaning supplies, I head inside. My mouth waters as the smell of freshly baked bread, hot coffee, and pastries engulfs me.

"Oh, wow."

Leaning over the glass cabinets, I eye the delicious treats and the fancy coffee machine taking up the entire back wall.

"Hungry?"

A tall, willowy woman emerges from the back room, carrying a basket of steamy rolls. She has her strawberry blonde curls dragged back into a high ponytail, and a smattering of pale freckles dust her nose and cheeks.

"Always."

She smiles and slips the basket into the display, wiping her flour-covered hands on her navy apron. *Serena* is embroidered with happy-yellow thread in the top corner.

"Coffee?"

When she waves a takeaway cup at me, I nod enthusiastically. After that interaction with King, I could do with something stiffer, but it's a bit early. I shouldn't let him get to me. He was obviously trying to be nice to me because of who I am—John's daughter—and out of guilt for hurting me last night, but then slipped back into his true persona. Asshole through and through.

“Another always.”

Laughing, she turns and presses some buttons, and the machine whizzes and whirrs, coming to life.

“You must be Holly,” she says over her shoulder as she works, and I still. I'm wondering how she knows who I am before I remember what small-town life is like. “Scott is my brother. He mentioned you. There aren't too many stunning brunettes I've never met running around town.”

The resemblance is clear now—same baby blue eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips. She's leaner, though, whereas Scott is solidly built.

“This is your place?”

Changing the subject, I take the coffee she hands me and wrap my hands around it. This high in the mountains, it's colder than I'm used to. Hopefully, I'll be able to keep the cabin warm and won't freeze my ass off for the next few weeks.

“Yes. I'm a baker by morning, butcher by afternoon.”

She tips her head, and I see a door to her left that leads to the next unit.

“Wow. Weird combination!”

Shrugging, she goes back to refilling the wicker baskets with fresh bread.

“There's not enough trade in Sutton for someone to do either full-time. The butcher shop was my dad's...”

Ahh. She's carrying on the family business but prefers baking, so she's found a way to do both *and* pay the bills.

“Scott joined the force, so you’re it.”

As I point out the bread I want, she bites her bottom lip. She wants to say something but isn’t sure she should. You have to love small towns.

“You can tell me to butt out if you want, but I heard you never met John. King and Ben were closer to him than anyone, but I still could tell you some good stories about him, if you ever want to hear them.”

Compared to how King practically ran me off his property earlier, chatting to Serena seems like a much nicer offer, especially if it’s over this coffee. It’s amazing.

“Thank you. I’d really appreciate that.”

Waving away my thanks and my money, she hands me a brown bag full to the brim.

“A welcome gift. You want to pay me back? You keep me company some quiet morning, and we’ll chat about John.”

That’s hardly a chore. I want to hear about him from as many people as possible. I’m touched by the thoughtful gesture. After the way everyone was looking at me last night, I wasn’t sure anyone would be eager to speak to me.

“Deal. I don’t think King’s up for telling me his childhood memories.”

Serena snorts and looks at me with a rueful smile on her face.

“He used to be bearable, just barely, before Amanda. Since then, he’s not been himself anymore. Just be careful.”

I have no intention of wasting trying to be friends with him. No matter how alluring I find him, he’s made it clear he has no time for me.

“Your brother said something similar, that he’s dangerous.”

“Much as it pains me to admit it, my brother is probably right.” Serena gives me an exaggerated eye roll, and I can’t help but chuckle. I think I’m going to like Serena. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

Just as I'm about to walk off, I pause and turn back to face her.

"Can I ask you something?"

Keeping my lips pressed to the plastic coffee lid, I lift my eyes to meet hers. She's wary; she knows what I'm going to ask.

"The girls?"

Nodding slowly, I grimace. I don't like to be nosy, but it *is* creepy moving to a small town with something so dark hanging over it. One girl going missing, in particular one who just split from her boyfriend, might be nothing. Even two could be an unfortunate coincidence. Not three. Scott clearly thinks there's foul play involved in at least one case, which means there could be more.

"Yes. I don't know much about what happened, but it's freaking me out a little," I admit. "I'm going to be staying on my own..."

Stopping and placing her palms flat on the counter, she leans her hip against it and shakes her head slowly.

"It's awful. Amanda, I'm not so sure about that. I heard she and King broke up. She was always talking about getting out of here, so maybe she just left town, maybe not."

The tone of her voice suggests she's not certain, and for some reason, my gut twists. Even though I don't like the man, my body does. A lot. The way I reacted to him earlier, when all he did was stand close to me, is making me so confused. Why am I so physically drawn to a man who is a walking red flag? I try to convince myself he couldn't be a killer, but what do I really know about him?

"What about the others?"

Serena sighs and rubs her eyes. I'd imagine this is a conversation she's had lots of times before.

"They were lovely girls. Jill was here for the summer helping her aunt. She'd been here before, so I knew her. Tina was just passing through, but she took a shine to the place and

stayed for a couple of weeks. Both just disappeared off the face of the Earth. Someone must have taken them. Nothing else makes sense.”

Were. Past tense. She’s obviously resigned to them being dead, as John was, judging by the notes I saw strewn across his desk.

A chill runs down my spine as I think of them in this shop, in this town, going about their business until someone decides they don’t get to do that anymore. I feel like I’m walking in their footsteps: coming to town, on my own, hanging around for a while. Is it too risky to be here?

“But Scott is all over it. He’ll keep a close eye on you. He’s going to get someone for it soon. I promise you that.”

Somehow, even though I don’t know him well, I can believe Scott won’t rest until the case is solved.

“You’re not worried?”

Serena’s a beautiful woman. She’s about the same age as me, as *them*. Surely, she has some concerns. Her brother can’t be everywhere at once.

“Not in the slightest, because I don’t plan on ever being alone with Evan King.”

CHAPTER 11

HOLLY



Driving back to the cabin, I'm lost in thought as Serena's words play over and over in my head. She seems pretty unconcerned for a young woman living in a town with three missing women. If she's so convinced King is responsible, how does she deal with seeing him day in and day out, going about his business as usual? Why would the town, and my father, not have turned their back on him? It doesn't make sense to me.

I keep going around in circles in my mind as I drive the steep, forested road to what will be my home for the next few weeks. As I turn the last corner, a massive truck roars past; King, stony-faced, behind the wheel and Ben in the passenger seat. Evan's eyes slide in my direction, but he doesn't acknowledge me, while Ben raises a hand in greeting.

Stuffing down a mixture of annoyance and irrational hurt, I let myself into my father's cabin and pause on the threshold, feeling awkward. I'm not sure what to do with myself. I didn't know this man, but I guess that's why I'm here. Maybe by going through his things, I'll gain some understanding of him, since it seems I'll never get the chance to experience him in person.

Feeling like I'm trespassing, I flick through a magazine sitting on the coffee table. Fishing. Not really my thing. Something draws my gaze once again to the board, to the maps and the notes stuck to it.

This feels less personal somehow. He was working on these searches along with the rest of the town. It's not about him or his private life. I settle into a comfortable armchair, dragging some papers and notebooks over to my lap, and dig in.

There are newspaper articles, missing person reports, schedules for the searches, and interviews with people in town. This looks more like a full-blown investigation on the scale the police would do, rather than just assisting in the search. John's thorough, I'll give him that.

I tell myself I'll have a little look, just to keep myself occupied while I'm alone here on my first night. Tomorrow, I'll start going through my dad's personal belongings. It seems hasty to clean out his stuff the minute I'm inside the door.

It's only when I need to squint to read the pages that I realise the cabin is cloaked in darkness. When I get up to turn on a couple of lamps, it sinks in just how wild it is around here. It's a cloudy night, and there isn't even moonlight to see by.

My reflection follows me in the glass as I walk across the room. I'm conscious that anyone outside can see in, but I can see nothing at all. Feeling exposed, but also foolish, I move through the cabin, pulling the curtains and making sure I've locked the doors. It's not that I think there's a killer sitting right outside my door, but reading the girls' stories has me on edge. It only makes sense to be careful.

I can tell John wasn't as convinced Amanda disappeared into the sunset as everyone else was. He has pages and pages documenting how he tried to track her down. Half the town heard her telling King she was leaving and not to bother following her, because he'd never find her. She never wanted to see him ever again, and she'd had enough of this hick town.

John seemed to think it was just a fight, though, that she would never have left things like that. He was convinced that once the dust had settled, Amanda would have called or come by to clear the air, even if it was just to say goodbye. He was

suspicious about how well she'd supposedly hidden her tracks, especially when it seemed to be a sudden departure.

The others were clearly abducted. Jill was leaving town as planned to return home after working with her family for the summer. She was seen that morning, but she never made it onto the bus, disappearing without a trace somewhere between her aunt's house and downtown.

Tina's pack was found at the bottom of a gorge in a remote part of the closest mountain range, but that's it. If she had an accident, there should have been a body somewhere nearby. Instead, she was gone.

Like in my dad's case, search parties scoured the area where her possessions were found, spreading wider and wider as time went on, but she was never found.

The interviews with parents and loved ones are harrowing. All three sets of parents insist that no matter what was going on in their personal lives, they were all happy, vibrant women. None of them had a history of depression or mentioned hurting themselves. All firmly believed they would never knowingly put their families through this ordeal.

I lay all three photos of the women side by side on the coffee table, and the similarities are striking—all dark-haired, beautiful, and young. My brain screams one thought loudly at me, and I can't look away.

They look like me. Or, I look like them.

So do plenty of women, I remind myself, but the thought lodges itself in my mind, and my skin pricks with unease. I'm scared even before the wind picks up and a low-hanging branch taps repeatedly against the window closest to me. I should have brought my dog.

As I get ready for bed, I re-check the windows and locks. Curling under the covers, I keep a bedside light on and try not to focus on the strange sounds of a new house. My overactive imagination is running wild, and I struggle to drift off to sleep, even knowing my penknife is stashed until my pillow.

When I do succumb, it's fitful and restless, and I don't wake up feeling refreshed. Instead, I'm tortured by snippets of dreams about brooding, dangerous tow truck drivers and sexy, charming police officers playing on a reel through my head. I'm being hunted by both through the dark, deserted woods outside.

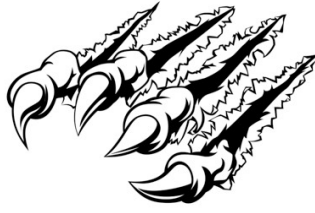
My heart is racing when I bolt upright, finally giving up on getting any more sleep. The primal fear of being chased has adrenaline coursing through my veins.

It's not fear alone that has me feeling off balance, though. I squirm and try to ignore the needy ache I feel between my thighs, which isn't from being terrified. I'm dripping wet and panting because I loved it, the thrill of being pursued, and worse than that, I'm giddy at the idea of being caught.

What the hell is wrong with me?

CHAPTER 12

SCOTT



“Coming! Hang on a second.” I hear shuffling inside and the noise of a chair being dragged across the wooden floor before Holly yanks open the door with a flourish. Her dark hair is piled high on her head, with wavy tendrils falling loose around her flushed face. She’s panting as she stands back and wipes one hand across her brow, leaving a smear of dirt behind.

Tilting to one side, I look past her into the upturned living room. Boxes spill over with journals, books, and knick-knacks, and the furniture has all been pulled into the centre of the room, piled high.

“Spring cleaning?”

It looks like a hurricane has gone through the place. The prospect of sorting that mess out would make my head hurt, but Holly is smiling brightly. She looks like she’s having the time of her life, cleaning up the home of a man she never even met.

“Something like that. I know John’s replacement is due to start in a month’s time. Figure it’s the right thing to do to make the place as nice as I can for them while I’m here.”

While that doesn’t really make sense to me, I keep my opinion to myself. I’m pretty sure he’ll do the same when he arrives. When I don’t say anything else, Holly opens the door further.

“Excuse the mess,” she gestures for me to come inside, but I can tell she doesn’t really care what I think about the

state of the place.

I step out of my boots, not wanting to trail dirt onto the floors she's just washed, and follow her in. She's wearing a pair of tight yoga pants that should be illegal, and when she bends to shove a box out of her way, I stifle a groan. Holly is curvy in all the right places, with long, athletic legs.

That a woman this beautiful just dropped out of the sky into my town is a miracle, and an opportunity I intend not to let slip through my fingers.

"Find anything interesting?" I glance around at all of John's belongings stacked on chairs around the room. For a middle-aged man who lived in this town for decades, it's a depressingly small amount. There's something bleak about the fact that this is all he left behind. And Holly, of course. It's a shame he never knew about her. He would have been thrilled, and she certainly would have been easier to raise than Ben and King.

"Not really. Some photos, maps. I'll donate the clothes. Anything work-related, I'll leave for the next occupant to decide whether they want it or not."

I've been through his cabin already as part of the investigation into his disappearance. When he went missing, we went through his notes, phone records, and emails. We looked for anything that could have tipped the rescue teams off as to where he was going or what he'd been up to in the hours and days before he left. There was nothing.

Nodding, I reach out and touch her arm.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Holly. He was a good man. It's a real pity you never got to meet him. I shouldn't really say that, since officially, it's still an open investigation, but..."

Holly nods, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She avoids eye contact and instead stares intently at the map on the wall.

"I know. Thank you."

Her voice is tight, so I say no more.

“Anyway, I didn’t come here to upset you. I wanted to let you know John’s buddies meet every week at the Claw for a drink and a few games of poker that I’m not supposed to know anything about.”

Holly chuckles at my eye roll, and it feels good to put a smile back on her pretty face.

“Sounds exciting,” she teases sarcastically, and I can’t help laughing along with her.

“Well, it is for Sutton. My point is, they’d be more than happy to regale you with stories about him if you’re up for it. They’ll be there tonight if you want me to introduce you...”

Holly’s eyes widen in both surprise and delight at my suggestion and she pulls me into a big hug.

“I’d love that. Thank you, Scott; that’s so thoughtful. Do you really think they’d talk to me about him?”

Her uncertainty is endearing. It’s easy to tell she didn’t grow up in a remote town like Sutton.

“Hmm. Would a bunch of old bachelors living in the middle of nowhere like the chance to bore a beautiful woman like you with their endless stories from back in the day? Let me think...”

I tap my index fingers against my bottom lip and pretend to consider her question seriously.

“Scott...” She blushes at my teasing and pushes my hand away from my mouth. I snag her fingers with mine and stop her from moving away.

“I have an ulterior motive,” I admit, and the pink in her cheeks deepens as she lifts her gaze to mine. Long black lashes frame her brown eyes, and her tanned skin glistens where she’s worked up a sweat.

“Oh, really?”

She doesn’t pull her hand away but leaves our fingertips curled together, dangling in mid-air between us.

“Mm. I’m hoping that maybe when you’re finished with the old fogies, you might have a drink with me? I’d like to get to know you, Holly.”

Like a teenager asking out his crush, my heart thumps inside my chest. I feel alive for the first time in a long time. It’s good to have something exciting to focus on, someone who piques my interest. I feel like I deserve this.

“So that’s the deal, is it?”

I smirk. “That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

Forcing myself to sound confident and casual, I feel anything but as she takes her time mulling over my proposal.

“Just a drink, though. Not a date,” she clarifies as she nods at me. A big grin splits my face, and I fight the urge to punch the air in victory.

Yes!

She can say what she wants, but it’s a date. Or, at least it will be by the end of the night.

CHAPTER 13

HOLLY



Scott skips down the steps as he leaves, flashing me another dazzling smile.

Oh, God. A date-not-date. Everyone knows there's no such thing. What have I done?

Even though I can't drag my eyes away from his mouth-wateringly muscular thighs as he climbs into his truck, unease settles over me. Scott oozes boy-next-door charm. He's the type who's the high school quarterback, helps old ladies cross the street, and rescues puppies in his spare time. Between the perfectly messy sandy hair and those gleaming teeth, he has the swoon factor going on.

I was already in trouble, and then he appeared out of the blue, offering to bring me to John's friends so they could fill in the blanks for me about the man my dad was... well, what hope did I have?

No woman could resist.

King's unsmiling face flashes into my mind, and I feel a twinge of something uncomfortable.

Guilt, maybe? But that's ridiculous.

He has expressed nothing but distaste for me. Why should I care what he thinks?

I might have gotten hot under the collar when he got close to me in the cabin, but he was just toying with me. He knows what effect his dark, dangerous looks have on me, but he

didn't act on it. Instead, he made it abundantly clear that he has no time for me.

Then why do I still feel like I'm doing something wrong?

Ignoring that niggling feeling, I get back to work and throw myself into tidying. The place has obviously been neglected recently. Given the volumes of newspapers, articles, journal entries, and search plans strewn about, my guess is he had been working nonstop.

The only benefit of having a small place with few material possessions is that it doesn't take long to put the cabin right and pack up the mementos I think Ben and King might want. I'm sure there are things that will mean a lot to them, but nothing to me.

Anger at my mother re-surfaces a few times as I work, particularly when I see John's smiling face in photos. How could she so callously keep a child from a man who appears to have been responsible and kind? If he practically raised two boys who weren't his own, he couldn't have been a monster.

Feeling proud of myself for getting so much done, I crack open a beer while I get ready. I'm nervous. Is it weird that I really want John's friends to like me? It's like I want the reassurance that he would have wanted to know me if he had gotten the chance.

I feel pathetic and desperate, even to myself. I never felt I was missing anything from my life until I learned about my father. Spending the day discovering more about him, immersed in his life, has deepened the feeling that I've missed out on something great.

Maybe that's why I'm getting ready for a date that I'm not sure I should go on. My doubts aren't because he's not a great guy. Scott seems like a catch. No, it's because there's something clearly wrong with me. I can't stop thinking about a certain angry, brooding bartender, one who hopefully won't be working and giving me intimidating, filthy looks all evening. Does seeking the attention of a man who clearly doesn't give a shit about me translate to daddy issues? I feel like I'm a walking cliché.

A rap on the door breaks me from my, quite frankly, rather depressing self-reflection, and I gulp down the last of my drink, hoping for some Dutch courage. I have a feeling I'm going to need it tonight.

CHAPTER 14

EVAN



E van

The evening is dragging by slowly, and for the first time in a long time, I consider leaving my bar in Ben's capable hands and disappearing for a while. There's nothing here for me in Sutton, and with Scott's relentless attention, it's going to be sooner rather than later that he finds some way to put me behind bars. It would kill me to leave Ben behind. It's safer for our kind to stick together, but not here. Not anymore.

Sighing, I move around the tables in a daze, picking up empty glasses and throwing more logs on the fire. The door opens, letting a stiff breeze swirl around us, and I'm about to bark at the new arrival to shut the door when I realise who it is. Scott leads Holly into *my* bar, with a shit-eating grin on his annoying fucking face. Instantly, my vision turns red at the edges, and I grip the table beside me to keep myself in place. She looks uncomfortable as he places a hand gently on her hip and leads her toward a cosy, relatively private table in the corner. Her dark hair tumbles in waves around her shoulders, and in the soft glow cast by the roaring fire, she looks like an angel. Holly's far too perfect for a man like Scott. For either of us.

The glass in my hand cracks in my tight grip, and Ben glances up from his phone, over at Scott who is pulling out a chair for Holly, and sighs dramatically.

“Here we go again.”

He's talking about Amanda, but this is not the same thing. I feel a twinge of regret at the memory of Amanda and how things went, but I shove it down quickly. Holly is nothing like her. I'll make sure the same thing never happens again.

"We're not doing anything again. I'm not interested."

Ben scoffs and returns to his scrolling, perched at the end of the bar. He believes my lies about as much as I do.

Scott meets my eye as he leans in close to Holly and places a hand on her shoulder, whispering intimately in her ear. I can't watch. Ducking out of the bar and heading for the store room, I toss a towel smack into my brother's face.

"I'm out."

Ben snatches it up off the bar and steps behind the counter with it resting over his shoulder. I push into the office, hiding from Scott and his inevitable attempt to rub Holly's presence at his side in my face. My patience is non-existent at the best of times, but with Scott on my case, I can't lose my temper again. That's exactly what he wants.

Ben's voice drifts through from the bar as I close my eyes and calm my beating heart.

"Hot date?" Ben asks Holly. Dickhead. He knows I'm listening, and he's turning the screw, as any brother would. Torturing each other is how we show love.

"Hopefully," Scott drawls as he places his order. I kick an empty box across the room in frustration. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm jealous. I wish it was me she was sitting with by the glowing fire. It's not meant to be, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy to watch Scott fooling yet another woman into thinking he's a good guy. Holly deserves better.

Scott stays for one more drink with Holly, smiling, flirting, and sitting way too close. After introducing her to John's poker buddies, his three best friends who still meet here once a week for a beer, Scott gives me a mock salute as he ducks out the door.

Smug asshole.

Holly beams as she's pulled into the middle of the group, and they take turns telling her all about the father she'll never know. Happiness shines in her eyes, and I must hand it to Scott, it was a great idea. I'm jealous that it wasn't my idea that put the look of joy on her face.

It's great to see everyone remembering the good times and to hear those stories being told out loud again, though. The bar has been too quiet lately, and tonight, laughter fills the place. It feels like old times. I can't help being impressed when Holly hugs one of the old timers as he gets emotional telling the story of their last fishing trip together.

She leaves the table and approaches the bar, purposely going to Ben instead of me, to order for the entire table.

"I'll get these. You change that keg I asked you to swap out ten minutes ago."

Ben glares at me. For a moment, I think he's going to hang me out and tell her there's no keg that needs swapping, but eventually, he just rolls his eyes and leaves.

"What are you having?" I already know what the rest of that table wants. They've been coming here at the same time every Thursday for as long as I can remember.

"Just a beer." Her eyes stay downcast, and I hate that I've ruined her mood. She was happy until I spoke to her. This is what I thought I wanted, but I hate it.

"It's a good idea, meeting the gang."

I tilt my head toward the table, and this time, Holly looks up and follows my gaze. Her grin slowly returns as she watches them argue over who was or wasn't there on some camping trip twenty years ago.

"Hope they're being nice to you," I add, but of course, they are. Who wouldn't be? Holly radiates warmth and friendliness. For these guys, who live quiet, simple lives, mostly with no female company, she's like sunshine on a cloudy day.

"They are." Her subtle emphasis on the word "*they*" doesn't go unnoticed, and I bite back a smile. Holly has some

fire in her. “Pretty much everyone has been.”

I presume I’m the exception, and I frown, hating the thought that I’m the only person in town who doesn’t get those big smiles.

“I’d be happy to do the same sometime. Ben and I, I mean. We can tell you all about him.”

She scoffs and tips her chin up, clearly not believing it’s a genuine offer. It’s what I should have done the second I found out she was related to John. Any decent person would have.

“You won’t find anyone who knows him better than us. The offer is there if you change your mind.”

I tell myself it’s for John, that he’d want me to make sure she knew who he was, that she understands he would have been there if he’d known.

Is it guilt? Knowing John stayed here to protect my brother and me instead of following her mother down the mountain? Maybe.

Or is it just an excuse to spend more time in her presence? Probably.

She tries to pay, but I wave her away and ignore the money she places on the bar. When I turn my back, I watch in the mirror as she presses her lips into a thin line, not happy she isn’t getting to buy this round. She wanted to do something nice for them.

“Already taken care of. Maybe next time.” Grabbing a tray off the shelf, I load the drinks onto it and tip my head, indicating she should go back to her seat and I’ll follow. Reluctantly, she puts the money away and returns to her new friends. I force my eyes to stay on her back and not to watch the sway of her hips as she walks.

“Thank you,” she mutters begrudgingly when I get to the table and set the drinks down.

“You’re very welcome, Holly.”

Our eyes lock as I say her name, and the want that blooms in my chest is like a bolt of lightning. Her lips part slightly,

and I can hear her pulse pick up above the surrounding chatter. Holly's eyes are slightly glassy, and I'm not sure if it's from the few beers she's had or something else. I'd like to think I'm not the only one feeling this way.

Damn it. If she has the same reaction to me as I have to her, why did she arrive on the arm of that jerk? Would she have been smiling and flirting with me if I hadn't acted like an asshole as usual?

As if I've conjured Scott by thought alone, he breezes through the door, turning on his charm with everyone who looks up and greets him. Very few people welcome me like that.

Holly holds my gaze right until the last second, something electric passing between us, but it's ruined the second he appears at her side. Leaning down, he presses a kiss to her cheek, and I'm perversely satisfied when she visibly tenses and moves away, not expecting him to be so forward. That feeling fades quickly when she blushes, embarrassed by his attention but not hating it either.

"I'll leave you to it," I grumble as I turn my back on them, returning to my spot behind the bar. I'm happy to have a barrier, once again, between me and the source of my inner turmoil.

"Do you gentlemen mind if I steal Holly away?" Scott asks, never looking away from her pretty face. The guy's smooth, I'll give him that. The rest of the bar clearly agrees; they throw knowing looks his way as Scott leads Holly to the other side of the room. Holly waves goodbye, telling them they're welcome to visit her in the cabin any time, and you can tell she means it.

As the evening progresses, my mood sours, watching them together. She laughs at his jokes, and her cheeks are rosy. It might be the fire, the alcohol, her delight at Scott's unwavering attention, or all three. Whatever it is, it's driving me crazy.

When Scott gets pulled into a conversation with an old-timer whose mailbox got run over, Holly excuses herself and

heads to the bathroom. That used to be the only type of crime we got around here.

As Holly passes, the faint scent of her perfume reaches me and makes my mouth water. Why does she have to smell so good?

She keeps her head angled away from me, completely ignoring my attempt to speak to her, and I grit my teeth in irritation. I know I should have been nicer when she collected her truck, but I offered to help her get to know her dad.

That's a big deal for me.

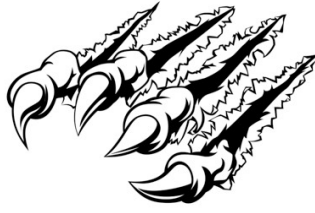
I've barely been able to speak about him with anyone, even Ben. It's too hard, too raw. Knowing he's out there, dead or alive, and I can't find him, is gnawing away at my insides. I'm a hunter by nature, and he should have been easy to locate and bring home. The guilt in my failure is overwhelming.

As Holly turns the corner, she tucks her long, wavy locks behind her ear, and her eyes drift to mine. Her steps falter when she sees I'm watching her, but she darts around the bend, eyes wide and steps hurried. She's not immune to me; otherwise, she wouldn't be so quick to escape. Her sudden movement, giving me her back, was a bad idea. Without meaning to, she's triggering my predatory urges.

The last thing she should do around someone like me is run.

CHAPTER 15

EVAN



Before I know it, I'm hurrying around the bar, my instinct to catch her pushing me on. Holly is much shorter than me, so my long strides quickly eat up the distance between us.

She doesn't even hear me coming. I sneak up behind her, my adrenaline spiking when I get so close, she's within my grasp. When her delicate hand pushes against the bathroom door, I take my chance. Capturing her in my arms, I spin her to the side, her shoes brushing the ground as I lift her and back into the store cupboard before she knows what's happening.

"Hey!" Holly shouts, indignation written all over her beautiful face. Quickly, I clamp a hand over her mouth to stop her screaming, but I wince when her blunt little teeth dig hard into my flesh.

Fighting like a wild cat, her head whips to the side as she tries to pull her face out of my grip. She kicks my shin hard, and I hiss in pain, but even a sharp elbow to the ribs isn't enough to make me loosen my grasp. Her struggles only heighten my predatory instincts, making me more determined to hold on to her.

I'm not letting her go. In fact, something about her feisty spirit turns me on.

When she finally goes lax in my arms and submits, I know I'm in deep trouble. The beast within me respects that she put up a fight, but now that she recognises my dominance, he wants to reward her for good behaviour. It's hard not to

imagine how it would feel to have her naked body pressed up against me. Her scent makes my head swim with the desire to claim her as mine. Right here. Right now.

In the bit of light that creeps through the gap under the door, she glares at me with contempt above the hand still covering her mouth. Her soft body is still pressed tight to my chest, and I can feel her ribs expanding with each ragged breath, evening out as she gradually calms down.

“Shh, now. It’s just me.”

Slowly, I take my hand away from her mouth, but I keep one arm wrapped around her waist from behind. The top of her head fits beneath my chin, and it’s like we’re two pieces of a puzzle that slot together perfectly.

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” she snaps, and I feel an approving rumble start deep in my chest at her defiance. My reaction to her feels primal—my beast wants to tame her.

“What the hell are you doing, Evan? Why did you pounce on me like that?”

“Because you ran from me,” I state simply. It’s the truth. She twists to look back at me over her shoulder with a confused expression on her face. Ignoring my answer, her gaze flicks around the tiny room I’ve dragged her into, taking in the shelves full to bursting with cleaning supplies, beer mats, and storage boxes.

“You can’t just grab people and drag them away. You scared the shit out of me.”

That’s probably my cue to apologise. Instead, I tighten my grip on her waist and lean down, pressing my nose to her delicate neck so I can inhale a lungful of her scent. Hearing the sharp intake of her breath, I smile, letting my lips brush against her skin in the slightest of touches. My breath fans across her cheek as I bring my mouth close to her ear, relishing in her tiny shiver.

“Are you enjoying your date with Captain America?”

Holly's back stiffens, but she doesn't move to get away from me. She's not frightened of me, even though she should be.

"It's not a date. Not that it's any of your business."

I ignore her rebuke and let my fingers play with the ends of her hair.

"He thinks it's a date, and you're all dressed up. You look stunning, by the way."

She flushes slightly, clearly happy with the compliment but not wanting it from me. Nervously, she tucks her hair behind her ears and turns, sweeping it over her shoulders, away from my touch. Bringing one hand up to rest on my forearm, she smiles a self-deprecating smile.

It's the first time she's touched me on purpose, and I feel the rumble inside me grow stronger.

"Just because I'm not wearing leggings for once doesn't mean I'm all dressed up. It's not a date," she repeats, less adamant this time.

I scoff but say nothing. She can tell herself whatever she wants, she doesn't believe it either. Instead of arguing with her, I just tip my weight forward, throwing her balance off so she's forced to hold onto me a little tighter to stop herself from tipping backward.

Heat passes between us where our bodies press together, and it's exhilarating. I can't get enough. I move the hair she hid behind her ears and cup her neck, her heartbeat pounding in my hand. My thumb grazes her artery, and I can feel the life pulsing within.

"Everyone out there thinks it's a date."

Holly doesn't argue; instead, she just purses her plump lips together and stares up at me. She refuses to back down and is seemingly unbothered by my hold on her fragile neck. One flick of my wrist, and I could snap it like a twig. I could sink my long canines into her skin and feast on her. I've already told her I'm dangerous and she's not worried at all.

As I pull away, I allow my lips to graze the shell of her ear, and the tip of my tongue teases her flesh. She tastes even better than I imagined, and I can't stop the tortured groan that escapes me.

"Did you just lick me?" she whispers incredulously, sounding more awed than disgusted.

"No," I lie with no attempting to sound convincing. She glares at me again, so I lean forward even more, forcing her to step back until her shoulders hit the wall of shelves.

"What is this, Evan?"

She said Evan. Not King.

And I fucking love it.

Nobody calls me Evan except Maisy, and it makes my cock hard hearing it flow from Holly's lips in that hushed tone. She must feel me against her belly, but she says nothing, instead staying perfectly still like the good girl she is. My hands wander now, one brushing up over her side, my thumb grazing the underside of her breast. My other hand drifts over her hip and trails lightly around to the curve of her ass.

"You're having fun. Are you going to go out with him again?"

They've been laughing all night, torturing me as I watch her get close to him.

"He hasn't asked."

I grunt. She's being stubborn. We both know Scott will be looking for date number two. A surge of jealousy rises within me.

"*Yet*. He hasn't asked you out *yet*, but he will. Who wouldn't?"

Holly seems thrown by my comment. Her hand resting on my arm shifts and eyes follow as she strokes over my biceps.

"You."

Her voice is quiet, and she looks shocked—she didn't mean to say that out loud. My heart stops for a moment as I tip back

to look her in the eye. There's a lingering flicker of hurt there, and I know it's from the harsh way I dismissed her yesterday.

"I'm not really the dating and flowers type."

I'm not. When I'm not working, I want to be at home relaxing or out in the wild, absorbing as much of nature as I can to soothe my animalistic nature. It calms me and keeps me on an even keel.

"And I'm not the type who wants to get felt up in a store cupboard. So, if that's all you wanted..."

Apparently, I'm being dismissed.

Holly arches one eyebrow haughtily at me, as if to say *get the fuck out of my way*. My dick twitches in my jeans; I'm desperate to tear those clothes off her and pound that sassy attitude right out of her.

"It's definitely not all I want," I say, stepping back to make enough room for her to exit, just barely. She slides past and has to put her hands on my hips to keep her balance.

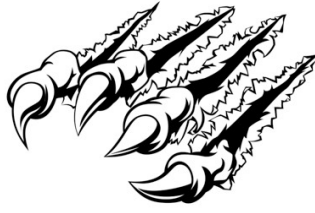
"Could've fooled me," she hisses as she opens the door and steps out into the hall, glancing up and down to check if anyone sees us emerging. Turning back to face me, she looks troubled. "Whatever this pissing contest is that you have going on with Scott, leave me out of it, okay?"

Without a backward glance, she slips into the bathroom and leaves me standing there, alone. She's right. I should leave her be, but my beast is oddly attached to her already. Why am I courting trouble by continuing to seek her out?

Especially when it's guaranteed to make Scott even more determined to ruin my life.

CHAPTER 16

HOLLY



My body is burning up from the inside out as I walk away from Evan and close the bathroom door firmly behind me. Respecting boundaries doesn't seem to be his thing. I wait, listening for his footsteps, half expecting him to follow me in here. To my shame, maybe even hoping.

As soon as I'm certain I'm alone, I grip the sink with both hands and hang my head between my arms, sucking in deep breaths, trying to regain my composure.

What the hell was that?

My entire body is trembling, and I can hear the blood rushing through my veins. I'd love to say it was the fear of getting up close and personal with a dangerous man like Evan, but it's not. It's something far more troubling. With nothing more than a few gentle caresses and some whispered words, he had me eating out of the palm of his hand.

Let's not forget his scent. I feel like it's still on me, a swoon-worthy combination of leather and spice, designed to make me think of nothing but naughty things. If I didn't think it would just make me want him more, I'd sniff my clothes to smell him again.

Only the memory of being rudely tossed off his property keeps my last shred of self-respect sufficiently intact. It was enough to stop me from giving in to whatever spell he's weaving over me. My body, though...*that* is another story. She wants to get laid, my soaked panties the shameful evidence of her lack of self-control.

Fuck!

Is this some kind of joke to him? Is he toying with me to get one up on Scott? The erection I felt pressed against me wasn't playing games, and my stomach flips again as I recall how big it felt.

I splash water on my face with shaky hands, trying to snap myself out of this madness. It's been a while since I've been in a relationship, with Mum being sick, and I'm not normally a one-night-stand kind of girl. Maybe it's because I've never had this kind of reaction to a man.

Giving myself a little pep talk about how I'm a grown-ass woman who won't be led astray by her hormones, I head back out to Scott. He's waiting patiently for me at the table with fresh drinks, and he stands with a broad smile as I approach, just like the gentleman he is.

Guilt crushes me. Even though technically this isn't a date, and technically I did nothing wrong, I feel like I cheated on him. Because I wanted to. God, I wanted Evan to do more. There's no denying it.

"Everything all right?"

He studies me carefully when I immediately take a long drink and cling to the bottle, hoping to hide my shaking hands. Still feeling all flustered, I smooth down my hair and fidget in my seat. I swear I can smell Evan on me.

Dragging his eyes from mine slowly, Scott looks over my shoulder, eyes narrowed, at the bar. His normally-smiling expression turns dark the longer he looks. In the window behind Scott, I can see Evan's wavy reflection. A blurry version of him stands stock still behind the bar, powerful arms folded across his muscular chest, glaring right back at Scott.

The small bar is suddenly suffocating as both of them refuse to break off the staring contest. I shove my chair back suddenly, needing to escape the cloying atmosphere.

The loud screech of wood dragging along the floor splits the air, and everyone turns to look at me. Scott blinks, finally

looking away from King, and his face falls when he sees me picking up my purse and slinging it over my shoulder.

“I’ve had a great time, Scott. Thank you for bringing me and introducing me to everyone, but I’m not feeling so good. Would you mind dropping me home?”

Pressing a hand to my head, I avoid his gaze. He knows I’m making it up. Everyone knows, but nobody could blame me for not wanting to be in the middle of this pissing contest.

“Sure.”

His tone is clipped. Even though he has a neutral expression pasted on his face, he’s not happy. I nod and lead the way outside, desperate for some fresh air. Despite myself, I cast a glance over my shoulder at Evan, who’s watching me, just as I knew he would be. I just can’t decide whether his hooded expression means he wants to kill me or rip my clothes off.

“Night, everyone,” Scott calls as he ushers me outside. He throws a subtle wink in Evan’s direction, resting a hand on my lower back as I pass, and something about the gesture makes me bristle. Was that just for Evan’s benefit? I edge away from his touch, my mood getting worse by the second.

“Goodnight, Holly,” Evan says right before the door swings closed, cutting off the quiet buzz of the bar. The eerie silence outside doesn’t feel any less oppressive, though. I stare up and down the empty street. There’s nobody to be seen, not a single sound to be heard. It’s odd.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” Scott’s cursing drags my focus back to the man beside me. He kicks a tire and walks around the vehicle, cursing again when he gets to the back.

“What’s up?” I ask, walking around to his side, but it’s immediately obvious. “Oh no, a flat.”

“Two flats,” he corrects, his jaw ticking as his eyebrows draw down in a fury. I can hear his teeth grinding as I look from him to the completely flat tires on one side of his truck. It doesn’t take a genius to work out that this wasn’t an accident. My stomach sinks.

“Car trouble?” Evan’s smug smirk is less than sympathetic as he approaches, casually stepping out of the bar and taking long, confident strides toward us. His black t-shirt moulds to his body perfectly, and the chill doesn’t seem to bother him at all. I look away, determined not to get sucked into any more of their drama.

“You could say that. Don’t suppose you know who might have done it?” The accusation is clear in Scott’s voice.

“What do you think?” Evan’s voice is deathly calm.

Scott’s a big guy, but something about Evan’s cold attitude seems to make him feel bigger. He looms over Scott, muscles taut in his neck and arms. His dark eyes dart to me for a second before locking onto Scott again.

“Of course, you’d say you don’t know a damn thing about it, even though we both know that’s a fucking lie,” Scott isn’t backing down. “This is fucking teenage stuff, Evan. I thought even you were more mature than this.”

Evan stays silent, not denying anything, and I shake my head at the childishness of it all, of both of them. Out of the shadows, Ben appears, at least having the grace to look embarrassed at the whole situation.

“Ben, drive Holly home and make sure she gets inside safely.” Evan doesn’t even look at me, just orders Ben to take me away. My blood boils at the cheek. “Scott, leave that here and I’ll fix those for you in the morning. I’ll even do it on the house, since it ruined your evening. It’s not quite the ending to your night that you were hoping for, is it?”

Evan’s tone is as bitter as I feel. Did he really pull this stunt to stop Scott from taking me home? To stop me from taking Scott to bed? What the hell was he thinking?

“Fuck you,” Scott hisses, his always calm and pleasant exterior slipping as Evan taunts him. King glances at me, eyebrow raised, as if daring me to complain.

With a dramatic roll of my eyes, I say a quiet goodbye to a distracted Scott and follow Ben to Evan’s truck. It’s too cold to stand out here any longer, and I’m done with this evening.

What started out as a brilliant night, chatting with John's friends and listening to their anecdotes about fishing and hiking trips, turned into a disaster as soon as these two got involved.

This is why I don't date. I hate games. I hate drama. Why does it have to be so hard?

"Sorry about that," Ben mutters as he holds the door open for me. I nod as I climb in and hug my purse in my lap. "I don't know why he's being an ass. He should have driven you home himself if he cares so much."

Staring out the window, I feel more and more miserable about the whole thing. Those are my thoughts exactly. Maybe that's the point? He doesn't care, not really. He just cares about winning. Maybe that's all that Scott cares about, too. He did purposely antagonise Evan all evening with little touches and loud laughs.

"It's not your fault that your brother's an ass," I mumble, and Ben grins, relaxing behind the wheel now that he knows I'm not going to vent my frustrations to him.

"How are you liking the cabin?"

I'm relieved to change the subject.

"Good. Actually, you taking me home tonight worked out well. Will you help me carry out some stuff?"

When we pull into the driveway, Ben hops out immediately, walking me to the door and waiting patiently while I retrieve the boxes stacked up inside.

"I thought you might like these. It seems like they'd mean more to you than me."

Ben opens the top box and pulls out a fishing trophy. His eyes glass over when he turns it over in his hands and reads the inscription carefully. He looks emotional when he places it back and turns to me, one hand resting on top of the stack.

"Are you sure?"

His voice is thick with emotion, and I know now this was definitely the right thing to do.

“Of course. These are memories for you. I’m keeping his journals and letters to go through, if that’s alright? It’s helping me get a better sense of who he was.”

Ben suddenly steps forward and wraps me up in a warm embrace, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. He seems to need the hug more than I do, so I don’t pull back. Eventually, he lets me go, giving me a bro-style thump on the arm, making his show of emotion feel like a distant memory. With a nod, he lifts all three boxes at once as I stare open-mouthed. They weighed a ton.

As he carries them to his truck, I jog past him to open the tailgate. I watch, fascinated and feeling puny, as he slides them in with ease, spreading them out so they don’t topple over on the drive home. He ruffles my hair affectionately and points back to my front door.

“Inside. Lock the door,” he orders. As I walk back toward the front door, he calls out, “And thank you, Holly. You’re a good one.”

He ducks into the driver’s seat and reverses the truck around, waiting to drive away until he sees me safely inside. I wave through the window, and Ben nods once before slowly taking off.

The absence of headlights plunges the yard around the cabin into thick darkness once again. Trees sway in the strong breeze, and I shiver, regretting that I didn’t turn on the heat earlier. I’m about to turn away from the window when I see them: two yellow eyes, staring at me from the pitch black.

Not running past, not moving through the shadows. Just watching, waiting.

They blink and continue to stare. It’s not just looking at the house. It’s staring right at me.

And whatever it is, it’s big.

CHAPTER 17

EVAN



“**E**xplain the thought process behind this?” I ask Ben, kicking one of Scott’s flat tires as we both stand in the misty rain. It’s the early hours of the morning; the sky is dreary, and there’s not a soul in sight.

Tiny beads of water cling to Ben’s hair, and he flicks his head to the side to shake them off rather than wipe them away. A smile ghosts across my lips at the action, but then I look at the two punctured tires and sigh. This is another headache I don’t need.

“I... I didn’t want her getting into that truck alone with him. He looked pissed off, thanks to you.”

It’s the truth. Scott was watching me all evening, trying to get a rise out of me as he flirted with Holly right in front of my face. He was feeling pretty smug about snagging a date with her, that is, until she came back to the table after our *conversation* in the closet. After that, he had that cold, hard look about him; a look I now recognise as barely suppressed rage.

Maybe nobody else sees it, but the beast inside me senses it—it’s a feeling I know all too well, as does Ben.

“Don’t blame me. This wasn’t my genius plan,” I sigh. Although, if I’d thought of it or had time, I would have done it myself. I won’t admit that to Ben, though.

“And what *was* your genius plan, Evan? Be rude? Stare at her all evening, drag her into closets, growl at her? Because the ladies’ *love* that.”

“Fuck you,” I mutter, but can’t help as the twitch of my lips gives me away. He’s right. Of course he is. Ben is the one with all the moves. The fact that I’ve been single since Amanda left is proof of that.

“You like her. She doesn’t seem to be terrified of you. What’s the problem?”

I growl in frustration, and Ben sighs, ready to give up on an answer, when I clear my throat, struggling to put it into words.

“She’s not terrified of me *now*, but she will be if I show her who I am. Just like Amanda was.” The night I showed Amanda the beast inside of me was the night she left. The look of terror on her face and the horror in her eyes when I tried to speak to her are forever burned into my memory. I’ll never forget them.

Everyone asks how I’m so sure Amanda ran, and that’s how. She told me she couldn’t believe she’d ever let me touch her, that she never wanted to see me again.

I can’t go through that a second time, and I’m not so sure my beast would let Holly go. As I get older, the urge to breed gets stronger. John warned us it would, but it’s only in the last year or two that I’ve really felt it. He seems to have taken a shine to Holly. Controlling him if he got close to her might not be possible.

“Amanda was soft, too fragile. She never wanted to stay in Sutton. Her plan was always to convince you to move back to the city with her. It was never going to last.”

Immediately after she left, I spiralled out of control, rejected and angry. With time, though, I’ve gained a slightly different perspective. If she couldn’t handle the thought that I was something more than human, she wouldn’t have been able to handle the rest. There are other aspects of dating a monster we never got the chance to explore.

“She still didn’t deserve to be scared like that. I should have stayed away from her.”

The guilt and humiliation gnaw at me every time I think of her bolting out my front door and running to her car, screaming at me to stay away. I won't put anyone else through that, especially not John's daughter. It's not lost on me that if he'd known about her, if she'd spent time here, maybe she'd already know our secret. She could have been mine.

"So, that's your master plan? Be lonely and miserable for the rest of your days? Amanda was sweet, and you didn't want to be alone. It worked for a while, until it didn't. Stop being so hard on yourself."

I grunt, and Ben shakes his head.

"You want me to help you with this?" I'm keen to change the subject. My brother has a much more carefree attitude towards life. Very little bothers him. I envy that about him. My beast has a much darker temperament, and it's hard not to let that bleed into my human persona.

"No. You need to run. Get it out of your system." Ben waves me away and points me in the direction of the mountains. Ben is too clever for his own good. He knows I didn't come home last night. This is his way of both testing me and finding out what I was up to.

"I was out last night. He's calm for now."

It's a lie. He's anything but calm, and Ben can sense it. He wouldn't be commenting otherwise. The animal in me has set its sights on Holly. He wants to hunt her and claim her, make her ours, and he rarely gives up once he starts. If it wasn't for my last experience with Amanda, I'd completely be on board. There's something about Holly, I've never been drawn to anyone like I am to her.

"Good. Because if you don't get your head out of your ass, there'll be more dates with Scott, and you won't be able to keep him on that leash forever." Ben turns away, knowing he doesn't need to say anything more. Turning, I kick a stone and watch as it hits the side of the bar with a loud thud.

"It wasn't a date," I mumble under my breath as I stride away, repeating the lie Holly told me last night. Not quietly

enough, though, judging by Ben's big guffaw. Keeping my hands shoved deep into my pockets, I hide my clenched fists.

“You keep telling yourself that. If you don't cop on soon, you'll have to keep watching those non-dates from behind that bar.”

CHAPTER 18

HOLLY



Maisy pours another large coffee and sits down opposite me, worry making the lines on her face appear deeper.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look terrible, dear,” she reaches across the table, patting my hand gently. “Are you sure you should do this on your own? I know you didn’t know your father, but it’s still a hard thing to do, clearing out someone’s personal effects.”

While I’m grateful for her concern, cleaning out the cabin isn’t what has me so tired. After turning off all the lights, I tried to get a better look at whatever was outside my cabin. One second, it was there, and the next, it was gone, blending into the inky shadows. I crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling until the early hours, unable to get those intelligent yellow eyes out of my mind.

When I did eventually nod off, my sleep was disturbed by dreams of terrifying creatures, stalking me from the trees. Every creak and groan from the branches outside sent my imagination into overdrive. My bear spray now has pride of place on the nightstand.

I’m assuming it was a bear. It’s the only thing that makes sense, but I still can’t work out why it was sitting there watching the house. Shivering just thinking about it, I shift in my seat. There was something so creepy about it. The animal wasn’t rambling around, sniffing, searching for food.

“Would John have ever...?”

The loud bang of a door interrupts my question, and Maisy beams, sitting back with delight.

“Maisy, where do you want me to leave these bags?”

Evan King’s broad back appears in the kitchen as he pushes through the swing door in reverse, arms laden with bags, a large box balanced in one hand. Maisy shoots to her feet and snatches the cake box from him before taking one bag to balance his load.

“Over here.” She leads him to the counter, and he sets the rest down. He must have half a dozen heavy bags, yet he carries them with ease. I can see milk and all sorts of heavy items in there. He’s brought her grocery shopping. Damn it. Why is that so sweet?

The instant he realises they’re not alone, his back straightens. His black t-shirt stretches across his bulging muscles as he turns, fixing me with an unreadable look. He’s clearly thinking about last night, but which part?

How good it felt to be so close in the storeroom, or how the night ended with his unbearable rudeness? Rude behaviour seems to be a common occurrence when I see this man. Determined not to be intimidated by him, or turn into a puddle of mush in his presence, I stare right back. My heart is hammering in my chest as I try to appear cool and unbothered.

“Sit down and I’ll get you coffee,” Maisy orders. It’s not a question, and he knows it. Reluctantly, he lowers himself onto the opposite end of the polished wooden bench where I’m seated. “You look like you haven’t slept either.”

Evan’s gaze darts to me, and a frown creases his brow as he looks me over. He probably thinks I look terrible, too. Not that I care.

“Late night guest?” he asks, a sharp edge to his voice that gets my back up immediately. Fuck him. It’s none of his business anyway since he was too busy to drop me home himself.

“Yes, I suppose so,” I sip my coffee and watch for his reaction. The petty side of me rejoices when I see his eye

twitch and a vein bulge in the side of his muscular neck. I'm not the only one who feels off kilter. He was the one who dragged me into a cupboard last night, after all. I need to keep reminding myself of that.

“Was it a sleepover?” He grinds his teeth, and I struggle to keep a straight face when he balls his fists on the table.

“Thankfully, no.”

Evan's confused when I sound relieved, but he's too stubborn to ask me what I mean.

“You were asking me a question, dear?” Maisy sets a steaming mug of black coffee in front of Evan and joins us at the table.

“John would never have fed any wild animals, would he? Bears or anything?”

I feel embarrassed for even asking the question. Of course, a respected ranger would never do something so stupid. Only city slickers and dumb tourists like me try that shit. Both Maisy and Evan stare at me in silence, and I rush to fill the awkward break in conversation.

“Never mind. It's just, there was something outside last night. It seemed like maybe it was waiting for something... but that's ridiculous. Ignore me. I'm sleep deprived, and it was probably just my overactive imagination. I'm not used to living on my own.”

Maisy has gone slightly pale, and she gulps, licking her dry lips she turns to Evan, who hasn't moved a muscle.

“What did it look like?”

He's not laughing at me. He's deadly serious and his voice lacks its usual harsh tone. There's no more playful banter or attempts to wind me up.

“Um... I couldn't tell. All I saw were these glowing eyes, and it was big. It didn't move, just stared. By the time I turned off the light and went back to the window for a better look, it was gone.”

“Glowing eyes?” he repeats, and I nod, looking back and forth between them.

“You should check it out, Evan. Just to be safe,” Maisy suggests and Evan nods. “Don’t want a bear getting ideas about getting in to find food.”

She stands and returns to the counter; fussing over cutting some cake, she seems nervous.

“You don’t need to do that,” I protest, but Evan leans over and grabs my jeans by the belt loop, hauling me along the slippery bench in one swift movement, until I’m right beside him.

“Of course, I do. Don’t be stubborn.”

Huffing in indignation, I grip the table and try to edge away from him, but he’s too strong. My thigh seeking leverage against his does funny things to my insides that I’m reluctant to admit. I need my personal space back.

“I’m not being stubborn. Maybe I just don’t want you to do it. I’ll ask Scott.”

I don’t want to ask Scott, either. I could do without the drama, but I can’t help baiting Evan. Something akin to jealousy flashes in his eyes, and I hold my breath, struggling to maintain eye contact when his gaze is so intense. Despite myself, I can feel my body heating. I’m reacting to his presence, even though he’s pissing me off.

“Go ahead. Ask Scott. It’ll just be a waste of his time, because I’m checking it out, anyway.”

Shoving to his feet, he grabs two napkins and wraps up the slices of cake Maisy has put in front of us, taking another on his way by and stuffing it into his mouth in one go.

“Now?” I ask in disbelief, looking to Maisy for support in how ridiculous this is. It’s hardly urgent. She shrugs and nods, agreeing with his decision to leave. That makes me nervous.

“Right now.”

CHAPTER 19

EVAN



Bears eyes can look like they glow in the right light. It could be a bear.

I repeat that to myself as I drive up the winding road toward John's small cabin. It could just be curious about the comings and goings after the cabin was empty for a while. Holly isn't used to the wilderness. Maybe she left some rubbish outside that attracted something to her property. I can give her a lecture about food and waste disposal and be on my way.

Except I already know that's not what it was. I stretch my legs, twist my neck, and crack my wrists, anything to move and relieve the tension building inside me.

"What do you think it was?" There's an undercurrent of nervousness she's trying to keep out of her voice, but my finely-tuned hearing picks it up anyway. Turning to look at her, sitting there twiddling her hair adorably, I frown.

She shouldn't look troubled. She shouldn't be anywhere near this cursed town and its secrets, to the menace we all know is lurking close by. Apparently, even closer than we feared. Surely she has enough to deal with at the moment.

"I'm not sure," I mutter, looking away when she turns those big brown eyes on me; my heart skips a beat every time I look into them. I feel like those intelligent eyes see right into my soul. I'm drawn to her in a way that defies explanation, which is precisely why I've been trying to stay away. I keep telling myself that, because I'm doing a piss-poor job of it.

“Bullshit.”

I whip my head back around to face her. Nobody speaks to me like that, and the word is even more startling coming from her beautiful lips.

“Excuse me?” I yank the steering wheel hard and turn into the driveway far too fast. Without waiting for a response, I’m out of my truck and around to her side just as she slides out. Her boots have barely hit the dirt when I’m in her space, only an inch between our heated bodies.

“I saw that look between you and Maisy; you know exactly what it was. Or *who* it was.”

Holly stands tall in front of me, hands on her hips, staring up at me defiantly. Her dark blue jeans are form-fitting and show off every curve on her tight little body. A gust of wind whips her hair around her face, but she ignores it, determined not to give me an inch. It’s sexy as hell and incredibly annoying all at once.

Clenching my jaw, I narrow my eyes at her before turning and striding off. I should double down and insist it’s just a bear, but damn this woman, I can’t lie to her.

“Jill reported seeing something watching her cabin a few days before she went missing. Glowing eyes. I saw it in John’s notes.”

It sticks in my throat to admit, because I know what it means. The killer is one of my kind, one of my brethren. But which one? I say nothing and walk further away from Holly, following a trail of snapped twigs and trampled grass left by something big. Holly shoves back branches as she marches through the undergrowth, determined to follow me and keep pace.

I should hold them back and help her, but I don’t want her to see my face. She’s too damn good at reading me.

“What about Amanda?” she calls to my back, and I halt at the mention of her name. “Did she see anything weird?”

Anger flares within me as I pin her with a hard look. Holly is just like her father: far too curious for her own good. All

these questions won't do her any good in a town like Sutton. Look what happened to John; she's heading down the same path.

"She's not dead. I told you that already. She just left." Holly raises an eyebrow at me, and I sigh, reluctantly acknowledging I'm no longer one hundred percent certain of that. "She didn't mention it to me, anyway."

Sniffing as discreetly as I can, I look at the damp ground and the surrounding trees. Whoever was here hasn't tried to hide their presence or the path they took skirting the edge of the trees.

"Where?" Holly visibly bristles at my harsh tone. "Where did you see it?"

With lips pressed into a thin line, she points. I ignore her irritation and head in that direction.

"That's the spot," her earlier fire dying a little as she stands close beside me and looks down at the massive footprint in the soft mud. The tree beside us bears fresh claw marks, high up in the thick bark, someone marking their territory. This isn't good news for Holly or for Sutton. Holly's eyes fix on deep grooves carved into the bark at the same height as her head.

"It's huge."

Her pulse is racing, and I feel her anxiety increasing as she puts together the giant footprint and the obvious height and works out how big it must be.

"It is." There's no point in denying it. It's twice the size of Holly. She should be afraid. She looks at me in shock, and I can see the wheels turning inside her head, probably picturing a massive grizzly standing here in the dark. The truth is too absurd for her brain to even contemplate.

"A bear?"

I don't answer, merely stand where the animal would have stood as it watched the cabin. It's the perfect vantage point: well-hidden by the thick foliage, but with a view into both the kitchen and the main bedroom. Holly follows my gaze, and I see her visibly shudder. It shouldn't matter if an animal can

see in and potentially glimpse her undressing, but something inside her can sense this is no ordinary animal.

While she's distracted, I drag my boot across the footprint, destroying the evidence. Anyone who knows bears would know that isn't a bear print.

"Why would he just stand here?" She looks up at me hopefully, like I'll have all the answers. I do, but they're not ones that are going to help her sleep at night. Walking toward the cabin as though we're finished, I try to appear calm as I scour the grass and dirt for further tracks without being too obvious.

"He wouldn't. He was probably scouting around for a while before you saw him."

Not wanting to freak her out completely, I don't point out the tracks I can see closer to the cabin where he came right up to the back door, or the tuft of brown hair caught on a rough edge of the log shed. If I shifted into my animal, he could pick up the scent better, maybe work out who was here or whether I'd come across this one before. I'll need to come back when Holly isn't here.

"Evan," she gasps, jumping back from her bedroom window and clinging to my sleeve. Leaning over her, I see what's spooked her and growl. Two deep prints sit directly under her window. It stood right here. There was no serious attempt to get inside, or it would have been, but Holly is freaked out.

Unfortunately, I suspect she's right to be.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm clutching her to me, stroking a hand down her silky hair and making comforting noises. My beast hates the idea that another was here, watching her and trying to stake a claim. I try not to focus on why he hates that part so much.

"Pack up some stuff. You're not staying here until I've scared him off."

Turning her in my arms, I press my lips to the top of her head from behind. It felt so natural, like Holly's my woman

and I'm here to protect her. It felt good to comfort her, to hold her close, and I itch to do it again.

Her body tenses for a second, and I pray that she doesn't pull me up on it. Thankfully, she's too rattled to give me any attitude. Instead, she heads inside, and I follow close behind, scanning the trees for anything I may have missed.

A deep sense of dread washes over me, and the air seems to crackle with dark energy. It feels like a storm is coming. I've felt this before, a sense of foreboding the night the last girl went missing. I can't explain it, but this time, I know who he's after.

Whoever this beast is, he's not getting near Holly.

CHAPTER 20

HOLLY



My mind is reeling. As I step out of my dirty boots and cross the threshold of John's small cabin, I stop midway and stare at my socked feet. Wiggling my toes, I compare them to the gigantic footprints outside my bedroom window.

My brain can't even comprehend the size of the animal that made those tracks. I feel sick at the thought of something peering in while I was sleeping.

Would it be able to smell me? See me through a gap in the curtains, or hear me breathing through, what I now think, are far too flimsy windows? It was only feet away from me.

Jesus.

A shiver passes through me as a breeze blows through the room, and I barely register the front door closing. It's only a curious bear, I tell myself, one that might be getting too brave. I should be appropriately concerned about it coming this close, because I don't want us to cross paths.

Still, it shouldn't be scaring me *this* much. It's not out to get me. It didn't try to break in. The woods are his home. It was just snooping around, probably looking for food to steal. I don't need to be afraid, do I?

Evan steps up behind me and places his hands on my upper arms, rubbing them gently. Instantly, my nervous system calms, and I'm able to breathe again. Evan's here, and he makes me feel safe. He'll know what to do. It seems crazy that

I trust him, given the local sheriff thinks he's responsible for three missing women, but it's the truth.

Now that I can think again, my thoughts return to the kiss. It was so quick, and I don't think he even meant to do it, but it was even more exciting than him dragging me into the cupboard at the bar. That was all about jealousy and desire. This was caring, something I wasn't sure Evan was capable of showing.

"I'll take care of it, Holly. I promise. You don't need to worry."

His deep voice is soothing, and my skin erupts in goosebumps when his lips brush my hair again. Leaning back a fraction, needing his warmth, my back hits his chest, and I feel him tense. He knows I did it on purpose to get closer to him.

"I know," I whisper, because it's true. He doesn't mind pissing me off, so I know he's not just saying so for the sake of it. He's the type of man who gets stuff done. "But why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? I want to make sure you're safe."

His fingertips graze the back of my neck as he touches my hair, and I close my eyes, relishing in his touch. Evan irritates me with his gruff, bossy demeanour, yet I'm on fire for him. Watching him pace and prowl around outside had me enthralled. He radiates this protective, dominant energy, and I'm drawn to it.

I'm taking a chance, unsure whether he really is interested in me, but I can't deny how he intrigues me, how strong this attraction is. The energy in the room is electric, and my body tingles in anticipation, waiting to see how he'll react.

"But why you?"

After that unexpected kiss, I need to know what this is. The back and forth, the push and pull, I need to know I'm not imagining this connection between us.

"It's the right thing to do. John would want me to."

Ouch, that was the wrong answer. I don't believe him, but if that's the way he wants to play it, fine. I move to step away, but he tightens his hold on me. A low, rumbling growl cuts off the sharp words about to fly from my mouth.

"Fuck, I don't know." He hesitates for a second before sweeping my hair to the side and putting his lips close to my ear. "Because I like you, Holly. More than I want to."

While it's not exactly a declaration of undying love, I have a feeling those are the nicest words he's spoken to anyone in a long time. I soften, and he pulls me back against him, doing the kiss-on-top-of-the-head thing again, melting my heart. Despite his tough exterior, he wants me. It's not just a game.

The vibrations from a satisfied rumble travel through his body and into mine. My nipples harden instantly as his hands reach around to my front and find my stomach. He nuzzles into my neck, and I tilt my head to the side, happy to give him all the access he wants.

When his thumbs dip under my t-shirt to graze over my sensitive stomach, the scratch of his rough skin is delicious. I love a man with hands that have done a hard day's work. The heat coming off his palms has me burning up as he trails them higher.

I moan when he finally cups my breasts, taking their weight in his hands. They feel heavy as he pinches my nipples hard through my bra, dragging down the sheer cups for better access. He rolls and tweaks the hard buds gently between his fingers and I let my eyes fall shut, trying but failing not to melt for him on the spot.

As I arch my back, pressing my breasts further into his hands, my ass tilts backward, and he groans when it pushes into him. Something hard presses into my soft flesh, and my breath hitches.

Instantly, I'm hornier than I can remember ever having been before. My pussy clenches just at the thought of him inside me, filling me up. One big hand grips my hip tightly, and I freeze, waiting to see what he does next.

“Do you trust me, Holly?”

I nod enthusiastically, my head spinning with lust so powerful, it's the only thing I can focus on. His hand slides down my stomach and pops open the top button on my jeans. His fingers trail back and forth across my ticklish skin before they slip inside my lace panties. As he swipes a finger through my slit, my legs jerk as I gasp, but he holds me tight against him.

“So wet,” he hums with satisfaction as he runs his fingers across my opening. He drags my wetness over my clit and circles my sensitive bundle of nerves. I whimper when he returns to my core and presses a finger inside me, pushing in and out, a little deeper each time.

When he adds another finger, I squirm, climbing up on my tiptoes when he has those two fingers buried deep, trying to escape the overwhelming sensations. He's everywhere—kissing my neck, hot breath tickling my ear, massaging my breast, playing with my nipple, filling me up.

“So tight,” he grumbles, nipping my neck and sending my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

He circles the heel of his palm against my clit, the pressure and friction just right as he thrusts his fingers deeper. I moan, pleasure coursing through my veins. Just the weight of his body, the sheer bulk of him pressed against my back, makes me feel like he's possessing me.

“Evan,” I whimper. I wriggle in his grasp, and he clamps a hand around my waist to hold me in place as he drives me higher. The blood coursing through me is on fire, stars dancing before my eyes, and I squeeze them shut against the onslaught of sensations. It doesn't work.

Instead, all my senses focus on what Evan is doing to me, on the riot of feeling rushing through me. I'm almost panicking. It's too much.

“Yes, Holly. That's it.”

I reach back and grip his thick thighs as he strokes my clit hard, and the pleasure becomes all-consuming. My legs

wobble as my climax roars through me, but Evan has me. I give in to it, letting wave after wave wash over me as it turns me into a boneless mess, slumped in his arms.

“Fuck yes, Holly.”

Sounding satisfied with himself, he tips my head back and nuzzles my neck.

“Evan,” I sigh, as he kisses and sucks my delicate skin tenderly, making me clench down again.

Without another word, he steers me toward the couch, folding me up in his lap as he sits down, legs spread. Curling up against his chest, I clutch at his t-shirt as I struggle to get my bearings and come down from that high. It was incredible. Little after-shocks rack my body, and I can't get enough of his smell.

Leaning down, he presses a kiss to my forehead, then another soft one to my lips. A mellow expression replaces the perpetual frown on his face, and I'm struck by how handsome he is.

Normally, he looks sexy in a dark, forbidding way, but relaxed and open like this, he's something else entirely. His slate grey eyes crinkle at the corner when he hits me with a dazzling smile, and I can't help smiling back, barely believing what just happened.

“Come on, get your stuff. I'll drop you down to Maisy's.”

CHAPTER 21

EVAN



Holly tenses in my arms, and her heart skips a beat. Those bright brown eyes dim, and her features tighten, her content expression looking strained now.

I'm an idiot.

Her hair is messy, and her skin flushed a rosy pink from her orgasm. She's the sexiest thing I've ever seen, and my beast rumbles with pride that we've satisfied her. I shouldn't have said anything about leaving, just enjoyed this moment a while longer.

"What are you going to do?" She grips my t-shirt in her hand, her fingertips grazing my chest. The slightest touch sends a jolt of need through me; I want her hands on my bare skin. I can't imagine anything better than continuing this in the bedroom.

"I'm going to come back and look around some more."

Holly frowns at my answer and attempts to sit upright in my lap. I grumble as I let her up, not wanting to release her. Her warm body pressed against mine feels unnervingly right, and my cock is enjoying the feel of her luscious ass cradled in my lap.

"I'll stay and help you," she states firmly. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Of course, she wants to help rather than being whisked away. Reaching out to smooth a stray strand of hair from her cheek, I stare at her, fighting the urge to bite her full bottom lip.

“Ben can help me scout around before he goes to the bar. I’ll stay here tonight and see if he comes back.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why do you need to be here alone? And who’s going to open?”

Now she’s sitting fully upright, head tilted, trying to work out what’s going through my mind. I shift on the couch, feeling like she might see every thought if she stares at me hard enough.

“There’s no point in both of us staying up all night. Kali’s working, she’ll be fine for a few hours.”

All lies. While Kali will be fine, I’ve never left my cousin there on her own before. She’ll immediately know something is up.

My usual surly attitude is creeping back in and replacing the momentary calm. My beast is feeling intensely protective of Holly after what we found outside. Even though I could protect her from anyone out there, I can’t be here 24/7, even if she’d let me.

And I don’t want her anywhere near the place when I find out who it is, because I’m going to tear the fucker to shreds. I don’t want her to fear me. If she finds out the truth about what’s out there, whose lap she’s sitting on, she’ll run like Amanda did. I can’t think too deeply about what’s going on between us until the threat is gone, and it is a real threat.

“Fine.”

It’s clearly not fine, but I don’t push her to tell me what she’s thinking. Rain hits the windows outside, coming down heavily now, just as it did early this morning. It will wash the last of the scent away, meaning I can’t tell who was outside, but there’s no mistaking the deep gouges in the trees.

A beast like me made them. That was no bear.

The prints on the ground have me confused, though, and I want Ben to see them and get his opinion. They’re big, but not as large as ours.

Could it be a juvenile male?

The aggressive markings on the trees and the nerve of coming so close to the property suggest it's a mature animal. I can't quite work it out, but I know I don't want Holly anywhere near here until it's dealt with. The thought of anyone watching her, let alone hurting her, is enough to make my blood boil.

Holly slides off my knee and stands between my legs. She looks angry, but I can't focus on anything other than the strip of tanned skin I can see through the open fly of her jeans. All I want to do is grab her by the hips and pull her back to me; to tug those jeans down to her ankles and lick her sweet pussy. I can still smell her arousal, and I know if I buried my face between her thighs, she'd still be wet and ready for me.

"Better let the boys deal with it, then. I'll pack a bag and get out of your way. Out of my own house!"

"John's house," I correct sharply, with no idea why I feel the need to clarify that point. He was her father. If he'd known she existed, he would have made it her home, too.

When I drag my gaze away from her pink lace panties, I realise she's glaring at me, one eyebrow raised. The apology I should be quick to give sticks in my throat while she waits.

Stubbornly, I refuse to speak. With an exasperated sigh, she turns on her heel, disappearing into the bedroom and closing the door harder than necessary. I frown at the banging of drawers and tip my head back, stretching my arms along the back of the sofa and my legs out across the floor.

I'm tempted to go in there and fuck the sassy attitude right out of her, but then we'll never leave. My cock might not agree with me, but getting her out of here is the most important thing right now. Closing my eyes, I think unsexy thoughts and try to quell the storm inside. I need to keep my cool.

"Ready."

Holly marches through the room to the front door and bends to put on her boots, treating me to the perfect view of her ass. Groaning, I push to my feet. The sight of her like that,

ass up and ready for me to take her, undoes any progress I've made in tempering my need for her.

I flex my hands to get rid of the urge to grab her ass, or slap it hard to see how much she likes it. Something about Holly makes me want to manhandle her like I never thought I'd want to do with a woman.

When I reach the door, I go to take her small backpack off her shoulder and carry it, but she holds tighter to the strap and breezes past me, chin held high. Before I even close the door behind me, she's climbed into my truck without waiting for me to open the door.

"Everything okay?" I ask as I slide into the driver's seat and twist to look at her properly.

"Just dandy." Her voice a higher pitch than normal, she meets my gaze and holds it, daring me to contradict her. With a loud huff, I shove the truck into gear and pull out of her driveway, driving us back down the hill toward town.

The journey is tense, and my annoyance intensifies the longer we sit in silence. Why is she upset with me? All I'm doing is trying to protect her and even though I'm keeping the scarier details to myself, she must know I'm trying to help her.

Pulling into Maisy's, I roll to a stop and, as I expected, she's got her belt off and is trying to jump out before I've even parked properly. Slamming down the locks to stop her, I wait for her to turn back and look at me. She purses her lips and narrows her eyes, adorably furious.

"What the fuck, King? Let me out," she hisses. Her cheeks are pink, and it reminds me of how she looked right after she came, albeit not quite as pleased with me.

"You call me Evan, not King. Just stay put for a second, will you?" I bark, annoyed and maybe even a little hurt at her eagerness to get away from me. "Why are you pissed off with me? I'm going to get rid of... whatever was outside your cabin..."

"John's cabin," she interrupts with a roll of her eyes, and I can't help the twitch of amusement on my lips at her sharp wit.

“I’m making sure you don’t have anything to be afraid of. What the fuck is so wrong with that?”

My hand slides around the back of her seat, gripping the headrest to stop myself from touching her, and I lean my other elbow on the steering wheel. She glares right back at me, fire blazing in those sexy brown eyes.

“You’re getting rid of me, as if I can’t help with something as simple as looking out a window! You don’t mind shoving your hand down my pants, but spending a few hours with me is so much of a chore that you ship me off to Maisy’s?”

Holy shit. That’s the conclusion she jumped to? It’s time I set her straight before she drives us both mad.

I shift forward until I’m in her personal space, until she has to press her back to the door to keep any distance at all between us. Her eyes are wild as I reach up and stroke the back of my knuckle over her cheek. I trail it along her jaw, turning my thumb over to graze that full bottom lip as I pass.

Holly looks utterly confused and slightly nervous as my finger drifts down her neck, right over her pulse, along her delicate collarbone. My gaze follows its path, enjoying the way her skin reddens beneath my touch, how she squirms as her desire for me returns, no matter how much she wants to fight it.

“Holly, I don’t want you up there because I *need* to find this animal. The idea of you up there, scared, on your own last night, makes me feel sick. It will not happen again.”

My voice is barely above a growl and hints at the violence stirring within me. It’s a stark contrast to my gentle touch as my fingertips brush over the swell of her breasts, dip into the valley between, and finger the delicate edge of her lace bra. Her breathing speeds up, and she pants slightly, transfixed, waiting to see where I take this.

“Oh. Okay.” Her features soften, her initial defensiveness fading.

“And the reason I don’t want you there with me is because I need to pay attention to what’s going on outside, not

daydreaming about dragging you off to your room and taking you so fucking hard, anyone or anything lurking outside will hear you screaming my name. Because that's all I can think about whenever you're near me."

Sitting back, I unlock the doors and step out, coming around to her door and opening it carefully.

"Oh."

Holly seems to have been rendered incapable of saying anything else by my frank admission. I smirk, enjoying my ability to shock her smart mouth into submission.

When I extend a hand, she takes it, letting me help her out of the car. She lifts her eyes to mine, hazy with lust, and I can tell she's picturing what that would be like, how amazing it would feel; by the way her arousal perfumes the air, I think she'd like what I would do to her *a lot*.

"That's exactly what would happen Holly. Now that I know how good that tight pussy of yours feels, I want more. I want it all."

Taking the backpack she's clutching like a shield, I swing it over my shoulder and take her hand, steering her toward Maisey's front door. I hear Maisey's footsteps approaching from inside, so I take this last moment of privacy to press my lips to hers in an all-too-quick but sensual kiss.

Pulling back, I nod brusquely before dropping the bag and jogging back down the porch steps, leaving Holly standing there, stunned, as Maisey opens the door.

A spark of hope flares within me. If I can work out who this is, and it turns out to be the killer, I can clear my name. Holly will be safe, and maybe she'll stick around for a while.

Ben's right. I can't keep going as I am, and for the right woman, a woman like Holly, I want to change.

CHAPTER 22

HOLLY



My lips are still tingling where Evan kissed me when Maisy opens the door. With a concerned expression on her face, she ushers me into the kitchen. Did I only leave here a few hours ago?

A slice of cake and a steaming mug of tea appear in front of me, and I look up at her, equally confused. Since I left, I discovered there's a bear trying to break into my cabin, and Evan, the man who loves to hate me, rocked my world. He takes going hot and cold to a whole new level.

My tender clit rubs against the seam of my jeans, and my damp panties are a testament to how good he is at doing the hot.

Is he going cold again, or should I trust his word that I'd be a distraction if I stayed?

Reluctantly, I must admit that if I was in a small space with him all night, after that performance, I might try to tempt him into showing me more of his skills.

"I don't know what is going on," I mutter, looking at Maisy for an answer. Wringing the tea towel in her hands, she looks away guiltily.

"We should have told you about what's in those woods, warned you to keep an eye out. For that, I'm sorry." Sliding into the seat opposite me, she taps her unpainted nails on the wooden tabletop anxiously. "What did you find?"

I was talking about Evan, but I'm clearly missing something here, so I refocus and try to keep her talking.

“Tracks. Big gouges in the trees. Evan said it was a bear marking its territory. To me, it looked like it was trying to get into my bedroom.”

That's an exaggeration, but it does the trick. She gasps, looking horrified, and her hand flutters to her chest.

“Oh, my.”

Maisy continues to fidget, refusing to meet my eye. When she realises I'm staring at her, she jumps to her feet and rushes to the counter, standing with her back to me. She fusses, doing nothing but avoiding me. I stand and follow her, leaning against the counter beside her so she can't ignore me.

“Maisy... what kind of animal is it?”

She won't look at me. Instead, she puts away the coffee she just took out and loads some dirty dishes into the clean, half-emptied dishwasher.

“Evan will take care of it.”

Her head bobs up and down emphatically as she slams the dishwasher shut and turns it on, before turning and gripping the counter behind her with both hands.

“Take care of what?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she finally looks at me and sighs, looking torn.

“It's not my place to say. Just promise me you won't go back there by yourself. You won't wander in the forest or in town late at night?”

She looks desperate as her eyes plead with me to take her request seriously. Her strong but aged fingers grip the sleeve of my jumper tightly, and she leans in, waiting for me to agree.

“I promise.”

Satisfied, she nods, reassuring herself that everything will be okay. I don't feel one bit reassured. What on Earth is hiding in the forest that has her so scared?

My gaze drifts past her to the window, to the lush forest reaching up to her yard. When I arrived in Sutton, I loved the stunning mountainous scenery, the dense woods teeming with wildlife. I planned to do more exploring while I was here. Now, I'm wondering whether that's such a good idea.

Maisy is still tense, so I clear up my plate and give her a hug. She looks like she needs it more than me.

"Thank you for letting me stay. I'm sure Evan will have it all sorted in no time, and I'll be out of your hair again."

She gives me an odd look before turning away to continue her distracted pottering. Something has her rattled, and it's making me nervous. Remembering the two journals I shoved into my pack, I excuse myself and slink off to my room. Maybe there will be something in there about mysterious giant bears or late-night visitors to John's cabin.

Climbing under the cool sheets, I yawn, suddenly exhausted. I read late into the night, making notes as I go. It's only when I start the second notebook that I pause. This one is dated right before Amanda leaves town.

It feels intrusive to read about this without hearing about it from Evan first, so I push my curiosity aside. Snooping on the man who's currently spraying my yard with bear spray, or whatever his plan is, doesn't seem right, no matter how much I want to know about the woman who stole his heart.

As I stretch over to place the notebook on the bedside table, and turn off the light beside my bed, a creepy sensation slithers down my spine. I'm drawn to the window. Tugging back the curtain, I peer out into the pitch-black night. I try to make light of the feeling, laughing at myself for even thinking I'd see anything out there.

I'm just about to drop the floral fabric back into place when movement catches my attention. It's so quick, I'm not even sure what it was, but then they're there again: two yellow spots in the gloom.

They're moving this time, side to side, as whatever it is ambles its way through the trees. I hold my breath, watching

as they disappear from view, obscured by the trunk of a large tree, before emerging again on the other side.

Swallowing hard, I stare, transfixed, as it stops. The shadows seem even thicker where it stands, the black even blacker, and a feeling of dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

It can't be.

When the animal lifts its head to look at the guesthouse, I freeze, and my heart starts pounding. It's looking right at me, but that can't be possible, not from this distance or in the dark.

My heart stutters in my chest as I fling the curtain closed and lie back in bed, pulling the covers tight to my body.

What the fuck is going on?

Evan and Maisy both know more than they're letting on. Maisy is too kind for me to interrogate. I'm afraid to freak her out by telling her the animal is here, but Evan?

Oh, he's going to hear all about this, and I expect him to tell me what he knows or deal with the consequences.

CHAPTER 23

EVAN



After spending a wasted night watching the windows at Holly's house, I'm frustrated and tired. Ben did a sweep of the surrounding area a few times during the early hours, and nothing even came near. Holly isn't any safer, and we aren't any closer to working out what happened to those girls.

Briefly, I considered slipping into Holly's bed and trying to get a couple of hours of shut eye, but I have second thoughts. If just being in her cabin is enough to make me hard, wrapping myself up in sheets covered in her scent is going to make me blow my load.

The drive home was a blur. Ben gives me a weary salute, and I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my chin before I put my truck into drive and head back to the bar. My body longs to go inside and climb into bed, but I have too much to do today.

Especially since it seems unlikely that I'll make it to the Claw tonight, either.

"Long night?" Kali asks, shifting the heavy crate from one arm to the other as she slips behind the bar and starts restocking the shelves. "I hope it was fun, at least."

"Not really."

Kali straightens and points to the bar stool on the other side of the counter. "Sit. You look like shit. I'll make us both some coffee."

Ordinarily, I'd give out. Normally, I don't like to be told what to do, but not today. Dropping onto the stool, I obey without complaint, and she raises her eyebrow, stunned that I didn't reject her offer.

"This must be good. Or very, very bad," she surmises, returning with two steaming mugs of liquid heaven. She plonks one down in front of me, along with a Danish that smells so good, I don't even care where it came from.

"It's the second," I mutter around a mouthful of pastry goodness. She fiddles with the end of her blonde plait and waits patiently for me to elaborate.

Kali is my cousin, and she works part-time at the bar. Filling in at the last minute for us yesterday, she knows something is up. She might be a few years younger, but she's been working here on and off for years. With the exception of the first couple weeks after John went missing, there has never been a night that both Ben and I were gone.

"The new girl in town reported something watching her house - with glowing eyes. I had a look, but the scent had washed away already. Ben and I staked the place out last night, and found nothing. I might need you again tonight."

Kali stares at me wide-eyed, alarmed at this revelation. She knows what Jill saw. We've all heard the rumours.

"You really think it was one of us?"

Shaking my head, I sigh, not sure what to think anymore. I didn't want it to be true, but all the signs point toward a beast. It makes me furious. We live quiet lives, keep to ourselves, keep our presence unknown. One dangerous fool could ruin it for all of us. That beast won't stop now if it has a taste for killing.

"Not someone from this town, but we know there are other clans out there, and drifters, too. Could be someone moving around and causing trouble. Whoever it is, it needs to be stopped."

Kali leans forward and rests her forearms on the bar.

"And it has to be you who does it?"

I know what she's hinting at, that Scott already has me in his sights. If I give him even the slightest opportunity, he'll gladly put me away.

For someone whose entire identity is wrapped up in what he does for a living, being a protector, having people in town like Ben and I drives him crazy. He has that badge; we have true power, and he wants it. Just like he wanted Amanda for himself. He was mad about her from the first time he laid eyes on her, but she picked me. He forgave her, secretly loved her in his own way, I think; but his hatred for me grew stronger every time he saw us together.

It may seem petty for the sheriff to want to wreck my life over unrequited love, but at the end of the day, he's just a man.

"Holly needs to be protected, and Ben and I will do it. Which means we'll need you here a bit more, if that's okay?"

Kali shakes her head at me in disbelief.

"Holly, as in John's daughter Holly? The new hottie everyone has been talking about?"

She's laughing, but I don't find it one bit funny.

"Who called her a hottie?"

My gruff tone gives my interest away, and Kali smirks at me knowingly as my jaw twitches. With a knowing smile, she reaches out to pat my clenched fist sympathetically.

"Oh, you got it bad," she teases. "But it's no problem. I'll do whatever you need me to do, if you promise you'll be careful. Don't piss Scott off, Evan, please."

With a dismissive wave of my hand, I brush off her concern. Kali rolls her eyes at my stubborn refusal to promise any such thing. She's known me my entire life, so she knows I won't back down. This beast is threatening my woman, and I'll do whatever it takes to get rid of it.

"Who, Kali?"

For a second, she's confused, then she realises with a grin that I'm still fixated on her throwaway comment. I can't stop myself from asking again, needing to know who was talking

about Holly, even though I'm showing my cards about just how interested I am in her. Not that I was fooling anyone before, other than myself.

"It's covered under barmaid-customer confidentiality. It's sacred."

She taps the side of her nose and laughs at my annoyed grunt. When she disappears to get another crate and leaves me sitting there, alone with my thoughts, I slump forward and rest my forehead on my crossed arms.

I'm done for. Holly consumes my thoughts. Even now, I can't stop worrying about whether she's safe. I want to know if she thought about me in her dreams last night, because every time I blink, I see her coming apart in my arms.

When I let my mind wander for even a second, I imagine how amazing it will feel to have my cock inside that tight, hot pussy instead of just my fingers. I wonder how loudly she'll scream my name when she comes; around me, the next time.

I need to work out who this beast is and deal with it, without drawing any more attention to Sutton and its unusual residents. Then, I'm going to make her mine. She doesn't know it yet, but the second she let me kiss her, touch her, and my beast got a taste, she was ours.

There's no denying the power of our connection. It's meant to be. For the first time in a long time, my spirits lift. I have something to look forward to.

With a tired groan, I drag myself to my feet, ready to blast through the urgent tasks I have to do before I re-group. I need to work out how to draw this beast from the shadows. It's not going to be easy, but it'll be worth it if it keeps my woman and my town safe.

"Evan?"

Just hearing Holly's voice makes me feel better and I turn, a smile already spreading across my face despite my exhaustion. That doesn't last for long, though, when I see her standing in the doorway, her silhouette framed by the morning

sun. Hands on hips, she looks like a force to be reckoned with. I can feel the fight within her dying to get out.

It doesn't look like I'll be getting a hug or a thank-you kiss today.

"For fuck's sake," I mumble, too tired to be dealing with this. Her back straightens, and when she marches toward me, I know that, as usual, my short temper and big mouth have gotten me into trouble.

"Don't "for fuck's sake" me. You're the one who's lying to me. Tell me what's going on."

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright. She's so sexy when she's mad.

"Jesus, Holly. I haven't slept a wink. I'm too tired to play twenty questions. Tell me why you're yelling at me so I can get on with my day and get some fucking sleep."

As she reaches my side and stares up at me in the gloom of the bar, her fierce attitude falters. Her gaze flits over me, taking in the fact that I'm still wearing yesterday's clothes and probably, as Kali so nicely put it, that I look like shit.

"It was at Maisy's last night."

My blood runs cold, and I blink. Once, twice, three times. While I was sitting in her house, it was sitting outside Maisy's, watching and waiting for its chance.

This is a whole other level of danger for Holly now. She wasn't just an easy target out in that old cabin on her own. The beast is focused entirely on her. It's stalking her, boldly following her to a property near town with plenty of people around.

"That's what I thought," she declares triumphantly at my silence, but her smugness turns to panic when I reach out and grab her, hauling her to me. Something in my eyes must give away my fear, because instead of being feisty and confident, she melts into my arms and gives a small shiver.

"Tell me," she whispers against my t-shirt as I stroke her hair and hold her tight.

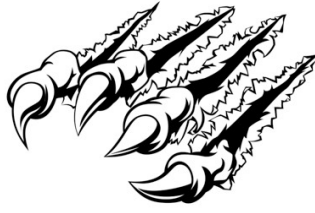
“I can’t, not yet, but I’ll fix it, Holly, trust me.” It’s a non-answer. She peers up at me, disappointed at my cop-out. “Give me one more night.”

Nodding, she avoids my gaze before slipping from my arms. Without a backward glance, she walks through the door into the rain, now falling in heavy sheets outside and washing away the trail once more.

Shit.

CHAPTER 24

HOLLY



Evan's tired eyes play on a loop in my mind as I wander down the main street. He's worried, but he won't tell me what's going on. It's frustrating and endearing at the same time.

All kinds of conspiracy theories rush through my mind as I stroll aimlessly down the quiet street. There are very few people about, the damp mist keeping anyone without urgent errands inside, warm and dry.

Is it a rogue bear? A dangerous wolf?

Or, even worse, is it possible Evan knows this isn't a wild animal, but a person? Like something out of your worst nightmares? Could it be the same person who killed those girls? Evan wouldn't purposely hide that from me and Scott, would he?

He's barely nice to me, but he says he wants to keep me safe. Maybe I'm not the only person he's trying to protect. Otherwise, he'd tell me what he's so concerned about.

Just because I have a crush on him doesn't mean I can put everything I know about him aside and assume he's not the trouble I've been told he is. His constant changes in temperament are worrying. I'd tell anyone else not to ignore that. He's sinfully gorgeous, which is a huge part of the problem.

Something about his rugged masculinity makes me lose my mind.

That's the only explanation for why one minute, we were bickering about whether I know how to store trash properly, and the next, he had his hands in my pants. I blush hard just thinking about it, my panties getting wet as I walk down a drab mountain town's deserted main street, daydreaming.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Without thinking, I find myself drawn back to Serena's bakery. I consider the "open" sign and pause, wondering whether to go in. The loud rumble from my stomach and the delicious smell decides for me. I'm powerless to resist. A brass bell tinkles cheerfully as I push the door open, but that's the only welcoming thing about the place today.

Scott's broad frame stiffens when I enter. I instantly regret coming in and wish I'd kept walking. He watches me, expressionless, from underneath the stiff peak of his well-worn navy cap, while his sister observes me coldly with narrowed eyes as I wave and walk over to his table.

There's a freshly buttered scone sitting in front of Scott with a piece of paper folded up to the side. He's not going anywhere for a few minutes. Perfect.

"Hi, Scott," I greet him brightly, despite my anxiety going through the roof at the sight of his twinkling blue eyes. This is my first time seeing him since he suggested Evan slashed his tires and then they sent me home with Ben. Unsurprisingly, I get nothing other than a polite nod in return. Serena's still shooting daggers at me, huffing before she walks away.

"May I join you?" I ask, gesturing to the empty seat in front of him. He hesitates, but finally answers with another brusque nod. The cap pulled low over his eyes, along with the hoodie and combat boots, give him a less serious look than he normally wears. The ends of his sandy blonde hair curl around the underside, and he hasn't shaved in a few days, judging by the shadow on his jaw. It suits him.

"I've been meaning to get in touch and apologise for rushing off the other night."

“But you didn’t,” he says pointedly, setting his mug down, long fingers drumming the wood impatiently. Swallowing, I pull my eyes back up to meet his, only to find them shining with amusement. He’s enjoying making me squirm. I can respect that.

“I should have, and I’m sorry. I just don’t want to get caught up in whatever history you and Evan have. I’m only here for a few weeks, and I don’t want to fall out with anyone.”

That part is true. I like Sutton, despite the decidedly eery vibe and the missing women. Oh, and the animal stalking me. Other than that, the people have been friendly and accepting of me as John’s daughter. After I go back home to sort out my mum’s affairs, I’d like to return and find out more about him.

“That’s not exactly true, now is it, Holly? King was at your place last night. All night.”

Fuck. How does he know that? Scott’s blank expression and careful tone give nothing away, but his posture is tense. Behind the small counter, Serena’s step falters as she bustles about, refilling trays of pastries. My cheeks redden, and I raise my voice, wanting her to hear my reply, even though I shouldn’t care what anyone might think.

“He was on his own. I stayed at Maisy’s.”

After he finger fucked me into oblivion. If he’d let me, I’d have taken him to my bed without a second thought.

But I don’t think that would make this conversation any easier on Scott’s wounded male ego.

“And why was that?”

He sounds bored as his fingers hold the edge of the paper, tipping the page up to read the headline as he allows a smile to turn up the side of his mouth. Scott’s unable to hide his relief that I wasn’t at home with Evan.

“Because there was a bear trying to get into the cabin. He was checking it out for me.”

Scott is the ideal person to talk to about Evan being cagey, but I don't want Evan to think I don't trust him. He said he'll fix it, and I believe him. Hopefully, afterward, he'll be comfortable filling me in. With Scott's dislike for Evan so clear, I don't want to give him any reason to pester him.

"A bear?"

Scott looks at me sceptically. He doesn't believe me, though Evan threw me into his truck and drove me there to check it out immediately.

"Think so."

I shrug, pretending to not really have any interest in what's going on. Normally, I'm a terrible liar, but since I don't have a clue if it was a bear or not, I think I can get away with it. Scott frowns and places his palms flat on the table, the local hero coming to the surface.

"You should have called me."

With a chuckle, I relax in my seat, resting my elbows on the table right as Serena drops coffee in a takeaway cup into my hands. Her face doesn't look as pinched as before. Hopefully, if her brother's talking to me again, she won't spit in my drinks or refuse me her warm, delicious loaves of bread.

"You have more important things to do than chase wildlife away from my bins."

Something about that makes him laugh out loud, and he leans back, fingers steepled, deciding whether to forgive me for brushing him off. I fidget under his gaze as my awareness of how handsome he is creeps back in. Evan has this power over me, like dark magic. I like Evan. I want him, but Scott is magnetic.

"Hmm. I suppose I do, but I'm always free for you. Especially in an emergency."

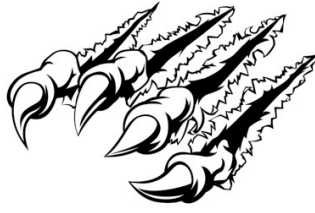
For the first time since I walked in, he fixes me with his piercing stare, and it takes my breath away with its intensity. My entire body tingles as he brushes his fingers over the back of mine and wipes away a stray drop of rain before sucking it from his thumb.

Without a word, I nod dumbly and get to my feet. That took an unexpected turn, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. I edge away slowly, as though afraid to turn my back on him. One last glance before I practically run out the door shows me Scott is still watching me, and my stomach flips.

Oh boy.

CHAPTER 25

SCOTT



Watching Holly nervously flee the coffee shop gives me a renewed sense of hope. She was at Maisy's last night. I thought as much when I saw her battered old truck parked out front, but it was good to hear her confirm it. My stomach has been twisted up in knots since I saw King wandering around outside John's cabin. Well, Holly's for the time being, I suppose.

It still irks me that she called him to help her instead of me, but she's right. King knows that cabin and the surrounding woods better than anyone. Since John practically adopted the brothers when they were young, he and Ben spent their summers hiding in the trees and building forts and dens. They know it like the back of their hands.

Not that whatever bear traps King told Holly he was laying down is going to keep away what's lurking in those woods.

Everyone in Sutton knows there's nothing that can stop a beast on the hunt. Part of me wants to believe that's why all the locals bow down to King, even though he's a grumpy son-of-a-bitch. I've never seen him shifted, but I've heard stories of his size and ferocity.

That's not why they listen to him, though, and I know it. Begrudgingly, I acknowledge it's not fear—it's respect. He has all this power, but he never uses it to get his way or make anyone feel scared or intimidated. Ever. Instead, he goes out of his way to help people in that quiet, cranky way of his, never looking for anything in return, other than to be left in peace.

My badge gives me a certain level of authority, but if I had a beast like his... I'd rule this place. I wouldn't be working nights in a shitty bar and days as a filthy mechanic, that's for sure.

Still, it's probably good for me that he's not ambitious. A woman like Holly might be attracted to the bad-boy attitude he has going on, but she's smarter than the rest. Amanda was pretty and sweet, but she was too flighty for me. I can see that now. It doesn't make it easier to swallow that she chose King over me, but it would never have worked between us.

Holly's cut from a different cloth—there's steel in her. The fact she came to a town where she doesn't know anyone, to find out more about a father she never met, tells me a lot about the strength of her character. There's something incredibly appealing about winning the affections of a woman like that. Hopefully, she'll realise that a man who treats her well is the better option in the long term.

I would treat her like a queen if she gave me a proper chance.

Allowing myself a rare break from work to enjoy my coffee and scone, I daydream. I think about how nice it would be to have some company, other than my sister, in my big old house. As I plan out my day, I think of ways to make sure Holly sees what we could be together. I need to show her that I can protect her, too.

Feeling in a better mood now, I'm more enthusiastic about my to-do list. A storm is coming—not today, but soon. I can feel the pressure building in the atmosphere. Maybe a check on Maisy is in order. It would be the neighbourly thing to do. Her place is enormous; there are lots of things that need to be squared away if things are going to get nasty.

It's just a coincidence, of course, that Holly will be there.

Setting down my paper, I spot her phone resting on the table. It's a sign that things between me and Holly aren't quite over yet. She was so flustered she must have left it behind in her hurry to get away. Waving goodbye to Serena, I duck outside, glancing up and down the street.

I can't believe my luck when I spot her coming out of the outdoor supplies store down the road. Her hands are full of shopping bags as she thanks Jack for all his help. Another beast, he ducks back inside when he sees me coming. That man wants nothing but a quiet life, leading his tours and selling gear to under-prepared visitors. Like Holly, apparently.

"Holly!" I call, jogging up to her and holding the phone up. She turns around, surprised to hear my voice, smiling with gratitude when she sees her phone in my hand.

"Oh, thank you! I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached!"

She laughs, shaking her head at her forgetfulness as she reaches out to take it from me. A rumble in the distance signals the imminent arrival of another Sutton resident to main street on this dark, dreary day.

"I hope you've got rain gear in there," I tip my head toward the bags. Holding out a hand, I catch one of the first big drops to fall from the heavy clouds hanging over us. The sky is so dark now it feels like night is falling.

"Yes. Maisy gave me a lecture yesterday about not being adequately kitted out, so I thought I'd invest."

I take the bags from her hands before she can object and incline my head, looking up and down the street.

"Which way?" I hold the bags up, hefting their considerable weight. She must have bought some new boots. Jack will be happy with his morning's work.

"Oh, you don't have to do that."

She tries to argue, but relents when more drops of rain start to fall. Yanking her hood over her hair, she points to where she parked then darts across the road just as large drops begin to pelt the tarmac.

I follow, ducking my head to avoid the downpour. With a giddy shriek, she rummages in her purse, dancing from one foot to the other as she tries to find her keys in the bottom of her bag.

The rain doesn't bother me. In fact, I'm quite enjoying myself, especially when King's dark pickup slows to a crawl as he drives by. Holly is completely oblivious as she finally locates her keys and, laughing, tries to get the door open before she's soaked through.

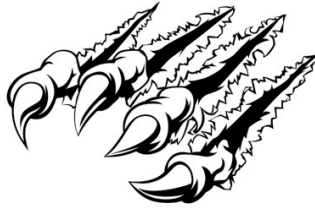
King glares at me. Winking back, I stand beside her, bags in hand like a doting boyfriend as she launches herself into the cab. She giggles adorably, swiping dripping wet tendrils of dark hair from her flushed face.

"Scott! Get in. You're getting wet!" Holly yells above the deafening downpour. Grinning, I meet King's disgusted gaze and slide in. His eyes flash, the orange glow clearly visible in the gloom. King's lip curls in a snarl before he guns it and tears off down the road, knowing he can't stay and risk letting his anger get the better of him.

Feeling victorious, I obey Holly's orders and close the door. A genuine smile spreads across my face for the first time in two days. King hasn't won Holly yet, and I'm not going down without a fight.

CHAPTER 26

HOLLY



Scott grins at me, water is dripping from his cap onto his lap and he doesn't seem to care. I laugh at the state of us, like two drowned rats hiding from the weather.

"I think you better get home and get dry," he comments, his gaze briefly dipping to my chest. Slick with rain, my thin top is plastered to me. Reaching out, he takes a strand of my soaked hair and winds it around his finger. It's shiny and black from being wet, and he seems fascinated by it.

The realisation of what I'm doing hits me full force. Evan touched my hair earlier, and now I'm letting another guy hit me with the exact same moves, alone in my car, the windows fogging up around us.

It's not a good look.

Pulling away, I face forward and force an invisible barrier between us. I need to make sure I'm not giving Scott the wrong impression. It's not like Evan is my boyfriend, but he had his hands in my pants only yesterday, so until I know what's going on between us, there won't be anyone else.

Scott's face falls, but he nods and ducks his head to see better out the steamy windows, wiping the one beside him with his sleeve.

"It looks like it's easing off." It's not. Turning back to me and waiting until I eventually meet his eye, he gives me a soft smile. "No pressure, Holly. You know where to find me if you want to go out again. I'll take you somewhere nicer than The Claw."

With a carefree wink and tip of his sodden hat, he climbs out, giving me a spectacular view of his tight ass as he leaves. Blowing out a deep breath, I curse myself and my raging hormones. I shouldn't react to him like that, not when I have another man on my mind, but those blue eyes are something else. He's confident and self-assured, a proper grownup.

There's nothing more attractive than a man who knows who he is and has his shit together. Watching him stride purposefully down the road, disappearing around the corner with a wave, I groan. Maybe it's because I've never had two men interested in me at the same time that I'm acting like a teenager.

As I start the truck and pull away, I correct myself. One man is interested in me. The other may only be interested in sex. Scott has asked me out, twice. Evan snaps at me and then accosts me in cupboards, makes me come and then sends me away. He told me point blank he doesn't do dates and flowers. Since I'm only supposed to be here for a few weeks, neither seems like a sensible idea.

My pussy doesn't care, though. She's throbbing and telling me to enjoy myself. Chances are, I'll never see these men after the month is out.

Why not be spontaneous and live a little? Pulling into Maisy's driveway, I decide that's exactly what I'm going to do. Soon, I'll be home again, and there will be no more adventures for a while. I'm going to have fun and ignore the nagging little voice in my head that's telling me to be careful.

In keeping with my new spontaneous outlook, I decide I can't just sit here and wait for Evan to pronounce my cabin safe. I'm not stupid enough to go up there and argue with him, either.

The man has an infuriating, stubborn streak a mile wide. I mean, all this fuss over a bear?

If I was anyone else, I bet he wouldn't be making a big deal of it. He probably thinks a city slicker like me will try to go out and pet it.

Instead, I'm going to pull my weight another way; one he can't complain about, but will make me feel at least slightly useful. That was my plan when I marched into The Claw, ready to demand Ben put me to work. I can pour drinks and I can clean. There must be something for me to do.

As soon as I power through the door and across the wood floor, though, seeing absolutely nobody else inside, not even behind the bar, my confidence wavers. I stop, turning in a slow circle, waiting for someone to appear from the bathroom, through the front door, but nothing. Damn it.

"It's the weather," a feminine voice calls out as she stands behind the bar, slinging a cloth over her shoulder. "Most people stay home when there's a storm coming. I was about to lock up."

My shoulders sag as my enthusiasm wilts. So much for this idea.

"Most clever people, you mean," I reply, staring back at the entrance and willing someone to arrive. When I turn back, she shrugs, but I know that's exactly what she means. Sighing, I drift to the bar. Gripping the polished wood with one hand, I slide defeatedly onto a stool.

"Evan won't let me near the cabin. Maisy won't let me lift a finger at the guesthouse. I'm so bored."

Grumbling, I tap my fingers impatiently on the counter while she smiles at me in amusement.

"*Evan*, eh?" The blonde opens the dishwasher and pulls out a tray of glasses, drying them off and stacking them neatly on the shelves. "I'm Kali, his cousin."

"What am I supposed to do all evening, Kali?"

I can't tell her it's sexual frustration that has me so on edge. That I desperately need something to do to stop myself from driving to my cabin, throwing myself at Evan, and making a fool of myself. My battery-operated boyfriend just wouldn't be the same. I've tried to scratch that itch already, but I need the real thing.

“I’m sure we can think of something. In an empty bar. On our own. With no boss in sight.”

The beautiful bartender smiles mischievously at me and slides a shot glass across the counter, setting down another in front of herself. Reaching behind her, she snags a dark bottle and sets it down on the bar. She looks innocent, angelic almost, with those pale eyes and blonde hair, but when she waves the bottle in the air with a naughty laugh, I know she’s anything but.

Grinning, she tips her head back and downs her shot in one go, hissing from the burn. The liquid is clear. It looks innocuous enough, but I can smell the strength of the alcohol as I bring it close to my mouth.

“What is that? I don’t think I should...”

Shaking my head, I look into the eyes of the devil herself as she chuckles at my reluctance. Pointing a slender finger at the glittering, clear glass, she arches a perfect eyebrow at me.

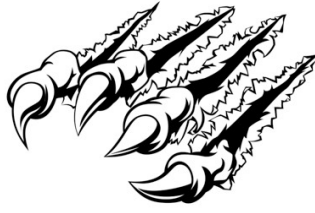
“You asked me what you should do, Holly, and I’m telling you. Drink. That’s what you should do -”

She laughs to herself when I toss it back, grimacing and cursing as it sets my throat on fire. Holy fuck. My eyes water as I gasp for breath. What the hell was that?

“- because you are going to need it.”

CHAPTER 27

HOLLY



“I wish I had blonde hair. Blondes have more fun,” I watch Kali dance behind the counter to the far-too-loud music blaring in the empty bar. Somehow, I don’t think our playlist would be the usual choice for The Claw, so we’re taking advantage.

Kali runs her fingers down her blonde plait and sighs, sadness flitting across her delicate features for a second before she smiles ruefully.

“No, you don’t. In a town like Sutton, it’s a curse.”

Sitting upright instead of slumping in my stool like before, I frown and point in her direction. She smothers a laugh at my attempt at a serious expression. Even though I know whatever is about to come out of my mouth is a load of garbage, it’s coming, anyway.

Tipsy Holly has no filter.

It’s highly entertaining for others, but normally ends in a serious case of *the fear* for me the next day. Thank God it’s just us here.

“You are stunning. If the assholes in this town don’t like blonde hair, fuck them. What the hell difference does it make?”

She shrugs and offers me another beer, but I shrink back, like she’s trying to hand me poison. God, no. No more alcohol. I already know I’m going to suffer for this tomorrow.

“It’s just the way it is. Only one person ever liked it, and he’s gone.”

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror behind Kali, I grimace. The rain did my hair no favours. It’s a curly, fizzy mess. There is no way this look is the better option.

“One person? Nobody else likes you *because of your hair?*” I repeat the absurd words. I’ve definitely had way too much to drink.

She nods, highly amused by my outrage on her behalf as she brings her bottle to her lips. Leaning against the fridges behind her, she folds her arms, grinning when my mouth falls open in shock.

“The men in this place must be idiots, then. What guy cares more about hair colour than getting laid?”

Coughing and spluttering, she sprays her mouthful of beer across the polished surface, laughing as she grabs a cloth to wipe it up.

“Everyone in Sutton, apparently.”

Kali glances around the empty bar, as if the lack of patrons is down to her personally.

“Screw them. No, don’t. What about that one guy? Do we like him?”

With a big laugh, she sets her bottle down.

“We did, but it doesn’t matter. He wasn’t ready for a relationship, so I need to move on.”

Rolling my eyes at the cliched bullshit he fed her, I gesture flipping him the bird, and she chuckles.

“I don’t think you need blonde hair to have fun, Holly. I have a feeling you can make it all on your own,” Kali winks as she slips out from the bar and disappears down the hall.

Resting my head on the bar, just for a second, I’m thinking just how nice she is when a cool breeze swirls around the room. The noise of heavy rain is louder for a second as someone opens and closes the door. When I don’t hear any

footsteps, a prickle of awareness runs down my spine, and I sit up, afraid to turn around.

Lifting my eyes to the mirror instead, I see Evan staring right back at me. Like a deer caught in headlights, I can't look away.

“You can make trouble, more like,” he growls.

Ooooh, he does not look happy. He's still wearing the same clothes, and he looks even more exhausted than before.

“Did you not go home for a nap? Or a shower?” I hold his gaze in the mirror.

“No. I didn't go for *a fucking nap*.”

Well, that's just stupid, I think to myself as I watch him prowl closer. His steps falter as his eyes seem to flash amber. I blink hard as I watch him suck in a deep breath, his fists clenched at his sides.

“Stupid? *Stupid?*”

Oops, did I say that out loud?

“Maybe it *is* stupid. I was working all day, so I could go back up to your place tonight, while you were off having fun with Scott. Decided to go on another date with the golden boy?”

Kali returns, and the wide grin on her face falls the second she sees her cousin. Turning on her heels, she flees to the safety of the storeroom again.

Slipping off the stool, I turn to face Evan properly. Somehow, he's already there, standing mere inches from me, forcing me to tilt my head back to look up at his feral eyes.

“Is that why you're in a mood?” I ask, and his face twitches. Fury makes all the angles on his gorgeous face hard.

“I'm not *in a mood*. I'm fucking pissed off.”

My gaze drifts away from his face, to the veins bulging in his thick neck, to his muscular shoulders. Biting my lip, I take in how his t-shirt stretches around his biceps, just tight enough at the chest to show off his defined pecs without being

obnoxious. My hands lazily stroke down his powerful arms, enjoying the heat of his skin and how hard those muscles are, rippling just below the surface.

“But you went up to my place to check things out tonight, anyway.” Letting my fingers trail across his stomach, I enjoy how his abs clench under my touch.

“Yes, but I’m still not fucking happy. And instead of staying inside Maisy’s where you’re safe, you’re here, getting drunk in my fucking bar.”

He saw me talking to Scott, and even though he is angry and jealous, he still went out of his way to help me. Evan’s secret is out. Despite what he’d love me to believe, he’s a good guy.

“Would you prefer I get drunk somewhere else?”

I look up at him from under my lashes and blink, hoping I look seductive and not like I’ve got something stuck in my eye. Tucking one finger inside his belt buckle, I give it a tug. Scott might be hot, but it’s nothing like the chemistry I have with Evan.

“That’s not the point, and you know it,” he grumbles, snatching my hands away from his body and holding them out to the sides. “How were you even planning on getting home in a storm, Holly?”

Even the fact that he’s still concerned for my well-being is turning me on. Plus, he’s so bossy and serious. *Yum*. Clenching my thighs together, I try to ease the ache there. I so badly want this man; the man who is currently looking at me like I’m high on something other than his addictive presence.

“You’re so sexy when you’re being all growly,” I sigh, leaning forward to press my nose into his chest and inhale deeply, like the weirdo I am. My body rubs against his, my swollen breasts pressing against his torso. I’m only wearing a thin top; he has to feel my hard nipples against him.

“What the hell is going on?” he mutters to himself, pulling at his short dark hair as I grip his t-shirt in my teeth and give it

a tug. He looks completely lost when I nip him through the material, damp from the rain.

When I look up at him again, his angry face has disappeared. Now, he looks somewhere between confused and like he wants to eat me alive. Suddenly, I'm being walked backward, and my ass hits the wooden bar just as two thick, tanned arms bracket me on either side.

An exhilarating thrill races through me. I have no idea what he's going to do next.

"I spoke to Scott. Big deal. Are you going to keep moaning about it or kiss me?"

CHAPTER 28

EVAN



“Don’t speak his fucking name. The only one I want to hear from these lips is mine.”

My head is spinning as I stare into Holly’s heated brown eyes. Behind her, my fingers grip the edge of the counter so hard, my knuckles hurt, but it’s the only way to stop myself from grabbing hold of her. I know she’s just being bratty to provoke me. God help me, I love it.

She’s acting like having Scott fucking Golden inside her car and carrying her bags is nothing, when she knows he likes her. I don’t want any other man thinking he has even the tiniest chance with her, and that thought floors me.

Before Holly, I gravitated toward quieter women. I thought they would be the perfect balance for my aggressive, dominant nature. Amanda was quiet and caring, she gave me space when my mood went dark. I wanted that because I was always afraid I’d lose control.

Two feisty personalities clashing over every little thing seemed like a terrible idea, until now. Now, it seems like a fucking incredible idea.

Heat courses through my veins, and it’s not all down to how sexy she looks. Something about her being bratty and challenging me has me harder than I’ve ever been in my life. I can see myself getting addicted to this back and forth.

My beast is eager to show her who’s boss, and the glint in her eye tells me she’ll love every minute of it. Instead of being worried as she should be, she stares up at me with those big

doe eyes and tips her head back, arching into me. The movement presses her firm breasts harder against my chest, her pelvis against mine.

“Holly, do you know what you’re doing?” I warn her, needing her to realise she’s playing with fire.

Holly doesn’t say anything for a few long, agonising seconds, but the heady scent of her arousal answers for her. It tells me all I need to know about what her body wants, but I’m more interested in her mind. Finally, she nods and fists my t-shirt in her hands, tugging me closer to her.

“You should be afraid of me, Holly. I’m not a good man, and this isn’t a game,” I give her one last chance to back out. I don’t know whether I’m talking about her teasing me about Scott, the fact that she’s drunk off her ass in my bar with no way home, or this thing that’s building between us. Maybe it’s all three.

Her dark hair curls around her face, and I can’t help grabbing a curl and tugging on it. My gaze fixes on her plump, rosy lips, waiting for her to tell me no.

My fingers drift from tucking the rogue curl behind her ear to sliding down the side of her neck. I follow her pulse down to her heart pounding under her delicate skin. Her skin is so soft, her throat so vulnerable; the predator in me can’t resist wrapping my fingers around it; my grip firm, but careful.

“Do I look like I’m playing?” she answers quietly. There’s no hint of doubt in her voice as she places her hand on top of mine, tightening my grip on her fragile neck. Waiting for the fear I expect to flash in her eyes, I let out a deep groan when her lust deepens. Her pupils dilate further, and her eyes dance with excitement.

Looking to the ceiling to gather myself, I feel the rumble in my chest rather than hear it. Leaning in, I drag my lips from above where my hand collars the base of her throat up to her jaw, nipping, licking, sucking as I go.

“You taste like heaven,” I mumble against her warm flesh. She shivers beneath my touch, and my dick jerks in my pants

at her reaction. Fuck, she's so responsive. "I bet if I laid you out on this bar and licked your pussy, you'd taste as sweet as your tight little cunt felt around my fingers."

Her whimper goes straight to my balls. I long to sink deep inside her. I need to see if she's as spirited when she's in the throes of ecstasy, but my eyes land on the brown bottle sitting half empty on the counter behind her.

"But we won't find out just yet."

My lips brush her ear as I whisper, my hand moving to her hair and gripping it tightly. She moans with desire before the words filter into her lust-addled brain.

"What? What do you mean?" she blurts out with a tiny shake of her head, confusion clouding her pretty features.

"Kali has been feeding you alcohol, Holly. When I fuck you, I want you to remember it." I'm pissed off at my cousin for giving such strong liquor to this tiny human.

I push that down and focus on the delectable woman in front of me, whose outrage is now steadily rising. Fuck, if she isn't making it even harder to not touch her tonight.

"The next day, I want you to remember where every little delicious ache and pain came from, because I know every second is going to be burned into my brain forever."

Kissing her to ease the sting of shutting this down, I show her just how much I want her. I need to make sure she understands this is nothing to do with her, merely a rain check rather than a pass. Using my fist in her hair to hold her in place, I pour my need for her into that kiss.

Our tongues touch and lips move over each other in a sensual dance that feels like we're made for each other. She sinks into me, and it's so good, I could kiss her all night.

"More than that, I need to be sure that you know exactly what you're agreeing to. Because if we do this, I'm going to own you, Holly. I'm going to own that pussy, this sexy body, and that smart mouth. And once I do, I might never let you go."

Nipping her bottom lip, I pull back with a pained sigh, keeping our bodies pressed tightly together.

“What if this is your only chance?” she whispers, her lips turned up in a teasing smile. I try to hide my amusement at her sassy response, but I fail miserably.

“Then you’ll have had a lucky escape, Holly.”

She’s about to say something else, but I don’t want to hear her telling me that’s not true, or that I’m a good guy, or whatever other kind words she’s planning to give. Instead, I kiss her again, grabbing her luscious ass in both hands before giving it a hard slap, making her shriek.

“Come on, gorgeous, let’s get you back to Maisy’s.” The mention of Maisy has her frowning, so I grasp her hand and try to lead her to the door before she argues with me. “Kali, go home. Nobody will be out tonight,” I call out.

Kali emerges from my office, giving me a thumbs up and Holly a wave, her eyebrows shooting up when she sees our entwined hands. Giving her a look that says keep your mouth shut, I rest a hand on Holly’s back as we step out into the pitch-black night.

With the storm building, the heavy clouds have blocked out all the light from the moon and stars. The atmosphere is oppressive, with strong winds blowing through the trees in a loud roar. I can almost taste the rain that’s coming.

Holly pulls up her hood, grinning at the wildness of the weather, which has worsened considerably as the day has gone on. When she slides into my truck and I close the door, relief floods through me.

She’s safe.

When Maisy told me she went to the bar and hadn’t come back, genuine panic gripped me. I can barely remember the drive down the mountain. I feel much more content now that she’s near me, although that in itself is another cause for concern.

As massive drops pelt the windscreen, I turn on the wipers. I go to reverse out of my spot but freeze when two yellow eyes

peer straight back at me from the darkness. Holly chats away beside me, completely oblivious.

The beast and I stare at each other silently, and I can almost feel its fury and jealousy, even from fifty metres away. It was watching the bar, waiting for her. Stalking her.

It's no coincidence. It knew she was at Maisy's and probably followed her here, for fuck's sake, waiting for the darkness to fall outside *my* fucking bar for the chance to steal her from me, to hurt her. Rage grips me as I realise just how close this evil creature was to getting his claws into Holly.

It's not going to happen. My hand flies to the door handle, my beast intent on getting out and tearing this animal to shreds, but when Holly's small hand lands on my thigh and my eyes go to her perplexed face, I'm momentarily distracted. When I look back, the eyes are gone.

Cursing, I face her again, frustrated that in this torrential downpour, following the trail will be impossible. What was I going to do, anyway? Shift into my beast and murder someone right in front of Holly?

"Are you okay?" She gives my leg a gentle squeeze. My chest tightens as I stare into her trusting face. She's a sitting duck.

"No, I'm fucking not. You're not going to Maisy's. You're coming with me."

CHAPTER 29

HOLLY



Evan's fingers slowly uncurl from around the door handle, the plastic creaking from the force of his grip. He places both hands on the steering wheel, breathing in and out steadily, never taking his eyes from the dense forest across the street from The Claw.

His normally grey eyes blaze gold in the reflected light; the dark shadows make his features look angular and sharp. Rage pours from his tense body, every muscle coiled tight. He seems to grow in size, taking up more space in the cab, as his bulk becomes more and more intimidating.

I follow the direction of his gaze into the trees; I can't see anything beyond the sheets of rain and the inky blackness, but I know Evan can.

Any playfulness from earlier is gone. I'm immediately sober, like someone just dumped a bucket of cold water over my head.

"Evan, what's going on?"

My voice is quiet. I feel like anything loud or sudden will spook him. He doesn't answer; he just slings one big arm over the back of my seat and reverses, eyes still riveted on the swaying trees.

The silence as we pull away is stifling; the air in the truck, heavy and oppressive. Veins bulge in his hands and forearms, and his skin looks stretched as he clenches his fists.

Suddenly, I'm not excited about getting him all to myself. I'm on edge and, frankly, a little uncomfortable with his rapid change in demeanour. Shifting in my seat, I rest my back against the door and try to get a read on him. Repeatedly, his eyes flick to the rear-view mirror, and I swivel in my seat to see what he's looking at.

"Evan, you're freaking me out." His head twitches at my bluntness, but he still refuses to look at me. The corded muscles in his jaw bunch, and his lips stretch thin in a silent snarl as he spits out his words.

"It was there," he growls. "Waiting."

Why the hell are we leaving then?

"But what about Kali? Evan, go back and we'll give her a lift home, too." Gripping his arm, I stare back down the winding road at the rapidly disappearing rustic bar. "Evan, go back! What if it's trying to get into the bins and she goes outside?"

"It's not after the fucking bins, and we're not going back!" he snaps, shrugging my hand off his arm and continuing to look ahead instead of at me. "Kali is fine."

Gobsmacked, I stare at him in disbelief. What kind of callous asshole leaves his cousin to deal with a rogue bear on her own?

"Stop! Let me out of this car."

He doesn't say a word, but the clunk as he locks the doors says more than any words could, and he continues to drive. The muscles in his arms look like they're about to burst through his shirt, and his jeans are bulging at the seams across his thick thighs.

"You're a jackass," I mumble, arms folded across my chest as we continue down the road. The asphalt looks like a river now with the amount of water being dumped by the black clouds overhead. Evan scoffs, but that's it.

I twist, half-turning my back on him as my anger rises. To think, I was throwing myself at him only a few minutes ago. I'm busy planning how I can jump out when we get to the

cabin, and make it inside without looking at him, when I realise he's blown straight by it. He's not going toward my place, but continuing up the mountain to his.

"Hell no. I'm not going home with you." With a bitter laugh, I shake my head in disbelief at his audacity. "You don't want to tell me what's going on and you're going to be a dickhead about it? Fine, but I have no intention of spending any more time in the company of *this person*."

I'm waving my hand in his direction when the truck skids to a halt in the middle of the road. In this wet weather, it's a miracle we don't aquaplane straight into the ditch.

Shrieking, I brace my hand on the dashboard as we jerk to a stop. I open my mouth to spit venom at him; the recklessness of his action causes my adrenaline to spike and my senses to go on high alert. I'm all set to go toe to toe with him, but his eyes flash with something wild, telling me to keep my mouth shut.

"This *is* the real me, Holly. *I warned you*," Evan sneers at me, a wild expression on his face as he angles his body to face me, finally looking at me properly for the first time since we left. Gritting my teeth, I wait for the real reason he's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

"That animal is following *you*. *Tracking you*. It doesn't want Kali. It's not just hanging around outside Maisy's and The Claw and John's cabin by fucking chance." He's shouting and he looks tormented. "But he can't have you. You're mine, and even if you fucking hate me for it, I'm going to make sure nothing happens to you, too."

He slams his fist hard against the dashboard, and I shrink back, stunned. I blink at him as he growls in frustration and throws the truck into gear, covering the distance to his house at a terrifying speed.

When we get there, I'm in no rush to get out. The trees swaying in the strong winds look ominous. The wildness fills me with a fear of what's lurking just out of sight, instead of the peace I used to feel in being surrounded by nature.

It can't be true, can it? Why would a bear be stalking me? Even if it was, surely it's not following a truck, so what's the hurry?

However, as I watch the hulking man beside me scan the area around his house before climbing out, I know this is serious.

When he marches to the side door of his house to unlock it before coming back to open my door, I do what I'm told.

The footprints under my window take on a whole new, far more menacing meaning. I glance at Evan again as he ushers me inside, trying to shield me from the worst of the rain with his enormous body. The anger rolling off him has eased after his outburst, and I can only focus on one thing.

He knew.

CHAPTER 30

HOLLY



Evan suspected from the very start that it was more than a hungry animal looking for food, getting too brazen. That's why he didn't want me up there with him; that's why he was so alarmed when I saw something in the trees outside Maisy's.

When we get inside, I shake my arms to rid myself of the chill and bend to take off my shoes, not wanting to track mud through his cabin. Evan's presence looms beside me as he does the same and straightens, waiting for me to finish.

My heart pounds in the quiet, his overwhelming emotions smothering my own and making my head spin. It's like I can feel him.

I'm so angry at him for being such a stubborn, domineering, jackass, but when he said "*too*", my heart broke a little for him. John is missing. He must be hurting. Maybe the way he's acting is more about that, than about me.

Pushing my shoulders back, I straighten, resigned to being the sensible person here and remaining calm. I know nothing about wild animals, but there must be something we can do. Maybe, if we contact the rangers, they can arrange for the animal to be relocated. There must be some kind of procedure for bears that become a danger to the public?

"Evan, I... I appreciate your help. I really do. But I'm sure this isn't as big a deal as you're making out..."

He steps into my space, and instinctively I step back. My shoulders hit the white wall of his mudroom, and I press my

hands to his chest to keep him at bay.

“What are those?” he interrupts, his gaze darting to the side at the three boxes of John’s belongings, which Ben has pushed into the corner. Getting whiplash from the sudden about-turn in this conversation, I frown at him in confusion.

“I gave them to Ben. I thought you guys might like to keep them, but I can take them back if it’s too much...”

My eyes meet his, his expression unreadable. He stares down at me, silent and motionless like a statue. Except for his eyes, which search my face. For what, I don’t know. His damp hair looks jet black, his shirt already soaked after the quick dash inside. When his thumb grazes my lips, I shut my eyes, not sure what to feel after this emotional rollercoaster of a day.

“Holly?” he whispers, running his nose along mine, his hot breath dusting my cheek and making me shiver. Nuzzling against me, he repeats my name softly, and any notions I had of staying distant melt away when he drags his lips ever so lightly across mine. “I’m sorry.”

Keeping my eyes closed, I nod, or nod as much as I can with my face still gripped between his hands. I feel him shake his head, refusing to believe my simple acceptance of his apology. He eases his body against mine and lowers his lips to my neck, kissing my exposed skin like a caress.

“I’m really sorry.”

I’m weak, pathetically so, I think absentmindedly as his hands slide back past my ears and across my scalp before tangling in my hair. The sharp pinch as he tightens his grip is sore but exhilarating at the same time, but then he’s back to caressing and stroking, leaving me in a spin.

“You can’t speak to me like that.” My words are a breathless whisper, not remotely convincing, and I should be ashamed of myself for not standing up to him more emphatically.

Evan nods, nipping and biting as his lips ghost past mine, teasing up and down the other side of my neck. I can’t let him

railroad me into doing whatever he wants just because he has me under his spell.

While this is no way to build a relationship, I decide I'll worry about that later. I'll give him hell when he's finished grovelling, because I'm enjoying this. With a weak-willed moan, I let my head fall back against the wall and give him full access to my throat. He licks the base of my neck in that dip between my collarbones before kissing his way north, over my chin, firmly taking my mouth with his.

A moan that sounds completely pornographic, even to my ears, escapes me as he rolls his hips forward. He wants this as much as I do. His erection presses into my stomach, and I squeeze my thighs together, my pussy clenching in anticipation.

I want to touch him, to feel his weight in my hand. The thought of having him at my mercy is doing something funny to my insides, and I rock my pelvis, grinding my need against the thigh he's pushed between my legs.

"I'm an ass. I'm sorry."

Briefly, he pulls back and stares right into my soul. I see the regret shining in his eyes, along with pure, unadulterated lust. "Let me show you, Holly. Let me make it up to you."

He's deadly serious. There's no hint of a smirk or a twinkle in his eyes—just pure fire.

"Okay," I whisper, suddenly feeling nervous at the intensity. It was all fun and games when I wanted to fool around earlier, but this is different. This man isn't playing.

Without breaking eye contact, he takes my fingers gently in his and walks backward, pulling me deeper into the house. I don't take in one bit of the layout or decor as we move—my eyes never leave Evan's handsome face as he leads me down a corridor. He kicks open the door behind him, not even flinching when the handle hits the wall with a loud bang.

The second we're through, he pulls me to him, wrapping me up in his big, powerful arms, and crashes his lips down on

mine. His smell, his warmth—it's all addictive. I feel every nerve in my body come alive as I let his desire consume me.

Desperate to feel his skin on mine, I slide my fingers under his t-shirt and sigh when they meet hot skin stretched over firm abs. He hums in delight against my mouth as I trail one finger along the top of his jeans, dipping slightly below the waistband, teasing his sensitive skin.

When the door closes behind me, and it's just me and Evan, alone in his bedroom, my heart skips a beat. This is big. I can feel it in my bones.

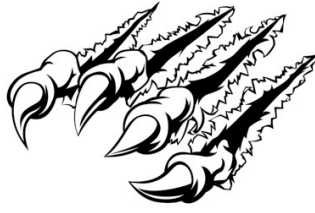
This man is going to ruin me.

I can't bring myself to care, though, when his tongue is slipping inside my mouth, teasing me with hints of what's coming. His huge hands are palming my ass possessively, so I press my body closer to his, the appreciative growl rumbling deep in his chest making me feel like a queen.

One thing is for certain: there'll be no going back after this.

CHAPTER 31

EVAN



Holly's soft skin glows in the dim light. The howling wind rustling in the leaves and the rain pelting against the glass sound untamed, like the beast inside me. Outside, the storm is whipping through the trees. Inside this room, time is standing still. As I lower her to the bed, Holly's big brown eyes shine up at me, nervous but trusting. Her silky, dark brown hair fans out in stark contrast to the white sheets.

Unspoken words hang heavy in the air between us. This isn't just about sex.

I *am* sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at her. The way I spoke to her was unacceptable. When I called Maisy and she told me where Holly was, blind panic gripped me. I knew Kali was at the bar, and no man would get past an angry Kali, but we're not dealing with a human. The fact that it was lurking around both the cabin and Maisy's tells me it has fixated on Holly.

Finding her standing there with Kali was such a relief. She seemed happy and carefree, if not a little tipsy and way too flirty for me to resist. I hope that was specifically for my benefit and not just any man who would have wandered into the bar. Her bratty attitude was so hot and so frustrating at the same time.

Then, spotting those yellow eyes staring out from the gloom sent my protective instincts into overdrive. I've tried to pretend my attraction to her is normal. She's a beautiful

woman, and I'm a man who has been single for far too long. It's natural that we're drawn to each other.

It's not just that, though. I've tried to convince myself I'd be this protective of anyone I thought might be in danger, but I wouldn't be. She's special to me.

The urge to morph into my beast, to let his rage out and kill to protect my mate, is overwhelming. And that's what he's decided she is. Not just a woman he's infatuated with, but his other half, and the one meant to be ours. He wants to feel the damp earth under his paws as he hunts whatever mangy beast dares to come into his territory and hurt her.

I want the satisfaction of sinking my long, black claws into his thick hide and gutting him for making her feel even an ounce of fear. The sudden realisation he wants to claim her as his was like a punch to the gut. As is imagining what he'll do to her afterward, if the missing women from our town suffered the same fate.

I freaked out instead of taking care of Holly, reassuring her, and making sure she was okay. I let my fear and anger get the better of me, and she took the brunt of it.

Not for the first time, my bad temper had me lashing out at the wrong person.

I already felt terrible when we pulled up to the house and she wouldn't look at me. When I saw all the boxes of John's belongings, things she could keep for herself but is generously handing over, it confirmed exactly how perfect she is.

I'm not good with words, so I'll have to show her a different way. I need her to believe me, to see I'm serious about this.

Stripping my rain-soaked t-shirt over my head and tossing it to the side, I drop one knee onto the mattress and lean over her, unable to resist touching her. She props herself up on her elbows, watching me with a hunger that makes my chest swell.

Holly takes in the tattoos covering my shoulders and chest, and her fingertips trace the designs while I work intently on stripping her. She giggles as I struggle with her wet jeans,

kicking to help me get them past her ankles, leaving her in nothing more than her underwear. Taking a moment to soak in her glorious body, I curse.

“You’re stunning.” She chuckles but doesn’t shy away from my gaze. This isn’t a laughing matter to me; it’s too important for that. When I push back to my feet and my hands fall to my belt, she’s not laughing anymore.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I open the buckle and slide it free.

“Are you ready for my apology?”

Popping open the top button of my jeans, I pause, waiting for Holly’s reaction. She’s staring at my hands, her breathing coming in shallow little pants.

“Holly? Look at me,” I order.

When she complies instantly, her eyes widening in excitement, my cock twitches. She’s a complicated mix of feisty and playful, stubborn and agreeable, and my mouth waters at the prospect of what’s ahead.

“I don’t fuck around. This is not a one-time thing. If you’re not sure, you need to tell me right now.”

That’s all the warning she’s going to get. Instead of answering me, Holly pushes to her knees, her hair tumbling softly around her shoulders. My hand reaches out to stroke the silky strands. I wrap one piece around my finger absentmindedly as she opens each button on my fly at a leisurely pace, completely absorbed in her task.

“Holly,” I whisper, my fingers wrapping around the back of her slim neck. “Answer me.”

She looks up at me again and nods.

“I know, Evan. Whatever this is, I want it too.”

Fuck.

Bending to kiss her fiercely, I cup the back of her head and lower her back to the mattress. I grab the waistband of my jeans and shove them down, taking my boxers with them.

Crawling over Holly, I kiss the inside of her ankle, then her knee, before sliding my hand up her leg as I move.

I can smell how wet she is already. Groaning, I stop to press a trail of kisses along the seam of her panties from the top of her thigh out toward her hip. Her skin erupts in goosebumps, and she squirms with a sharp intake of breath, edging up the bed away from me. Clamping one big hand across her waist, I keep her where I want her, kissing and licking my way across her soft, flat tummy and up toward her full breasts.

When my rock-hard length brushes against her leg, Holly moans, low and needy, and I growl, fired by her desire for me.

“Did you just growl at me?” she whispers, amused, as I pull the cups of her sheer bra down and take one nipple between my teeth while my hand caresses the other.

Using one knee to part her legs further, I press my thigh against her aching clit. She groans and pushes hard against my leg, seeking more friction and more contact. One sharp tug and I tear her panties, throwing the torn scraps atop my bedside locker.

“Hey!” she exclaims, indignant at my rough treatment of her flimsy underwear, but I smother her complaints with a kiss. Her pillowy lips give in to me, granting me the access I need without resistance. And I do *need* it. Our lips move perfectly in sync with one another, hungry and driven.

Holly brings her hands to my shoulders, fingernails digging hard into my tight muscles. When our tongues meet, she rewards me with little whimpers and noises of encouragement, spurring me on.

Replacing my thigh between her legs with my hand, I drag one fingertip through her wetness. Knowing how turned on she is, already, fills me with satisfaction.

“So wet for me, Holly. That’s my good girl,” I whisper against her lips, my tone boasting as I revel in her arousal.

This kind, sexy-as-hell woman wants me, even after seeing my grumpy side. *She doesn’t really know you*, an irritating

voice inside my head warns, but I push it aside. Right now, I'm too selfish to listen to anything that might ruin this. I dip my finger inside her delicious warmth, intending to ease into things, but it feels too good.

As I push one finger, and then two, inside her heavenly cunt, Holly arches, gripping my forearms as I curl my fingers and find that magic spot inside her.

"Evan," she cries, startled, her gaze meeting mine as she drops back onto the pillows. Throwing one arm over her eyes, she turns her face away from me, holding back the delicious noises I want to hear.

"No," I snap, tangling my fingers with hers. Pulling her arm away from her face, I hold it above her head. I want to see every exquisite expression as I stroke her g-spot slowly, over and over, loving how she wriggles and writhes at my touch as I grind my palm hard against her clit.

Her thighs clamp hard around my hand, and I grin at the idea that she thinks that would ever stop me—not when she's clearly enjoying it so much. She bites her lower lip, and her dark eyelashes flutter against her cheeks as she squirms and tenses, fighting the release I can feel building.

"You look so cute when you're trying not to cum," I whisper against her mouth, dragging my lips to her ear, nibbling and licking, then moving to her neck. "I can feel your pretty pussy quivering around my fingers. Just relax, Holly. Give in to me."

Possessiveness swells up inside of me. She's mine. Her orgasm is mine. I'm getting it from her, even if she thinks she doesn't want to give it to me.

"Fuck," she whimpers when my hot breath tickles her neck and I lick the same spot, knowing exactly what it does to her. Her insides clamp down on my fingers, and her hips buck as she chases her pleasure, wanting her release and afraid of it at the same time.

"Give it to me. I want to feel you on my fingers so I know you can take my cock," I command, changing the pressure on

her clit to a circling motion. Her hand is still gripping my arm, almost painfully, as if she's afraid I'll stop what I'm doing.

“Once you come, you're mine, Holly.”

It's not a threat—it's a promise. It's probably shitty to throw that at her when she's right on the edge. Her eyes fly to mine, and the raw intensity in my expression is enough to tip her over.

“Evan! Oh!” Holly calls loudly as she bucks under my hand, her nails digging into my skin hard enough to leave marks. The sting just drives my desire higher, but I hold back and take my time, enjoying the sight of her boneless and sated as she flops back, chest heaving and flushed.

Nuzzling into her neck, I press kisses to the delicate skin and breathe in her scent while I continue to stroke her gently through her orgasm. My beast is content to let her luxuriate in the afterglow of her release. I feel her tremble with little aftershocks as I trail my fingers gently up her side and around the underside of her breasts, loving how soft her skin is.

“How did you do that? That was ridiculously fast,” she whispers, blinking up at me in wonder. I finally release the arm pinned over her head and bring it down to my face, kissing her knuckles tenderly before turning her hand and kissing her palm.

“I hope that's not what you're going to be saying after round two,” I murmur. My ability to restrain myself is wearing thin the longer I touch and admire the curves of her body. She gives me a slap on the shoulder for my lame joke, giggling happily. I'm enjoying this moment, but I want to know what it feels like to be inside her, to feel those quivers and tremors around me as I thrust home.

“Round two?” Holly murmurs, smiling seductively at me. She leans up and wraps her slender arms around my neck, pulling me in for a long, leisurely kiss. I kiss the inside of her elbow as her nails lightly scratch my scalp, making me shiver. Adjusting, I move my hips between her legs, and she immediately responds, wrapping them around my waist and pulling me closer to her body.

“Mmhmmm,” I mumble against her lips, pressing her tight to me so her breasts rub against my chest. Feeling her limbs draped around me is everything. I’ve waited long enough; I can’t hold back. Gripping my throbbing length, I press against Holly’s entrance, fighting the urge to push forward immediately. Instead, I drag my cock up and down through her wetness, the head glistening with her desire for me.

“No going back, Holly.”

I meet her gaze briefly before my eyes drift back to where we’re about to be joined. Something about the sight stirs a need I’ve never felt with anyone. To knot her. To breed. Giving into my primal needs, I push my hips forward; sinking into her warmth, I throw my head back with a low growl.

“Fuck,” I groan as I thrust inside. Holly’s gasp tells me she feels the tight fit as much as I do. Her pussy grips me like a vise, and I grit my teeth, forcing myself to hold still and give her some time to adjust.

When the death grip her legs have on my hips loosens, I move again, slowly, carefully. Her pelvis rises to meet me as I pick up the pace, growling and groaning at pleasure like nothing I’ve felt before. A feeling of euphoria swirls around me, and I’m dizzy with the strength of it.

Is it the anticipation? Was it the back and forth, the magnetic sexual tension, or the fight we had earlier that’s making this so incredible?

“What...? Evan, oh God, I’m already...”

Holly’s nails bury themselves into my shoulders as she grinds her pelvis against mine, seeking more and more friction. Taking her ankles, I pry her legs from around my waist and toss them over my shoulders.

Pressing feather-light kisses to the inside of her calves, I let her get used to the deeper angle. Gripping her hips, I tilt them higher, filling her even more. I need to own every piece of her body, to have her feel every inch of what she does to me.

Licking my fingers, I bring them between us to rub her clit, small circles at first, then harder and harder, matching the punishing pace of my thrusts as I pound hard into Holly. She mewls, overwhelmed, and her head falls back, neck exposed, as she races quickly toward another orgasm. Her neck looks so tempting, and I long to lean forward and bite it. Hard. Sinking my teeth into her skin and marking her as mine.

I want to ravage this woman. This isn't sex. There's not a strong enough word to explain what's going on. This is wild and feral as I rut into her. My beast sees this as a display of ownership. He wants to mark every part of her body with his teeth and his seed, and I'm struggling to remember why I should fight him.

Her heat wrapped around my dick has my brain clouded in a fog of lust. When I nip her neck harder than I meant to, she screams my name as she comes hard. Her gaze locks on mine, and something electric pulses between us. Holly clings to me, wave after wave of her climax quivering around me. The tingle starts at the base of my spine, and I feel my balls tighten, but then, something else—pressure at the base of my cock as it begins to expand.

My knot. Fuck, my beast really is serious about this. He wants to breed this tiny, breakable human. How the hell would I explain to her why we're stuck together until it goes down?

"Holly, fuck!" I shout in alarm, pulling out with a roar just in time. I spill my load all over her stomach, painting her olive skin with ropes of my cum. Collapsing forward, I hold myself above her on my elbows, head hanging down, exhausted. As I struggle to catch my breath from the intensity of it, Holly caresses my scalp. She practically purrs, sounding sleepy but content from her second orgasm.

I want to pull her to me and wrap myself around her, bask in the sight of her covered in my markings, but I need to pretend I'm a gentleman. This was supposed to be an apology, after all.

"Let me clean you up."

With a quick kiss, I roll to the side of the bed.

“No. Don’t go,” she groans, holding my hand in her pathetically weak grip as she tries to pull me back onto the bed beside her. Pressing another kiss to her shoulder, then her chin, and then giving her another on the lips, I force myself off the bed. When I come back from the bathroom with a warm, damp cloth, Holly’s eyes are closed. She struggles to open them when she feels the bed dip with my weight.

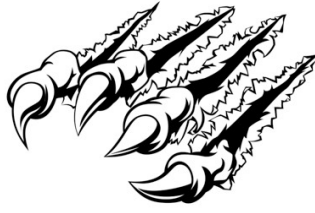
“Shh.”

Gently, I take care of her before climbing in next to her warm, pliant body, sighing in happiness. Dragging her against me, I curl protectively around Holly’s slight frame. This moment feels so right, it makes me deliriously happy and extremely worried in equal measure. This woman has me, hook, line, and sinker. I’ve never experienced anything like this connection.

I know now that I’d do anything to keep her; but, doing what I need to do to keep her safe means I’ll probably lose her along the way.

CHAPTER 32

HOLLY



It feels like I'm still dreaming when I wake up under the softest duvet, in the most comfortable bed, surrounded by Evan's amazing scent. I'm afraid to move, in case I can't get back into the same perfect spot.

When I finally realise that the room is too silent and open my eyes to see the pillow beside me empty, something heavy settles on my chest.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I spy my ruined underwear on the bedside locker, and my stomach flip-flops at the memories of last night. Evan is a man who knows what he's doing. When I push to my feet and my legs wobble, I blush to myself. He *really* knows what he's doing.

In the pale, early morning light, I find Evan's discarded t-shirt and drag it over my head. Shamelessly, I take a deep breath of his masculine scent as I step out of the room in search of him. When I tip-toe out into the hall, I hear two male voices mumbling quietly in the dark. As I get closer, Ben gets more animated, and I hear Evan's trademark irritated sigh.

By the time I reach the door, Evan is already there, wrapping a thick, bare arm around my shoulder. His tattoos ripple as he pulls me to him and plants a kiss on the top of my head.

"Morning."

His voice is husky from sleep, and he keeps me tight to his side as he turns to face Ben again.

“I hear you, Ben. I do.”

Ben tries to hide his annoyance from me, but I can see it in his tense features and stiff body language.

“But you don’t care. As always.”

Ben’s fully dressed despite the early hour. The mist of rain on his jacket tells me he’s been outside already. Evan fixes him with a stern glare, wanting the conversation over now that I’m here. Ben shakes his head in exasperation before turning to me with a big, friendly smile.

“It’s good to see you, Holly. Hopefully, we’ll meet like this more often.” He glances down at my bare legs briefly. Evan growls and shoves him away, but Ben just laughs, throwing me a cheeky wink as he saunters out the door.

“Morning,” I whisper to Evan once we’re alone. Folding my arms around his waist and burying my face into his bare chest, I hum in pleasure. We stand there together, his hand stroking my hair, like it’s always been this way.

“Did you miss me?” He teases, bringing me with him to the sink, where he refills the large glass beside it with water. Evan’s body language is tense as he looks out the window into the wilderness beyond, a ghost of a frown crossing his features before he can hide it.

“I did,” I admit, folding my arms and leaning against the counter behind him. There’s a reason Ben was here before dawn, and there’s a reason Evan is distracted. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine it’s connected to the strange goings on around here lately.

He turns to face me and drinks the full glass of water, a tantalising drop of liquid running down his chin and neck before he swipes it away. Resting back against the sink, hands holding the counter at his sides, he looks at me with a serious expression. I know it means nothing good.

“You stay here and relax. I need to leave, but Ben will be around if you need anything.”

The unsaid parts of that sentence speak volumes. A seed of doubt plants itself in my chest. He said leave, not go out.

“And where will you be?” Suspicion is clear in my tone.

Crossing the distance between us, his expression turns to one of regret, and dread of what’s coming makes my stomach drop.

“Scott found something in the woods—bones. Uncovered by the storm and a falling tree... apparently. They think it’s one of the missing girls.”

Oh god. They found a body. It’s awful and sad, but at least the family will get closure and have her home to bury. Maybe this will help the police find out what happened. Pressing myself into him, needing his closeness, I try to get a read on him. He hesitates but then gives in and holds me tight.

“But that’s good, isn’t it?”

His powerful embrace has me sinking into him, relaxing into his warmth despite my desire to find out what’s going on in that head of his.

“He found them not far from here. Near my property line.”

As what he’s trying to say hangs in the air between us, my head swirls with all sorts of crazy thoughts. Stepping out of his tight hold, I look up, needing to see his face for this next part.

“But you had nothing to do with it, so why does that matter?”

With a tormented groan, he scrubs a hand down his jaw and meets my eye. The rasp of his hands dragging over his stubble is as exhausted sounding as he looks.

“I had nothing to do with it, but Scott doesn’t care. This is the excuse he’s been waiting for, and he hates me even more now that I have what he wants.”

He tucks a loose strand of my hair back from my face tenderly and smiles sadly before kissing my forehead.

“You didn’t answer me, Evan. Where will you be?”

I repeat it calmly, closing my eyes as he continues to dust my face with kisses, enormous hands cradling my neck

carefully. The feeling of being left in the dark has tears pricking my eyes in frustration.

“I’m going to find who actually did it, which is why you’re going to stay here with Ben, where you’re safe.”

Squirming, I try to break free from his grasp, but he refuses, his iron grip keeping me tight against his firm body.

“That is a stupid plan,” I snap. “What if you get hurt?”

He’s putting himself in danger unnecessarily. If there’s a killer out there, what’s to stop them from murdering Evan next?

“Promise me you won’t leave without Ben,” he demands, ignoring my question.

Ducking down, he looks me in the eye, pleading with me, and the intensity of it has my heart stuttering. Still, I hate being lied to. My mother had been keeping secrets from me my whole life, and those secrets stole something from me I can never get back. I should have had the choice about whether I wanted to know John, and I should have a choice now.

“You’re not telling me the truth. You know something, Evan, and I want to know what it is. Do you know who did this?”

“I don’t know who did it.”

There’s a but at the end of that sentence he’s refusing to voice. When I scowl at him, his hand moves to my chin and grips me tightly, pressing his lips to mine. I stubbornly refuse to let him in. Keeping my mouth shut tight, I ignore his tongue as it licks the seam of my lips, demanding entry. As much as I want to, I won’t let him distract me with his skilful kisses.

“You’ll leave if I tell you.”

His tortured voice is thick against my lips, and his fingers bite into my cheeks where he holds me in place. I can feel his desperation, his need for me to give in to him, and it’s terrifying. I know if he’s worried, I should be too.

“Maybe I’ll leave if you don’t.”

With a pissed-off snarl, he bites my bottom lip hard, and I squeal in indignation at the pain. He seizes the chance and presses his lips back against mine, shoving his tongue past my lips. Suddenly, he's taking possession of my mouth. It's dominant but oh so gentle, and I can feel him begging me, pleading with me to concede, to let him have control.

So, I do.

When I submit and let him have what he needs, I feel his legs almost buckle with relief. His knees dip as a loud rumble begins in his chest. His hands reach around and grip me behind the knees, lifting me onto the counter in one swift, effortless movement. Evan wraps them around his waist as he leans forward and kisses me with everything he has.

"Tell me," I whisper as his hands wander underneath the hem of his t-shirt and grip my ass hard. "Something weird is going on. I'm not stupid. Tell me," I demand breathlessly between kisses.

Again, he stays silent. He pushes his broad body between my thighs, and I'm instantly very aware of my lack of underwear. So is Evan, by the murmur of appreciation that escapes him as he drags a knuckle through my wetness.

"I can't. But whoever he is, he's dangerous, Holly. Promise me you'll stay here."

His long fingers tug the thin material of the t-shirt higher so he can see all of me, and he groans as he looks between us.

"So pretty," he mutters with wonder, this time rubbing a thumb over my aching clit.

"Evan, you can trust me," I try again, forcing my brain to stay focused, but he just gives a tiny shake of his head before yanking me to the edge of the counter and dropping to his knees.

"I know I can trust you. When this is over, I'll show you. I'll show you everything, but can you trust me on this? Just once."

This massive man is on his knees on the cold wooden floor of his kitchen, staring up at me from between my legs. His lips

press against the inside of my thigh as he slides two thick fingers deep inside me.

“Oh, yes,” I gasp, one hand flying to his thick dark hair and holding on tight. Leaning back on the other, I keep myself balanced as I arch back, and his mouth meets my slick, quivering pussy.

How could I not?

CHAPTER 33

HOLLY



After making me come with stunning ease, I'm still gasping for breath when Evan gets to his feet and yanks open the top button of his jeans. Standing between my shaking thighs, he pulls my hips right off the counter with one hand.

As he pulls himself free, I stare at the size of his thick cock. Staring at my exposed body, he lazily strokes himself, up and down, as his thumb trails over the swollen head, taking with it the bead of pre-cum that's already there.

My gaze drifts back up to his face as he presses his thumb to my lips, and I suck it into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it like a lollipop. His eyes blaze as he watches me in the sunrise lighting up the kitchen in warm orange hues. Fingers dig into the flesh of my ass as he keeps me balanced right where he wants me, lining up with my entrance and taking a deep breath.

“Jesus, Holly.”

Resting his forehead against mine, he drives home with one, powerful thrust, and I arch my back, gasping at the sudden intrusion. Somehow, he feels even bigger like this. I feel full, stretched, and incredibly aware of him touching and rubbing every nerve inside me as he moves.

One, muscular arm wraps around my back to keep me upright and close to him while the other is pressed flat on the gleaming counter as he powers into me, starting slowly and building up speed as our need for each other grows.

“Evan, Evan!” I’m chanting his name incoherently as he pushes me toward another orgasm. “I can’t. I can’t.”

I’ve never come through penetration alone, and I thought I never would. Yet, Evan is about to prove me wrong for the second time in a matter of hours. He can play my body like a fiddle.

“Yes, you can.” Normally bossy and domineering, Evan’s voice in my ear is reassuring. There’s no point fighting my crazy reaction to him, but Ben could be anywhere in the house. The thrill of being caught, of knowing he can probably hear us, makes it feel even more intense.

We cling to each other despite the position we’re in, like neither of us wants any space between our bodies. My hands snake up his warm back, loving the feel of his muscles rippling under his hot skin as he pounds into me. Evan adds a roll of his hips at the end of each thrust to rub my clit with his pelvis, and it drives my pleasure sky-high.

I grab his shoulders, pressing my lips to his soft skin as my mind spins from the overpowering sensations bombarding me from all angles. The feel of his thighs brushing mine. His breath, hot and ticklish on my sensitive skin. His heated stare as he wrings every last ounce of pleasure from my overwrought body.

Biting down as my climax crashes over me, I somehow stop myself from shouting out his name. My legs tremble as tingles race from my toes to every inch of my body, and I’m panting and lightheaded when

Evan groans loudly, sounding pained as he pulls out. He roughly shoves up the t-shirt I’m wearing and paints my breasts and stomach with his cum. He rocks, using a firm grip to squeeze every last drop onto my skin.

Finally, he tips forward and grips the counter on either side of me. His fingers are wrapped tight around the edge as he struggles to stay steady on his feet. Sucking in deep breaths, he looks glorious with his tanned skin glistening with a sheen of perspiration.

Lifting his head and looking at his handiwork, he hums, sounding chuffed at the mess he's made. He swipes a finger through his seed, then another, until it drips and glistens on his fingertips. Eyebrow raised, as if daring me to stop him, he doesn't bring them to my mouth as I expect.

Instead, I watch in disbelief as he nudges my thigh wider again and pushes those two fingers, covered in his cum, deep inside me.

"Evan!" I exclaim in disbelief, my eyes flashing to his in shock. "What the hell?" I assumed the reason he pulled out was because he didn't want to get me pregnant.

"You're not ripe," he mutters, sounding strangely disappointed. When he finally pulls his fingers back out of my body, we both moan, and his eyes flash to mine. "If you were, there's no way I'd be pulling out."

Staring at him open-mouthed, I'm still trying to wrap my head around what he just said when he thrusts his two wet fingers, covered in our combined juices, past my lips and drags them along my tongue before dipping back inside me again and licking them clean himself.

"I knew we'd taste fucking amazing together."

While my brain scrambles to catch up with the most shocking and yet weirdly erotic thing I've ever seen, Evan scoops me up in his arms and carries me back to his bedroom. Did I like that? My clenching pussy is telling me I did. This man is filthy, a dirty-talking sex god who has ruined me for all men.

I never thought that would be my thing, but here I am, loving it.

He lowers me onto his mattress and tucks me in, squatting beside the bed to look me in the eye once he has me bundled up like a precious child.

"I have to go. There are things about me I haven't told you yet, Holly, but try to remember this," He gestures back and forth between us, and I smile; "And ignore what they're going to tell you. Trust me."

Giving him a weak nod, I melt as he gives me a devastating kiss. I have lots of questions and important things I wanted to ask, but my brain feels fuzzy, and my eyelids droop. Vaguely, the idea crosses my mind that he's put me into a post-orgasmic coma on purpose. I smile softly at his deviousness right before I drift into sleep. He definitely did, and it worked.

I once again wake up to an empty bed, except this time, I know Evan is really gone. The wind howls through the trees outside. I'm tempted to burrow down into the covers and stay there for the day, but my brain is nagging at me to get up and work out what the hell is going on. I drag a hand through my hair, which I'm sure now resembles a bird's nest, as I once again try to locate my clothing. My panties have now been officially stolen.

Finally, I settle on one of Evan's clean t-shirts and my jeans from last night. I'm about to go in search of my bag when a loud pounding on the front door demands my attention. Ignoring it, I realise I'm still able to feel my skin tight from Evan's seed, so I decide I need a shower before I face anyone.

Unfortunately, it starts again, harder and more insistent this time. Then, a familiar voice calls out, harsh and demanding.

"Holly, open the door."

Scott. *Shit.*

Freezing on the spot as a mixture of embarrassment and panic sends my heart racing. I curse, not sure what to do. This isn't my house, after all.

"Open the door, Holly. I don't care who you date. This is more important than that. I've got something you need to know."

CHAPTER 34

HOLLY



Hesitating, I wait for Ben to appear and deal with Scott, but the house is silent. He must have gone out. Cringing at being found here, I sigh and stare at the ceiling. Only yesterday, I had been insisting to Scott that Evan hadn't slept over at mine. Instead of hiding in Evan's room until he goes away, I force myself to act like a self-confident, unapologetic, grown-ass woman.

I don't need to explain myself to anyone. Deep down, I know that, but it doesn't make me feel any better as I rest my fingertips on the door handle, taking a steadying breath before I face Scott.

Cracking the door open, I shudder as a blast of icy air blows inside and makes me acutely aware that I'm not wearing a bra. Covering nipples that could cut glass with a strategically placed arm, I peer out through the gap, straight into the eyes of a very annoyed Scott.

His charming smile is gone as he takes in my mussed-up hair and the oversized black band t-shirt I've thrown on. One that's obviously not mine.

"Hi, Scott."

He's dressed in his uniform, his top half covered by a waterproof rain jacket, which has rivers of water streaming down it. Water spills over the brim of his hat and drips off his chin as he waits expectantly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Are you not going to let me inside? I need to talk to you."

Feeling terrible about leaving him outside in such horrible weather, I grimace and fight against every well-mannered bone in my body. Clearing my throat, I muster as much courage as I can. Something about a uniform makes me eager to comply, but my instinct tells me no.

Maybe I've watched too many police shows, but I'm not letting Scott snoop through Evan's place, looking for something to use against him. Not on my watch.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Scott. This isn't my house. I don't feel comfortable inviting you inside."

Scott fixes me with a hard stare, tilting his head to the side as he studies me. There's something unnerving about the way he's observing me. He takes one step closer, his nostrils flaring as he inhales deeply, clearly angry at my response.

"I'm not a vampire, Holly. It's bucketing down out here!" he snaps, shocked at my refusal to let him inside. Maybe he's not a vampire, but he is a bit intimidating, and I don't fancy being alone with him right now.

"You better be quick then," I reply shortly, my back going up and my temper rising at his suggestion that I'm being unreasonable. My fingers grip the door tighter, determined to protect Evan's space.

Looking past him, I see his squad car parked in Evan's driveway, another police officer waiting in the passenger seat. He's staring down at his phone with no intention of joining us.

The muscles in Scott's jaw clench, but he says nothing, letting the silence hang between us. Eventually, he realises I'm not going to cave. Taking a different tactic, he points to the wilderness at the rear of Evan's house.

"We found a body, Holly. A woman's body. About five hundred metres that way." Twisting again, he points to the other side of the property, his arm outstretched. He never takes his eyes from mine. "And only about a hundred metres over there, buried jewellery and a smashed phone. Do you really think that's just a coincidence?"

Remaining quiet, I wait for him to get whatever he needs off his chest. I can see the anger building within him, and I brace myself for it. Evan's right—this isn't just about him. I've made things worse.

“For fuck's sake, Holly. There is a dead body buried in this guy's back garden, a man I warned you was trouble, and you've got nothing to say?”

My stubborn streak makes an appearance as I narrow my eyes at him and lift my chin. He's not going to get to me, and he's definitely not coming in. He shouldn't be speaking about this case with me, and he definitely shouldn't be talking about Evan as though he's already been proven guilty.

With every word he says, my respect for him drops a little more, even if, in his head, he's trying to help me.

“What do you want me to say, Scott? He didn't do it.”

Of course, these missing women freak me out, and with a body being found nearby, of course, I want to know what's going on, but my intuition tells me to trust Evan. Scott takes a breath, as though he's about to debate that with me, when a black van appears through the trees. It crawls down the road before stopping just short of Evan's driveway.

We both watch two men step out and climb into boiler suits, retrieving heavy-looking black cases from the rear. The other police officer climbs out of Scott's car and wanders over to them before turning and pointing in the direction of the body.

Scott sighs loudly and shakes his head, giving me a disappointed look. He raises a hand to the three men now looking in our direction, waiting for Scott to join them. While they're waiting, they stretch yellow crime scene tape along the side of the road, blocking access. It twists and whips in the wind as they attempt to tie it to the trees. In weather like this, it'll last about five minutes.

“I want you to realise that Evan King is dangerous. You've no idea who you're sleeping with. He's a fucking monster,

Holly. You should run, because when he shows you who he really is, you'll wish you never met him."

His words sting, because there is a grain of truth to them. Scott sees they've hit their mark and grunts, finally understanding that I'm still not going to turn on Evan. He *is* hiding things from me, but I'm choosing to trust him. Hopefully, I won't regret it.

"Tell King I'll be back. He's going to have to answer my questions at some stage, and the longer he avoids me, the worse it looks."

Scott glances longingly inside Evan's home one last time, and his intense gaze fixes on the three boxes pressed up against the back wall. That tells me I did the right thing. He can come back with a warrant if he wants to search the house and do it the right way.

"Holly, how can you be so certain he has nothing to do with these missing girls? That he had nothing to do with John?" Sounding reasonable and with a look of genuine concern on his face, Scott is like a different person now, the charm working overtime to convince me of his point. "It'd be a hell of a thing to have to go back and tell your mother you were fucking around with the man who probably killed your father."

My fingers itch with the desire to reach out and slap him. How dare he try to guilt me by using my mother? Or my love life? My body, my brain, my choice. He tips his hat toward me and sighs, exasperated by the fact that he can't take advantage of Evan's absence and snoop around.

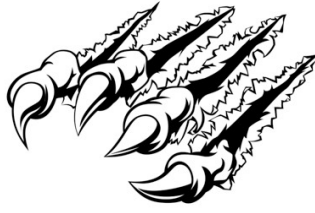
Just before he turns to leave, I grab his arm and turn him to face me.

"Scott, what's going on out here? This isn't normal," I venture, hoping to get some insider knowledge from the man who must know the goings on in this town better than anyone. Small towns can be strange, but this is completely nuts. Strange creatures in the woods. Missing people. I know crime can happen anywhere, but this seems too much.

“You don’t want to know.” His face is grim as he raises a finger and points it at me angrily. “But I will say one thing. You need to decide if you’re really so confident in King that you’re willing to chance being next. Because if you’re wrong, it could be you these guys are digging up someday.”

CHAPTER 35

SCOTT



That was bad. I shouldn't have said that. It's one thing to subtly warn Holly that King is bad news. It's another entirely to accuse him of being involved in her father's disappearance and scaring her half to death.

Fuck.

She'll definitely tell him what happened, what I said, and he'll come for me. There's no way he'll let that lie. At least nobody else heard. I'll deny it if he makes a formal complaint. As much as everyone in town loves King, they also respect how I do my job. I'm a regular boy scout to most of the people around here, and I'd like to keep it that way.

Normally, I'm able to control my frustration on the job, but this case is getting to me. I'm under so much pressure from my boss to nab somebody that it's all I can think about. All I want is for it to be over with.

John was conducting his own investigation into these missing persons cases. If there was any chance those girls were still somewhere in his patch, the ranger wouldn't rest until he brought them home to their parents. He told me that himself. Despite my efforts to convince him that if someone kidnapped them, they were likely moved somewhere else, he wouldn't give up. He didn't care what the statistics said.

Which makes me think he might have been on to something he wasn't willing to share just yet.

The boxes I saw suggest Holly has turned over all John's belongings to the Kings. Even though I went through the cabin

carefully, I'm convinced he had more recent notes hidden somewhere. He was religious about writing everything down in his journals, but I couldn't find anything for his last few weeks. Maybe he had it with him and the clues he may have found are lost forever. Still, it would have been nice to get inside King's house and have a look around. It might have given me some inspiration.

Ducking under the yellow tape, I greet the crime scene technicians. They've come to retrieve the partial skeleton and see what other evidence they might find, so they follow me through the dense undergrowth, past King's house. Quietly, I let them know that this is our prime suspect. They can look out for anything, any clues indicating the body was moved to its final resting spot, buried in the woods.

Silence descends on our little group as we approach the shallow grave. We stand in a semi-circle in the pouring rain, looking at the overturned soil and the covered bone breaking through the surface.

An old tree with expansive roots fell over, the storm finally getting the better of it, and it gave up the forest's secrets to us as its parting gift. No matter how many times I've seen it, it's always shocking to see what a vibrant human body is reduced to in a relatively short amount of time.

"Okay, people. Let's get her out of here. Just ask if you need anything."

Stamping my feet to get some feeling back into them, I move back out of the way to let them work. The sound of a camera clicking is the only noise as they work methodically to document every detail of the scene as it is. They move efficiently, keen to get out of this weather before it gets worse. I can't blame them—if this wasn't a murder case, there is no way we'd be out here with the severe weather warnings.

"You know he didn't do it, Scott."

Jumping at the sound of Ben's voice right behind me, I curse. This fucking family gets on my nerves. How can a man that big be so quiet? How long has he been here?

He laughs at having successfully given me a fright, and I bristle in annoyance. I don't have time for these games.

“Get the fuck out of here, Ben. It's a crime scene.”

He frowns, faking confusion, and I wish I could punch that smug smirk off his face. Turning in a circle, he looks toward King's house, where he's still living as a freeloader in his late twenties. The wide rear porch of the house faces straight this way, but it's too far to see through the thick undergrowth.

“I'm just out for a stroll. This is where I live, after all. Saw some strange people over here and thought I'd see what they're up to. You can't be too careful these days.”

Turning my back to him to make the point I'm not going to entertain his nonsense today, I return to watching the techs work. We might have to call it a day and come back tomorrow, but we'll do as much as possible before it becomes unsafe. It's vital they preserve as much evidence as they can before the rain washes it away.

“Is this all about Holly?” Ben asks, continuing to needle at me, despite knowing he should be nowhere near here. “It seems extreme, pinning an actual murder on my brother just because you didn't get the girl.”

Whirling on him, I get in his face. I know what Ben is, but he doesn't scare me. I might not be like him, but I'm not a pushover, either. My father was a beast, and when he discovered I'd never shift, I bore the brunt of his rage. Showing weakness made it worse because it reminded him of what I'd never be: strong like him.

Making sure my voice is calm, I look him in the eye as I speak to make sure he gets the message loud and clear.

“He can have her. I'm just doing my job, Ben. This might be hard for you to believe, but I don't spend my days plotting against your family.”

Ben grunts, casting his eye over the scene. He knows better than to ask questions, but I can see the curiosity in his eyes. Who did we find?

“Just go, Ben. Tell your brother I’ll find him if he doesn’t come to me.”

King is forcing my hand. I’d prefer not to have to get a warrant, but I will if he doesn’t appear soon. He’s not at the bar, the garage, or at home—those are the only places he goes. He’s definitely skipped town, but for how long?

I give Ben my back and wait to see if he leaves. The crack of a twig tells me he’s moved away, and I let out the breath I’d been holding with a loud sigh.

“If you fuck with Holly, you’ll see him sooner than you want, Scott. Stay away from her. She’s his.”

His voice is right beside me, and I startle. Spinning on the spot, I fume at Ben’s broad back, already disappearing through the trees. Fucking beasts. This town loves them, and has proudly hidden their secrets for generations, loving the part they play in keeping them from the rest of the world. Not me. When I found out I would never shift, I was angry. Now, I think it’s a good thing. I’d never want to end up anything like my parents.

“Sir, I think you should see this.”

My young deputy, Henry, is squatting close to the shallow grave, pointing at something with a pen as he speaks over his shoulder at me. Forgetting Ben and his antics, I stride back over to see what they’ve found. Before I even reach him, I see the curved bone exposed by the pounding rain. A second skull. This is two bodies, not one.

Henry stands, and we both stare in silence, the noises of the forest the only sounds to be heard.

“Jesus,” he mutters nervously. “This is fucked up.”

He’s seen bodies before, but those were car wrecks, fires, hiking accidents. This is different, and I can understand his unease.

“Indeed. Okay, let’s get a tent up and preserve what we can before this storm destroys our chances of recovering anything useful.”

Henry nods, trying to steel himself to do what needs to be done. It's not pleasant, but this is progress, at least. I do feel better that I can finally return these women to their families, as hard as it will be to deliver the bad news they know is coming.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I scan the surrounding forest. King could be right here, watching me, lurking in the shadows, and I wouldn't know it. In a way, I hope he *is* here to see the beginning of the end for him. I hope he's scared, because I'm going to make sure his furry ass spends the rest of his life behind bars.

CHAPTER 36

EVAN



“Don’t worry, I’m going back inside. No need to get your panties in a twist,” Ben calls out as he stalks back toward the house. Even without being able to see me, he knows I’m there. His heightened senses can probably hear my breathing. When he was talking to Scott, I’m sure he knew exactly where I was hiding.

My answering snarl leaves no doubt about how I feel about his performance as Holly’s bodyguard so far. He smirks and keeps walking, purposely not acknowledging my position, just in case anyone is watching. Not that any of these humans could see me with their weak eyesight anyway. My black coat blends in seamlessly with the dark shadows of the forest. When I want to be invisible despite my size, I can be.

Ben’s heavy boots cross the wooden porch, and the back door slams shut. I relax a little and retreat into the woods, back to my second home. Flexing my long claws, I savour the feeling of them digging into the soil beneath me. It feels good to be back on four paws and prepared for the hunt.

Someone is trying to get me out of the way, and it’s no coincidence this is coming after I finally get the girl.

Shaking the drops of water off my thick pelt, I stretch my long, muscular body and raise my nose to the air. The rain is going to make it infinitely harder to work out who’s been here lately, but I have to try. If I fail and Scott gets his way, I might not be in Sutton to protect Holly much longer.

With a stealth that not many other beasts possess, I trot through the trees, leaping over fallen logs and boulders with ease. I love the sounds of the forest; the smell of damp dirt and the feeling of pine needles under my paws soothe my soul. The trees groan and sway in the strong wind, and most animals have found shelter to ride out the coming storm. I find the second crime scene easily—Scott’s yellow tape stands out like a sore thumb in the middle of the dense woods.

Staying out of sight, I circle the area and press my nose to the ground, trying to pick any unusual scents, but there’s nothing. I dart forward under the tape and peer into the hollow at the base of the tree. There’s a purse shoved inside, along with a set of keys and what looks like either a necklace or a bracelet.

They weren’t even buried, just pushed into a gap near the roots. It’s a rushed job. The way they were left made them easy to find.

Scott went over this area with a fine-tooth comb. The entire town was out looking for any sign of these girls. When you have as many people with excellent noses as we do, there is no way this would have been missed. Those items have only been placed here recently.

I sneak close enough to Scott while he’s speaking with his deputy to hear they’re talking about how to retrieve a second body. My stomach plummets—two women have been buried out here, practically in my yard. It’s been a while since I shifted and ran close to home, but I would have scented them if they were here the entire time. Even when I’m in my human form, my sense of smell is far stronger than the average person.

Yet again, I can’t detect any scents here that I wouldn’t have expected to find. Frustrated, I take off at a gallop toward The Claw. It’s a long shot, but maybe I can pick something up there, if they were stupid enough to come closer to the bar after we left last night.

Plus, I need to check in on Kali. Even though I insisted to Holly that she’d be okay, I shouldn’t have left her on her own,

at least not without warning her.

She hasn't been herself since moving here. It was supposed to be a fresh start after getting dumped by some mystery man she refused to let me hunt down, but moving here hasn't turned out to be the new adventure she hoped for.

I wouldn't put it past her to do something reckless in search of excitement, something even more reckless than plying my girl with shots when she knew it would piss me off.

CHAPTER 37

HOLLY



The back door opening gives me a fright. I jump, pressing my hand to my heart when I see Ben step inside and shake his drenched curls, sending droplets of water flying everywhere.

He strides into the kitchen, his handsome face serious as he leans against a counter on the far side of the room. His warm brown eyes burn into mine before he stares out the window, back into the wild forest he's just come from. The wind has gradually been getting stronger, and it's so overcast outside, it feels like it's night already.

“Can you drop me back at Maisy’s? I can stay there tonight. I won’t be on my own.” Taking a sip of my coffee, I try to act casual, pretending there’s even the tiniest hope he’ll agree. With a deep laugh, Ben tips his head back, his whole body shaking before he wipes his eyes and straightens his face.

“Oh, Holly. You are fucking delusional if you think I’ll be leaving you anywhere other than here.” He’s smiling, but his tone tells me he won’t change his mind. “I’m your new best friend. You’re lucky I’m so entertaining.”

Smirking at him, I tug at the front of Evan’s giant shirt and point to my socked feet.

“Can you at least take me to get some clothes? I’m not going to run off or do something stupid. I just want to get a book and some girly things...”

Ben’s eyes slam closed, and he holds up a hand to silence me. He’s heard enough. Any hint of feminine hygiene products

is normally the fastest way to get a man to agree. They'll do anything to make you stop talking.

"Please stop."

"If Evan will be back later, I suppose he can take me..." I already know Evan won't be back. I just want to make Ben feel guilty about leaving me in the dark.

"Doubtful." Ben frowns, and I feel him waiver. "Right, come on. We'll go fast before the roads get too bad."

Smothering the grin on my face, I nod enthusiastically.

"But we're only going as far as the cabin, not all the way back to town."

His handsome face is serious, and he looks conflicted.

"Absolutely," I readily agree, running for the mudroom to get my coat and still-damp shoes before he changes his mind. My gaze falls on the stack of boxes that caught Scott's attention. He knows John was investigating the missing girls. What if my dad found something? What if that's why he 'disappeared'?

I've gone through most of his stuff, but maybe I missed something in his journals. If there really is someone stalking me, I need to find out who and why. If I'm going to be stuck here with Ben playing babysitter, I may as well have something interesting to read.

"So, what do you think is going on?" Ben concentrates hard on the wet road in front of us as I study him closely. Broken twigs and branches are scattered across the surface while a loud boom of thunder rumbles overhead. Ben gives me some serious side-eye before returning his frown to the windscreen.

"I think you're trying to get us both killed by making me go out in this."

When I don't respond to his smart comment, he sighs. He looks exhausted. I'm sure his brother being accused of murder is weighing heavily on him.

“Obviously, someone has it out for Evan, but it could be quite a few people, to be fair. He’s the most dominant...” Ben frowns and bites his lip. “Well, let’s just say that over the years, he’s pissed off plenty of people. In small towns like this, folks have long memories.”

It seems a bit extreme to go to all this trouble over a petty feud. Don’t want to talk to him? Fine. Framing him for murder seems a step too far.

“But someone didn’t kill those girls just to get back at Evan?”

That wouldn’t make sense. My brain is spinning with all the possibilities, but it’s impossible to wrap my head around why someone would do this.

“No, that’s true. So, what we have is a psychopath who Evan unwittingly got on the wrong side of and who wants to use you to get to him? Or who’s taken a shine to you and Evan’s just in the way? Not sure which way around it is.”

Shit. I never thought about it like that.

“And what about John?” I ask quietly. “What do you think happened to him?”

I need to know if his thoughts have strayed in the same dark direction as mine.

“My working assumption is he found something or was asking too many questions. He didn’t get lost. He didn’t get sick out there. We would have found him.” Ben glances quickly in my direction. “Did Evan tell you anything about what he did for us?”

Shaking my head, I say nothing, praying Ben will fill me in on the details I’m so desperate to know.

“When we were little, our parents weren’t great. They’d disappear on... extended trips and leave us home alone. John took it upon himself to take care of us. He’d make sure we went to school, brought us to his place to stay while our parents were away, and filled the fridge with food.” He smiles at the memory, even though it’s not a pleasant one. “Their

stints away got longer until eventually, when we were teenagers, they just never came back.”

Ben shrugs, as though it doesn't matter, but of course it does. It had to have hurt deeply. How could anyone just leave two boys to fend for themselves without explanation?

“I don't even know what to say.”

My heart breaks for him and for Evan. They must have been so confused.

“There's nothing to say. John stepped up and filled the gap as best he could, along with Maisy. They kept us from going into the system, but we weren't the easiest to manage. We were practically feral at one point, but he stuck with us, and never turned his back on us.”

A consequence of not turning his back on them meant splitting up with my mum. She wanted to leave Sutton, and there was no way he could leave those boys.

It must have been before they were left completely on their own, but if their parents were already unreliable, John must have been concerned about what would happen to them if he wasn't around. Mum knew, too. Otherwise, when she found out she was pregnant, she would have told him.

The whole thing is just horrendously sad for everyone involved.

Ben goes quiet when we pull up to John's cabin. He turns off the engine but leaves the lights on, the bright beams shining up at what was sometimes his childhood home, by the sounds of things.

“I can run inside by myself. It won't take me long to pack a bag.”

Ben shakes himself from his melancholy and pushes open his door, looking at the old wooden building with a look of nostalgia on his face.

“Not a hope. I'll wait out on the porch and get some fresh air.”

Rolling my eyes, I tug my hood up over my long hair and make a run for it, squealing when the stinging rain lashes at my face. It's coming sideways now with the strength of the wind, and there's no avoiding it.

Getting the key in the door as quickly as I can, I run inside and slam the door shut behind me, leaving Ben standing sentry outside. Hanging up my rain jacket, I turn, doubting the wisdom of this plan. It's a tiny cabin. I've gone over it already, and I'm not sure what else I hope to find, but I won't relax unless I try. Where would I hide something that I didn't want *anyone* to find?

Heading for the small kitchen, I mindlessly open cabinets and drawers, looking for inspiration. Ending up in the front room, I yank open every drawer on John's desk, getting frustrated at the futility of this exercise. I've already gone through these; I'm not going to find something new.

Giving up and laughing at myself for thinking I could find something when nobody else could, I stomp into the bedroom and stuff a bag with a few days' worth of clothes. With one last huff, I throw my backpack over my shoulder and turn to leave.

That's when my gaze lands on a picture hanging on the wall. It's an old saying, and my eyes well up when I realise who must have given it to him and why it's hanging on his bedroom wall twenty-something years later. Mum. It's an old Irish saying, and I have a matching one back in my apartment.

The hearts of loved ones are your strength

As my fingertips touch the glass, curiosity gets the better of me, and I lift it from the wall, turning it. Taped to the back is a thin journal, a few old envelopes bundled together, and a note addressed to Ben and Evan. *Holy shit.*

Stumbling backward, I plonk down on the end of the bed and stare down at what I've found. With trembling fingers, I remove the tape and set the picture frame down beside me. The cursive script on the envelopes is unmistakably my mother's, and I'm not mentally prepared to open those right now.

“Holly, come on! Before a tree comes down on this place,” Ben roars through the door, and I jump. Shoving the bundle into my bag, I replace the picture on the wall, kissing my fingers and pressing them to the glass. He loved her. Even though they never made it, he kept the picture and treasured it. Just knowing that makes me feel better and worse at the same time.

When I walk to the front door, Ben’s holding it open for me.

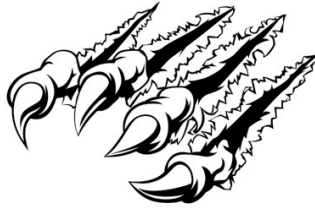
“Got everything you need?”

Avoiding eye contact as I slip back into my coat, I nod. Clutching the bag tight to my chest, I suck in a deep breath.

“I really hope so.”

CHAPTER 38

HOLLY



If I'm suspiciously quiet on the way back, Ben doesn't notice. Being at the cabin was clearly tough for him, and he's lost in his own thoughts.

Wind buffets the side of the truck as we drive back up the hill, and the normally relaxed man beside me is tense as we creep around each corner. I keep my bag gripped tightly in my lap, my fingers itching to pull out my latest finds and read them. As we pull up to the house, I'm sure I look guilty as hell when Ben turns and asks if I'm okay. I nod, hoping he thinks it's the nasty weather that has me spooked.

"This must be weird. You barely know us, and you never got to meet John. Now, all this is going on. I'm surprised you haven't run screaming from Sutton already."

He puts the truck into park and swivels so he's facing me, and neither of us makes a move to get out. Despite the warm glow of lights inside, making the house look cosy and appealing, the dash to the door is going to be miserable. Even with the heat on in the truck, I shiver. It's not even that cold out, but the dampness has seeped into my clothes, and I feel it in my bones.

"I don't scare that easily. Plus, I need to know what's going on. If there *is* someone following me, how do I know they won't find me, even if I went home?"

Humming in agreement, he gives me an impressed nod. It feels like I've passed some kind of test. Perhaps he's being protective of Evan. If Amanda leaving hit him hard, Ben might

be worried I'll bolt too and never look back. The idea of a burly guy like Evan needing protection from me is hilarious, but I've seen glimpses of his softer side. He's slowly letting me in.

"What's your plan when the new ranger arrives and you need to leave the cabin? When's that, three weeks?"

Much as he tries, the question doesn't come across as casual. He may as well have asked me what my intentions are with his brother. With how much Evan seemed to be irritated by me, the idea of something really happening between us never even occurred to me, not until last night when he was so possessive and this morning when he was so sweet.

Right before he left me with no idea when he's coming back.

"I honestly don't know. We haven't even been on a date."

Ben laughs out loud at that, a big grin splitting his face. His boyish smile is infectious, and I can't help grinning back.

"I'm trying to picture Evan on a date in a fancy restaurant. I don't think it would go well," he admits. Laughing quietly at the image of Evan sitting sulkily at a fancy table, arms crossed stubbornly over his chest, I tend to agree.

"See? I love going out and trying new places to eat. But it's a bit early to worry about that. I don't even know if he wants to date me."

Just because we had one hot, amazing night doesn't mean he wants anything more. I learned a long time ago to believe a man's actions, not his words. Once he's not in protective alpha male mode, maybe the novelty of the new girl in town will wear off and he'll forget all of this growly *you're mine* nonsense.

"That won't be an issue," Ben says wryly, reading the doubts flitting through my mind. "He hasn't been with anyone since Amanda. That's a long time, Holly."

No wonder Evan was insatiable. The man has taken sexual frustration to a whole new level.

“Tell me about Amanda. Why did they break up?”

I shouldn't ask, but the question is out before I can stop it. Ben hesitates, thinking hard before selecting his words deliberately.

“Amanda was timid and gentle. I think Evan was hoping she would rub off on him, but I never saw them as a good match. He had to hold back all the time, and when he finally *was* himself, loud and bossy, she didn't like it. Not her fault. She just never really knew who she was with until then.”

Clearly uncomfortable discussing his brother's relationship, he tips his head to the pelting rain running down the window.

“Come on, let's get indoors.”

His eyes land on the bag in my lap. Ben reaches out to carry it for me and snatches it from my grip before I have the chance to protest. He gives me a quizzical look when I go to take it back, so I drop my hands, trying to look innocent.

As my heart rate picks up, I launch myself out of the truck to hide the panic written all over my face. He's not going to open the bag and search it like some kind of prison warden, but I feel guilty for not telling him immediately about what I found.

I dart through the heavy rain and hop from foot to foot as I wait at the door for Ben to catch up. He shields me from the worst of it as he unlocks the door and ushers me inside.

“What the hell was that?” he laughs, setting my backpack down to shrug out of his jacket. I just laugh, unable to think of a decent reason for running out into the rain without waiting for him.

When we get coats and boots off and both stand straight, facing each other in the small hall, the atmosphere is awkward. I don't want to be rude, but all I want is to grab the backpack and lock myself in Evan's room to devour the journal I've found. Ben looks like he feels he should entertain me, but he doesn't want to answer more questions about Evan's ex.

“Would it be okay if I had a shower?” I ask, and Ben looks instantly relieved.

“Of course! Or would you prefer a bath? Have a nice, relaxing bath.”

He disappears to get me some towels, then leads me to the surprisingly luxurious bathroom. Ben turns on the taps, shows me where all the supplies are, and leaves me to it.

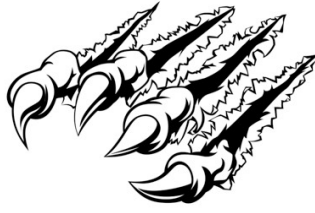
The minute he leaves, I pounce on the backpack and pull out the little bundle with shaking hands. There might be nothing in it. It could be more boring stories about fishing or new trails.

Except, I know that’s not true. If there was nothing in it, why would he hide it?

Clutching it tight to my chest, I beg John to tell me his secrets, to let me help his boy. My boy now. To stop whoever has been doing this and to make them pay for stealing my father from me before we even got the chance to meet.

CHAPTER 39

HOLLY



The bath has gone lukewarm, but I can't force myself to stop reading long enough to get out and get dressed. When I shiver, it's not just because of the tepid water: John's journal is more detailed and personal than the others I've read. This one has rattled me to my very core.

At first, I had no idea what I was looking at. My initial thoughts were that they were simply the doodles and musings of a bored man out on the trails for far too long, but no. This is who John thinks is responsible for the attacks on those missing women. The women who are currently being removed from a shallow grave within easy walking distance of Evan's house.

The drawings are rough, but they're detailed enough that I can tell what I'm supposed to be looking at: a monster, roaming the woods at night.

A beast, in the same form, sketched repeatedly, hiding in trees and clambering over rocks. He's drawn it in varying levels of detail, but from what I can tell, it's tall. The body appears humanoid, but with longer arms and legs. Its skin is covered in thick, dark fur, with sharp, black claws tipping each digit, and bulging muscles covering its body.

In some pictures, it's on all fours. In others, it's walking stooped over, but balanced on two feet. It might stand like a person, but that's where the similarities end. It has an elongated snout, almost like a wolf, but the nose is broader, its teeth longer, always drawn protruding past lips pulled back in a terrifying snarl.

That's not the thing that gets my attention, though. The biggest picture, the one that gives the best image of what this thing is supposed to look like, has two words underlined at the side that make my blood run cold. Yellow eyes. Just like the ones outside my cabin.

That's what is making me tremble with fear.

My gaze drifts to the frosted glass window on the far side of the bathroom, the reflection from the lit candles flickering in the dull glass. Is that what's lurking outside, waiting for me? Is that what was standing outside my bedroom? Where the only thing separating us was a flimsy pane of glass and a thin screen? I feel sick at the thought.

The longer I think about it, the stronger that uneasy feeling gets. As I climb numbly from the tub, flashes of the last few days fly through my mind as my brain tries to comprehend that something like this really exists.

Those yellow eyes staring out from the dark trees.

The massive footprint in the mud.

Deep gouges in the thick tree trunk.

Evan's immediate concern and insistence that I did not stay there again.

His horror when I said I saw something again at Maisy's.

Maisy's fear when she heard what was watching me.

Evan locking me in the car and speeding away from the bar after realising that thing was waiting out there for me.

They knew this was not an overly-friendly bear who got too close, or even a deranged man with an unhealthy fixation on a random young woman. It's something from a nightmare, living in the forests around Sutton. And they knew.

Dressing slowly in the comfortable leggings and hoodie I brought from John's, I suddenly feel far less safe hiding out here. I thought Evan wanted to protect me. I still believe he does, but he also wants to protect this town's secret. It's the only explanation I can come up with.

Why else would he not tell me the truth? Involve the authorities in some kind of manhunt the moment they suspected this thing was killing innocent women?

Oh god. Evan.

Is he in danger from it? Even if he's okay, who's to say anybody can stop it from breaking in and attacking me if it really wants to?

Picking up the discarded bundle of clothes from the floor, I dart across the corridor to Evan's room and flick the light switch. The house is dark and silent. Nothing. The power's gone. Without enough light to see by, I slip the journal into the pouch on the front of my sweater and creep down the hallway.

"The lights are out, Holly. I've left some candles and matches in the kitchen," Ben calls from the living room, where the soft glow of candlelight shines out into the long hallway. As if to mock Ben's pathetic attempt at restoring light, a bolt of lightning flashes across the sky, flooding the house in bright white light and making me jump.

I've got to get a grip, I remind myself. I need to keep myself ready and alert.

"Thanks," I reply, trying to sound relaxed. I don't know why my heart is racing so fast. Ben is helping Evan by babysitting me. He's not stalking me through the trees at night, but does the fact that he's helping keep me here mean he also knows what's out there? How much trouble am I in if he works out that I know?

In the kitchen, I light another small candle and sit beside it. Waiting for a few minutes to make sure Ben isn't coming in after me, I slip the journal from my pocket and open it to the last page. John's handwriting is terrible, and I squint, twisting it to see if I can make out what he's written.

With a sickening realisation, I get it. My throat constricts, and I struggle to breathe. No, no, no. Squeezing my eyes shut, I will myself to be wrong before I open them and read it again.

It's still there. *Evan has orange eyes, who has yellow?*

I remember how his eyes appeared to flash amber in the bar when he was mad. I dismissed it at the time. I thought it was a reflection from the fire or a trick of the light, but now... does that mean...

My heart pounds like a jackhammer, and I struggle to get my lungs working properly. I feel like I'm about to have a panic attack as I slowly slide off the stool and get to my feet. Gripping the counter with both hands, I spin in panic as the dreadful realisation hits me.

Evan is one. He's one of these things.

That's what John is saying. Evan has orange eyes, whereas this one has yellow. John knows what type of animal killed those women. He just didn't know which one.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. Is the entire town surrounded by these things?

When a strong hand clamps down on my shoulder, I scream and spin, trapped against the counter as Evan's dangerously handsome face dips down to mine.

"Holly? Is there something wrong?"

CHAPTER 40

EVAN



Holly gasps and shrinks back, staring up at me with wild, terrified eyes. It's a look I've seen before.

She knows.

"Nothing," she answers quickly, but her denial only confirms my suspicions. It was too fast, too definite. There *should* be something wrong. Police are digging two bodies out of my backyard as we speak, and I abandoned her with my brother all day.

Her body language betrays her further as her fingers creep along the countertop toward the small black notebook just out of her reach. I recognise it immediately. John was a creature of habit; there was always one of those lying around his cabin, and he never went out on the job without it.

Holly's blatant lie stings, even though I knew it would. Memories of Amanda fleeing from me, screaming at me to stay back and not to touch her, flood my mind. It feels like yesterday. I can feel my anger rising to the surface.

Foolishly, I had hoped Holly might be different, but clearly not. Snatching the notebook up and flicking to the first page, I smirk at Holly's horrified expression when she knows she's been busted.

"I think we both know that's not true," I snarl like the asshole I am. Frowning, I scan the pages. This is a new notebook, one I haven't seen before. I went through his belongings when he first disappeared, hoping to find this very

book, because I know he always writes down where he's going.

“Where did you find this?” My voice is bitter, devoid of any warmth, as I advance on her in the eerily lit gloom of my small kitchen. Holly presses back even further against the counter behind her with no other place to go.

This is the very counter where I was on my knees worshipping her less than twenty-four hours ago. Her dark hair is still damp, and she smells like me, the combined scent of my shower gel and the lingering hint of sex marking her as unequivocally mine. It makes me even angrier that she's looking at me with such fear.

“Evan, I...” She's flustered, and her eyes dart toward the living room where Ben was, but it's now empty. He had enough sense to leave as soon as I got back, probably thinking I'd be giving Holly something other than the third degree right about now.

“Where?” I shout. It's a demand, not a request, and she flinches as though I've struck her, curling into herself. My gut twists uncomfortably. I really don't want her to look at me like that, but John was my father, and I need to know. Maybe not in the biological sense like she can claim, but in every way that counts. How dare she withhold anything from me?

“The cabin. Hidden behind a photo frame.”

Her voice is a timid whisper, and it makes my chest physically ache to hear the nervous wobble in it. Fingers trembling, she takes the book from me, her gaze locking with mine in a silent plea for permission. Nodding, I relinquish the book, and she turns to a couple of pages near the back.

“He knew who was, or what was, hurting people, but he didn't write it down.”

Holly surprises me when she eases around to my side to show me the page she means. Front and centre is John's scratchy sketch of a beast. Afraid to look at her and see the terror return to her face, I nod and swallow, grabbing the notebook and turning my back on her.

Holding it closer to the candle, I can make out John's illegible scrawl in the margins—impossible to read for most people, but I've been deciphering it most of my life. I know what he's written immediately. *Evan's eyes are orange.*

Straightening to my full height, I turn to face Holly. I feel like there's a lead weight in my stomach, and resignation settles over me as Holly stares unseeing at the floor. It's like being on trial, knowing there's no way you can win.

“Don't you have anything else to say? No questions for me?”

Narrowing my eyes at her, my temper flares. If she's going to freak out and run, just fucking do it. I've survived it once before; I can do it again. An irritating voice inside whispers this is different. This will hurt more. I should convince her to stay. Instead of listening, I ignore it and continue to push her, to speed up the inevitable.

“Ben will drop you back to Maisy's. For your own sake, don't even think about telling anyone. Nobody will believe you, and it won't go down well with the others in town. You're in enough trouble already.”

Finally, she raises her head, and it's my turn to look stunned when the anger in her eyes matches my furious glare.

“Is that a threat?” she spits out. A bolt of lightning splits the sky in perfect time with her flash of rage. My gaze is drawn to the window, which rattles with the force of the gales blowing outside. It's going to be a rough night. There are trees coming down all over the place; Ben won't be driving her anywhere.

“You're a clever girl,” I reply, a nasty edge to my tone, continuing to play the abrasive dickhead role I know so well.

“And you're an idiot.” She storms past me back toward my room, leaving a delicious trail of her scent as she goes.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going?” I hurry after her, not even sure why I'm so mad. There's no way I'd let her set foot outside the door in this weather anyway. She can sleep

wherever she wants, and I'll take the couch. I just didn't expect her to move deeper into the house.

Quite the opposite, in fact. If anything, I expected to have to stop her from leaving.

"Go away, King. I'm not talking to you when you're being like this."

With a disappointed look over her shoulder, she keeps walking away from me, further into the dark, windowless corridor. She mustn't be able to see a thing, but stubbornly, she keeps going, her fingers trailing along the wall to tell her when she reaches the bedroom door.

"Go away? It's my fucking house."

Grabbing her elbow, I spin her around and use my body to press her back hard into the wall. Placing a hand on each side of her head, I lean in close, trying to intimidate her. Why is she dragging this out? I want to get this over with. I want her to show me exactly how much I disgust her, how horrified she is, so I can turn off all these warring emotions inside me.

My heart is telling me to fight for her, to beg her to see I'm really just a man.

My head, though, is telling me it's pointless. She might just be pretending not to be freaked out because she knows she's trapped here tonight, but eventually, she'll leave.

"Are you kicking me out, then? Do you want me to go to Maisey's?"

"No!" I snap, breathing deep to drag in as much of her incredible scent as I can. This might be the last time I get this close to her, and my chest aches at the thought. My finger brushes her hair, and my brain commits how soft it feels to my memory as my heart begins to break inside.

"Then what is your problem?"

Her breath tickles my neck as she stares up at me, searching the shadows of my face for answers. Those big brown eyes plead with me to tell her, even though she already

fucking knows. If she wants to humiliate me, fine, I'll let her. It can't feel any worse than this.

“Don't pretend. I know you know about me, and I know that as soon as this storm passes, you'll be leaving Sutton as fast as your shitty old truck will take you.”

She pouts her lips angrily, and I wince as her sharp nail pokes me hard in the chest. Instinctively, my hand flies up to catch it. Without thinking, I rub my thumb across the silky skin on the back of her hand.

“Do I know? Yes. Am I shocked? Of course, I am!” She reaches up and places her palms on either side of my face, squeezing my cheeks together. It's hard to look fierce when someone is smushing your face. “I don't understand what the hell is going on, but the only way I'll be leaving Sutton is when the person who killed my father is found, and I have the answers I want. You can push me away, Evan, but I'm not your ex. It'll be your fault if I decide not to put up with your shit, not mine.”

CHAPTER 41

EVAN



While I'm standing there completely stunned, Holly ducks under my arm and charges into my room, slamming the door hard behind her. Standing alone in the quiet hall, I scrub my hands over my face and roar a silent *fuck* to the ceiling. My claws lengthen and dig into the palms of my hands as I clench my fists.

She can't be serious, can she? She hasn't said she wants me, but she hasn't said no, either.

Trying to remember her exact words and wrap my head around what she means, I lean back against my bedroom door and force myself to think. She snuffles on the far side of the door, and I squeeze my eyes shut. She's upset, not scared. I did that. Not my beast.

Holly is alone, forced to stay here with not just one, but two potentially dangerous beasts until the worst of this storm passes. Between John's damning drawings and the crime scene tape stretched around my yard, I'm hardly a great catch. Anyone with an ounce of self-preservation would be terrified.

As I ran through the forest earlier, searching again for clues near the cabin or where the women went missing, the thought had been playing on my mind.

How would I tell her? Would she accept me?

Every time I replayed the scenario, it ended the same way it did with Amanda: Holly fleeing in floods of tears; me, broken-hearted and alone.

How could I ever expect Holly to deal with this?

It would be hard enough to explain this to her at the best of times, let alone with the local police in her ear telling her I'm a stone-cold killer. In the absence of any other suspects, Scott will try to pin this on me. His hatred of my kind runs deep, even though he hides it well. The Goldenes are one of the original Sutton families of beasts. They came out of the forest to live more like men and hide in plain sight.

Scott's father, Bobby, was sheriff before him. He was a tough son-of-a-bitch with a mean streak a mile long, but Scott idolised him and always wanted to follow in his footsteps.

When Scott hit his teens and his shift never happened, things changed. It became clear Bobby Golden wasn't Scott's biological father. His mother had a one-night stand with a human hunter passing through town and had kept the possibility that Scott wasn't Bobby's to herself.

Scott was devastated, not only by his parent's split after the truth came out, but also by the loss of his future. He would never become the beast he longed to be so badly. He was normal, just an ordinary man, and bitter as hell about it. Bobby never looked at Scott the same after that, and when his mother left town, Scott had nobody to protect him.

I became the target of all his resentment. This will be his chance to finally get rid of me for good.

"And another thing..."

I was so deep in thought that I didn't hear Holly moving inside until it was too late. She yanks the bedroom door open, and I fall back across the floor, landing with a heavy thud. Without missing a beat or checking to see if I'm alright, Holly stands over me, hands on her hips.

"...how dare you not tell me what has been following me around? Did you not think I'd be better prepared if I knew I was being hunted by some kind of giant wolf, or whatever you call yourselves?"

She waves her hand in the air at the last part, not sure how to describe what she saw in John's notebook. With lightning-

fast reflexes, I grab her wrist and tug her down with me. She shrieks, startled, and flails as I use my other arm to steady her and lower her to the wooden floor beside me. Pinning her hands above her head, I roll so I'm looming over her, growling.

"You can't prepare Holly. No human can. You'd be no match if he got his hands on you."

She pouts defiantly, wriggling in my grip. I refuse to release her, driving my point home. Any human is completely helpless in the face of our speed and power.

"You've made your point," she sulks as she squirms beneath me, bucking her hips where I've now straddled her thighs and immobilised her legs.

"I don't think I have."

Leaning forward, I brush my lips tenderly against hers, before summoning up the courage to put us both out of misery once and for all. Sitting up straight and releasing her hands, I let the shift creep forward, just a little.

My teeth lengthen, pushing out slightly from behind my top lip. The dark hair that covers my body in beast form pushes through the skin on my hands and arms. My muscles bulge, ripping the sleeves of my t-shirt and tearing my jeans apart at the seams. The ripping sound of the material is deafening in the quiet room, Holly's rapid breathing the only noise apart from the howling wind outside.

The atmosphere thrums with electric energy, and I can taste the adrenaline running through both our bodies.

A flash illuminates the room, and Holly yelps, covering her mouth with one hand as she gets her first clear look at me, still more man than beast.

"See? You don't want this stalking you at night, or sharing your bed."

My voice is thick and gravelly, the partial shift restricting my ability to form words as coherently as normal. My chest is heaving with the effort of maintaining this halfway form.

I'm about to stand and transform back when Holly's trembling hands smooth up my forearms. Her slender fingers curl through the heavy dusting of hair and stroke over my straining muscles, squeezing my biceps before travelling up my tense shoulders. She hums a soothing tone as she massages me, relieving some of the stiffness there.

"What are you doing?" I mumble suspiciously as she wriggles her legs out from underneath me and kneels, continuing her exploration. She removes tattered strips of clothing as she goes until my bare, hair-covered torso is fully exposed and she can see every corded muscle in my abs.

Closing my eyes, I allow myself to enjoy the moment, no matter how brief it will be. Nobody has touched me like this in this form. Even on the rare occasion I've encountered another female in their shifted form, deep in the woods, we stay away from each other. Our natural aggression and solitary nature make our animals unpredictable. Nobody wants to get involved in a fight when we need to live so closely together.

Holly lifts a hand, ever so slowly, to my lips and touches my lethal incisors, jerking back when she pricks her finger. My long, black tongue darts out to lap up the blood, and a low growl rumbles deep in my chest. Holly freezes, her fear thick in the air. Satisfied that she's seeing sense now, I grab her hair roughly with one hand and hold her in place, our faces a mere foot apart.

Extending a black claw, I hold it up to let her see it for the deadly weapon it is. Her heart rate picks up as I trail the sharp tip along her jaw and over the paper-thin skin of her neck.

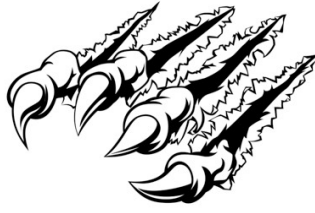
"You should be afraid, Holly." I watch her pulse flutter rapidly at the base of her throat. "You asked me before. I told you then, but you didn't listen. I can smell it on you now. Your *fear*."

Swallowing hard, her gaze locks onto mine, which must be blazing amber in the gloom.

"You can't scare me away, Evan."

CHAPTER 42

EVAN



Her voice is barely more than a whisper, but it's filled with certainty, and it knocks the wind out of me. When I try to breathe again, I notice the shift in her. There's still a hint of fear, but her scent has morphed. Now, I can smell desire. Arousal. It's overwhelming. And confusing.

"Holly," I groan, defeated by this ridiculously stubborn woman who's completely at my mercy, yet who trusts me so readily. "You don't know what you're doing, what my beast wants to do to you. You'll never forgive me."

Now that the taste of her arousal is on his tongue, my beast wants to claim her as his, not just mine. My cock jerks inside what's left of my jeans, and I can feel my balls filling up, ready to take her. The beast inside wants to fill her with our knot and, eventually, our young.

"Try me," she challenges, eyes shining bright as she stretches up and touches her lips to mine. I cover my sharp teeth and press my lips into a firm line, struggling to retain control.

"Jesus, don't, Holly," I mutter when she wraps her arms around my neck and climbs into my lap, pressing her warm, sexy body to mine. Kissing me harder this time, Holly licks the seam of my lips, demanding I give in. When she rolls her hips against me, grinding her pussy against my rock-hard cock, I lose control. There's no fighting it anymore, no resisting her.

My arms wrap around her back, and I haul her tighter against me. Her perfect breasts press against my chest as I thrust my hips up to her needy pussy, showing her exactly what she unleashed upon herself.

“Do you feel that, Holly? You thought I was a lot to take before? You haven’t seen anything yet. It’s not just my arms that get bigger.”

She smiles against my mouth as I take over, kissing her like my life depends on it. Retracting my canines, I explore her, tasting her, rejoicing in her fiery reaction. Her hands fly to my hair, and she hangs on for dear life as I devour her.

“You want that? You want to take my knot?” I feel her momentary confusion and chuckle. “When I fuck you as a beast, my cock will swell, filling you up like you’ve never felt before. My knot traps my seed inside you, joining us together until it goes down.”

Holly whimpers, and I curse as a fresh wave of desire perfumes the air. This woman couldn’t be any more perfect.

“You like that idea? My cock buried inside you, unable to escape until *I* decide you’ve had enough? Until *I* decide you can’t take any more and you pass out exhausted? Maybe even then, I won’t let you go. I’ll keep us stuck together while you rest. You’ll sleep with my cock still locked inside your sweet cunt, and you’ll wake up to me filling you again and again, making sure you’re bred and carrying my young.”

With a breathless groan, Holly rocks against me, seemingly desperate for me to do more than just torture her with my words. She wants the real thing, and I don’t understand why she’s not freaking out.

“Fuck. This is wild.” Holly seems dazed, and I’m not sure whether she’s talking to me or herself. But when her hand slides inside my ripped jeans and finds my aching length, freeing it and stroking it enthusiastically, I take it she’s on board with my plan.

“This can’t get bigger,” she whispers in disbelief as she glances down at her hand, fingers wrapping only part way

around my substantial girth. “It’s not going to fit if it does.”

Fascinated, she slowly strokes me again, watching as my cock, dark grey in this half-shifted form, drips pre-cum copiously from the head, ready to ease the way inside her. My juices glisten as she spreads them over me and swipes her thumb through the next droplet that appears.

“Yes, it will, and it’s going to feel fucking amazing.”

I have no idea if that’s true. I’ve never been brave enough to have sex in beast form, and I certainly never got close to trying it with Amanda. Maybe it will be too much for Holly, but I’m damn well going to try.

Lifting her with ease, I set her on her feet and roughly tug down her soft leggings. Slipping one of her feet out, I toss her leg over my shoulder and grip her ass in both hands, squeezing hard and yanking her hips toward my face.

“Evan! What the hell?” she cries out as she wobbles, her hands shooting out to regain her balance, but there’s no need. I have her. Her words of protest die in her mouth, turning into a garbled groan as I use my long, flat tongue to lick along her pussy. Savouring the delicious taste of her in my mouth, I slowly repeat the movement, using extra pressure and a little flick against her clit.

She needs to know just how effective this tongue will be in making her scream the house down.

“Oh my god,” she cries, her fingers tangling in my hair as she presses her pussy against my face. “That’s so good.”

Growling in smug satisfaction, I continue to please her. I use my broad tongue to fuck her, stretching her pretty pussy and readying her for my beast’s cock.

When she’s a whimpering mess, sagging against me, I press two fingers deep into her, claws retracted, pulsing them in and out and stroking that magic little spot inside. Then I turn my attention to pushing her pleasure to new heights. I suck her clit between my lips and lick it, harder and harder, swirling around it, teasing her to the edge over and over again.

Each time, I pull back right when she's on the brink of exploding and she whines, needy and desperate for me to let her finish. Her fingernails score my skin, and she tosses her head back, shaking it side to side, dark hair tumbling across her shoulders. Holly mumbles incoherently: please, now, yes, all begging me to let her come.

"Please, Evan, please." Her strangled plea fills me with pride, and finally, I decide she's had enough. Flattening my tongue, I drag it from one end of her slit to the other before pushing down hard on her sensitive clit and growling.

"Fuck!" she cries as her entire body tenses, her muscles locking up tight and her legs trembling as she comes. Her tight pussy pulses around my fingers with each wave of her release. "Evan, Evan," she chants quietly as she continues to writhe in pleasure, her limbs twitching with each jolt as she sags, spent, in my arms.

Something about seeing her like this makes me feel completely untamed. This woman is mine, and the feral desire to breed her is taking hold inside me.

Moving my grip from her ass to the backs of her thighs, I give her no time to rest. I flip her onto her back and follow her to the floor.

Roughly parting her thighs, I stare possessively at her swollen pink pussy. I hastily remove her hoodie and top, leaning down to pull one taut, perky nipple between my hungry lips.

Fuck, I want to own her. I want to possess every inch of her body.

Grabbing both her wrists in one of my hands, I shove them up over her head, leaving the full length of her body exposed to me. She's beautiful, flushed, and swollen, spread below me to be claimed and taken exactly how I want.

Using my other hand to cup a perfect breast, I growl as I nip the tight bud. Stroking my hand lower across her belly, I grip her waist hard as I position myself between her parted thighs. My excitement builds as I stare at the dark head of my

cock pressing against her delicate pink entrance, my grey skin a stark contrast to her pale flesh. It's intoxicating.

But then, something permeates my haze of primal lust—Holly below me, squirming.

“Evan,” she says sharply, snapping me out of my trance. When my gaze flies to her face, sensing immediately that something is wrong, she's wincing. I pull back, confused. I haven't entered her yet. It can't hurt already.

As I look down to see what the problem is, my stomach drops, and I feel physically sick. A semi-circle of small, crescent-shaped cuts curve around her hip bone where my claws came out in excitement. Without me realising it, I've sliced into her skin, drops of blood appearing on the skin above each wound and rolling down her side.

Horrified, I stumble back until I hit the door behind me.

“Holly.” My voice sounds tormented as I struggle to take my eyes off the damage I've inflicted on her fragile body because of my desire to claim her as my own. Holly sits up and extends a hand to me.

“Evan, it's okay,” she soothes. “They're not deep. It only stings a little because we're all sweaty.”

She's trying to comfort me, but nothing can make this better. Shaking my head, I stagger to my feet and reach behind me to open the door.

“Don't do this,” she pleads, her eyes filling with tears as she realises what's about to happen. “Evan, I'm fine. Let's talk about this. It's not safe to go back out there.”

I nearly laugh at the irony of her words. It's safer out there than here.

“I hurt you. It's too dangerous, Holly. I can't control myself around you. You need to leave. Leave me and Sutton and never look back.”

Without a second glance, I complete the shift, letting my beast take full control and tear through the house straight for the back door. I hear Holly calling after me, and I can hear the

pain in her voice, but it's better this way. No matter how much I want her, I won't risk hurting her, ever again.

CHAPTER 43

HOLLY



Evan's gone. From the look of devastation on his face when he saw he'd hurt me, he won't be back. Stumbling back to the bed, my legs still shaking from the orgasm he gave me only moments before, I fall back and grab a pillow. Burying my face in it and screaming in frustration, I try not to burst into tears.

He trusted me enough to show me some of his other side. I felt like he'd brought down his walls and let me in at last. When he'd growled about the things he wanted to do to me, it should have been terrifying, but it wasn't. It was the opposite. They were all things I never knew I wanted until I heard them spilling from his dirty mouth.

The sight of his dark cock ready to fill me up had me on the edge of coming again. I knew it would stretch me, but I also knew it was going to be so good.

He's already ruined me for other men.

Everything he does to me seems amplified. Every touch sets my body on fire, and finally being his feels like a physical need I need to satisfy. He was going to own my heart, body, and soul, and I was all in. It felt so right.

His claws hadn't hurt me badly, and I know it wasn't intentional. He was as caught up in the moment as I was. Seeing the raging lust in his eyes, being on the receiving end of all that dominance, was a powerful aphrodisiac. I barely noticed when his grip became a little too tight, and I wish I'd kept my mouth shut when he broke the skin.

Running my fingers over the four, evenly spaced marks, I sigh. The bleeding has stopped already. My skin will heal within a few days, but Evan won't get over this. He's a protector. Hurting me will have rocked him to his core.

Digging through strips of torn clothing, I find my leggings and put them back on. Covering up with another of Evan's t-shirts, I pad out into the still-darkened hallway and creep into the kitchen to raid the cabinets for some plasters. Wiping away any blood with a damp kitchen towel, I throw it away immediately. I don't want Evan to see the evidence of his over-enthusiasm if he does re-appear.

"Are you okay?" Stepping quietly into the room, Ben watches as I press the last plaster to my skin. He folds his arms in front of him and leans against the door frame, his long legs stretched. Dressed casually, he has a less intimidating air about him, even though he's not any smaller than Evan.

The fluffy bear slippers on his feet probably go some way to making him feel less threatening.

If he's Evan's brother, it's safe to assume he's a beast, too. That idea should freak me out, but nothing about these men has suggested I'm in any danger. Quite the opposite, actually—I feel oddly comfortable in their presence. Maybe it's because I trust that if my dad loved them, they're good people. He seems to have been a decent man, so I'll have the faith he had in them.

"No, but not because of this," I whisper sadly, letting Evan's t-shirt fall back down to cover my hip. This time, I can't stop the tremble in my lower lip. Ben nods and gazes out the window into the darkness as a rumble of thunder sounds nearby. The storm is close. My throat tightens at the thought of Evan out there in the pouring rain, upset and alone, feeling hunted and hopeless.

All I want is for him to come home.

"Can you see him? Or talk to him? Tell him to come back?" I ask hopefully, realising how little I know about what his beast actually is or what they can do. Ben shakes his head sadly and flicks the lock on the back door into place.

“No. He’s long gone by now, but he’ll come back eventually, Holly. You might have a battle on your hands getting him to listen to reason, but he won’t leave you. He cares about you too much.”

Ben’s kind words are too much. The frustration and worry of the last few days comes tumbling out. I cry giant, ugly sobs that wrack my body in a way I haven’t experienced since I was a kid. Ben crosses the room immediately and wraps me in his arms, swaying from side to side as he comforts me. Big tears flow down my face and onto his shirt.

“Shh.” His hand rubs my back as I struggle to steady my breathing, gasping and gulping as I cry into his chest. He’s calm, and his even temperament lulls me from the brink of a meltdown. Finally, my breathing returns to normal, and I can get some air into my lungs.

“I’ll slap some sense into him if all else fails,” Ben offers.

With a hiccupping laugh, I pull back, feeling a little better. I’ve left a big wet patch on the front of his T-shirt, but he says nothing. He just hands me a tissue and gives me a concerned smile. He’s about to speak again when a loud ringer goes off in the next room. With a curse, Ben walks over and lifts the phone from its cradle, listening.

“No, he’s not here. You already know he’s not.”

I presume he’s talking about Evan. His face falls as he listens to the deep voice on the other end of the line, his expression grim as his eyes lift to mine and hold my gaze.

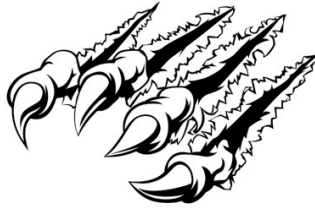
Instantly, something about the shift in his demeanour makes me nervous, my woes over Evan leaving temporarily forgotten. Ben frowns, looking me straight in the eye as he speaks to whomever is on the other line.

A bad feeling seizes me as Ben closes his eyes, his grip on the phone too hard and his jaw clenched too tightly for it to be anything good. I don’t think I can take any more bad news. Resting one palm against the wall and hanging his head, he sighs loudly.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 44

HOLLY



Trying not to eavesdrop, I watch as Ben immediately makes a quick call, speaking in hushed tones. When he finally faces me, staring at me with a conflicted look on his face, I steel myself for what's to come.

“I have to leave.”

Those aren't the words I expected to hear. He runs a hand back through his wavy hair and stares once more into the inky blackness outside. It's like he's waiting for someone to emerge from the trees, but it never happens. Without another word, he turns on his heel and moves toward the mudroom. His long strides eat up the distance quickly, and I have to scurry after him to keep up.

“Ben? What do you mean, *you have to leave*? You can't go out in that.”

It's bad enough that Evan is out there in this horrific weather, but now Ben too? Fallen branches litter the back porch, and heavy rain continues to batter the side of the house. The eerie howl of the wind through the trees gets louder, as though reminding Ben of exactly what's going on outside.

He kicks off his ridiculous stuffed slippers and steps into heavy black work boots. Folding his tall frame to sit on a long, wooden bench, he grumbles to himself as he angrily ties his laces.

Standing in front of him, blocking his line to the side door, I fold my arms and wait for an explanation. I'm trying and failing to shove down the panic bubbling to the surface.

Everyone is drilling into me that I can't be alone until whoever is following me gets caught—what's suddenly changed now?

“There's been an accident. Someone put their car into a ditch, and they're trapped inside. Ordinarily, Evan would go, but...” He frowns, looking utterly torn. “I can't leave someone pinned in their car, and I can't bring you with me if there are trees coming down. It's not safe.”

I scoff and instantly feel bad when I see Ben's anxious face.

“You can't leave them there. They could be injured. Go,” I insist, forcing some assertiveness into my voice that I most definitely don't feel. “I'll lock the doors until you're back.”

I can't be selfish—someone might be seriously hurt. I can't keep him here to babysit me if someone else needs immediate help.

Getting to his feet, he reaches for the keys hanging on the wall. There's a large set with a dozen keys and a red metal tag that reads King Recoveries. Ben hesitates, staring down at me before snatching them off the hook.

Mind made up, he pulls a heavy, dark coat off the wall and hurriedly shoves his arms in before pulling a hat down over his head. While he tugs up the zip of his coat, he shakes his head, still unhappy about the prospect of leaving me here.

“I don't like this.”

Giving his arm a reassuring squeeze, I step to the side and clear the way, forcing a small smile onto my face.

“The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back.”

A strange expression crosses his handsome features before he steps past me toward John's boxes, still stacked against the wall. He roots through the top one before bringing it down and searching through the second box.

“Ha.”

Triumphantly, he straightens, something silver gleaming between his fingers. I stare at the item in confusion and turn my gaze onto a sombre-looking Ben. He loops the string

around my neck and drops it inside Evan's t-shirt, hiding it from view.

“Do not open the door. For anyone. If anything happens, *anything*, use that. Something tells me Evan wouldn't have ventured too far. He'll come.”

I clutch it through the thin material and nod. Fear's icy fingers creep along my spine as the reality that I'm going to be here, alone, for God knows how long, sets in. Ben opens the door, and I gasp as a gust of wind blasts inside and nearly knocks me off my feet. Pushing the door until it's only slightly open, Ben shields me from the elements and looks at me with concern.

“Ben, just go. Please. They're waiting for you.”

Nodding, he slips out. I raise a hand to my face to protect it from the lashing rain as I peer outside, relieved he's not suggesting I go with him. I'd be terrified out in that deluge. One of Evan's gutters has come loose, and water pours down, pounding loudly against the cement path, the storm wild and raging.

Even though I'm not keen on being on my own, I'm reassured by the idea that the weather should keep everyone indoors. Ben's voice carries to me on the wind, and I look up. He's stopped halfway to the massive garage at the side of the house, using an arm to cover his face from flying debris.

“Stay inside, Holly,” he repeats gravely. I nod enthusiastically at that. No issues there. In fact, I can't wait to shut this door behind him. “If anything happens, use that. If Evan returns and he's not himself, do not run. Lock yourself in your room. Running will trigger every instinct he has, and he'll lose control.”

Ben delivers his warning without a hint of humour. I shiver, remembering Evan's gleaming black claws and the sting of those pointy teeth as they pierced my skin. Tipping my head to acknowledge his words, I shove my weight against the door and shut it tight.

Immediately, I slide the lock into place and turn, my fingers drifting to the string dangling around my neck. It's better than nothing, but it's also a reminder of how vulnerable I am. That this is the only defence I have.

Steeling myself for a long anxious wait, I pray the house stays upright in the howling wind. Trailing through the empty rooms, I take in Evan's space as best as I can in the near darkness, lit only by the few candles left dotted around.

I gather John's journals and the letters I retrieved from the cabin, clutching them to my chest as I decide what to do. The letters are addressed to Ben and Evan—they're not for me to read unless they want me to see what's inside.

Still, the one to John is in my mother's scrawl, and something tells me if she or John were here, they'd tell me themselves what's written inside.

Heading for the sitting room, I tuck myself into the corner of the sofa, draping a soft throw over my legs, and slowly remove the folded paper from the envelope. It's turned off-white with age, and the corners are worn from being read regularly. My chest aches as I imagine John sitting in his small cabin, letters open in front of him, pouring over the words again and again as the years went by.

Sucking in a deep breath to steady my nerves, I prepare myself to finally learn my parents' story. I read the letter with tears pouring down my face until I can recite it from heart.

My soul aches for them. They loved each other dearly. John was conflicted. He knew my mother loved big city life and was miserable living in a small, isolated mountain town. But he had these two neglected boys with nobody else to take care of them. He *adored* them and he would never choose.

So she did it for him. Every word in her letter tells me it killed her. I can't help wondering if she regretted staying away.

My thoughts return to Evan. How will I feel if this is how things end and he refuses to come back to me? Would I be able to return to my life, knowing what I know, and pretend none of this ever happened? I know I'll never be able to forget him,

but could I move on? I don't want to have to, but maybe that won't be my decision to make.

With a sad sigh, I tuck the letters underneath me and curl up on my side. Resting my head on a plump cushion, I wait. And wait. And wait some more.

CHAPTER 45

EVAN



A low groan and the unmistakable metallic tang of blood hanging in the air catches my attention. My beast has been running feral through the forest since I forced him to leave his mate. That's who he's decided she is, which is why he's so distraught we hurt her.

Huffing and snarling, he pushes on, furious that we've fucked up something so good so quickly. Amanda ran from us without even giving us a chance. Holly was open to giving it a go. She was even more turned on once I got a little rough and primal. My woman likes my darker side, and it's hot as hell.

Shoving my misery to the back of my mind, I focus on the pieces of broken metal and shards of glass littering the wet asphalt as I emerge from the trees.

The smell of burnt wood fills the air as I trot over to a felled tree blocking the road. A bolt of lightning has taken this old beauty down, and I recoil from the overpowering stench of singed sap. Following the broken shrubs and flattened vegetation to the ditch, I peer down the embankment at the mangled wreckage of a small family saloon.

Who the fuck is stupid enough to drive in this weather?

Twisting around to make sure nobody is watching, I leap over the car and land in the damp earth on the passenger side. Shifting back into my human form, I bend down and peer through the window. A young man, college-age, curses as he grips his thigh with both hands and tries to pull it free. Adam, Maisy's nephew. She mentioned he was coming to town this

weekend. With the storm coming, he should have been clever enough to stay away.

“Woah, woah,” I say, reaching in and resting my hand on his forearm to get him to stop moving. “Stay where you are for a minute.”

“I think my leg is broken.”

He winces as he shifts again in his seat and tries to move his foot. Judging by how compressed the front of the car is, I wouldn't be surprised if he's done some damage to his lower limbs.

“You're going to be okay, Adam. Tell me where it hurts.”

Casting my eyes over him, he doesn't look to be injured too badly, thankfully, although that might change when Maisy gets her hands on him.

“Everywhere,” he jokes, but his smile disappears, as even a small chuckle wracks his body and causes him pain. “Ribs. And my leg hurts.”

Leaning through the broken window, I try to get a better look at how his leg is pinned and at the deep gash on his forehead spilling blood down the side of his face.

“Why are you driving around in the middle of a storm? Not very smart, Adam. Couldn't stay away from Tia?” His high school sweetheart still lives in town; looks like even a thunderstorm wasn't enough to keep lover boy away. A soft smile graces his lips even as he places a hand on the door handle and tries to push it open. It won't budge.

“Why are you naked in the middle of a storm, King?” Adam retorts, looking at my exposed torso leaning halfway into the vehicle. “Hot date?”

With a little smirk, I pull back and shake my head. Nothing wrong with his sense of humour. Maisy's family are practically Sutton royalty. They're fully aware of who and what lives among the residents of the town, even though they're completely human. That makes things a little easier here.

Ignoring his smart comment, I stand back and assess the best way to free him. If I shift, I'm confident I can pull the door off, and we'll have to take it from there. Clambering around to the driver's side, my ears prick at the sound of an approaching truck. Not just any truck—my tow truck.

Red-hot fury courses through my veins as I see Ben pull up at the roadside, alone. If Holly's not sitting in that passenger seat, that means she stayed behind. On her own. Unprotected.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I fume, scrambling back up the steep grassy slope to confront Ben as he climbs down from the driver's side.

"I didn't have a choice, alright? You fucked off," he snaps pointedly, ignoring my anger as he reaches into the back and pulls out the jaws of life. "She wouldn't be any safer out here in the cold for hours, with branches and trees coming down everywhere."

Staring out into the forest, my beast itches to return to the house. She's not safe. I can feel it in my bones.

Ben is all business as he climbs down the hill, one hand on the ground to keep himself steady as he slips and slides in the mud. Standing at the bottom, he throws his hands up in exasperation when he sees my hesitation. I need to go. My instincts are screaming at me to leave immediately.

"I can't get him out on my own, Evan, and he's going to freeze or go into shock if we don't free him soon. Help me first, and then you can run home and sort things out with your mate."

Nodding, I know he's right. Rushing down to the car, I impatiently wait while Ben gets set up.

"This is going to hurt, Adam. I'm sorry, but we need to get you out. The fire brigade and ambulance can't get up here. The road is blocked near town, and it'll take them hours to get around the other way."

Adam nods and grits his teeth against the pain as both Ben and I grip the window and pull the driver's door clean off its hinges, tossing it to the side. The scent of blood is strong, and

I can see a pool of it underneath Adam's right leg. He's trapped by the ankle, and judging by the way it's bent back, I suspect Adam is correct about it being broken. Ben's eyes meet mine as we set to work.

The movement caused by the jaws of life have Adam crying out and cursing as they travel through his body and jar his broken bones.

"Sorry, bud. Nearly done," Ben encourages, gritting his teeth against the urge to stop when it's hurting him this much.

I can't speak. My entire being is focused on getting the hell out of here as quickly as possible. Nervous energy courses through me. I bounce from foot to foot as I wait to see if the spreader has created enough room for Adam to extricate himself from behind the steering column. Ben is the picture of calm confidence, scowling at me when Adam watches me nervously. I'm making him anxious, but I can't stop my emotions from going haywire.

Something is off about this whole thing, but my brain can't focus enough to fit the pieces together.

When Adam manages to pivot and get his legs out of the car, he stalls while Ben puts down the tool. Ben slips his hands under Adam's armpits, helping him up onto his good leg. The wind has died a little, but the rain continues to pelt down around us.

"Who called you?" A connection I know is important is tantalisingly close to being made in the far corners of my consciousness. It's so near, but it just won't come. Ben glances over at me, puzzled.

"The station," he answers, wrapping an arm under Adam's shoulder. Ben supports him as they move toward the bottom of the slope.

"The station or Scott?" I clarify as a gut-wrenching certainty crystallises in my mind. Ben's gaze meets mine, and I can see the wheels turning in his head, a sickening look of understanding creeping over on his face.

“Did you call the police, Adam?” I ask quietly, still staring at Ben as my legs go weak. I know his answer before he says it. My instincts scream at me to finally listen to them, but I need to be sure. Adam looks at me as though I have two heads before tipping his head toward the crumpled pile of steel wedged in the ditch.

“I don’t even know where my phone is.”

Oh God. Ben’s face turns ghostly white as he lifts Adam into his arms and bounds up the hill, ignoring Adam’s curses as he jostles him in his arms.

“Go!”

CHAPTER 46

HOLLY



I jump as a slamming car door wakes me from my sleep. Pushing myself upright, I groan. My back is aching from my awkward position, and I'm disorientated, waking in a strange room and a house that's uncomfortably quiet. Straining my ears to listen for any signs of life in the old house, I'm disappointed when I'm met by deafening silence.

There's nobody else home.

Ben is still out on the tow truck call, and Evan is still avoiding me. That he still hasn't returned makes me worry this isn't just a temporary blip, but I push that aside for now. I'm camped out in his house. He has to face me at some point.

Heavy footsteps approaching the front door have my pulse racing. I try to calm my nerves and act like a big girl, but I feel like cowering in the corner. Standing close to the window and leaning forward, doing my best to stay out of sight, I spot Scott's truck parked in the driveway. Headlights illuminate the way to the front door, but other than the narrow path they cast across the concrete, it's pitch-black outside.

Sighing, I pinch my brows and shove down my annoyance. I don't want to talk to Scott again, not after the last time, but at least I know he's not a beast, he's the local law. If I want him to see Evan's not guilty, I have to share what I've found with him.

The last thing Evan needs is me hiding evidence from Scott that could help catch the real killer.

Grabbing my phone, I head to the front door just as Scott's firm knock sounds through the house. I snag a jacket hanging inside the door and throw it on, knowing I'll get blasted with freezing rain when I open the door.

"Hi, Scott."

I pull the door open and peer out. Icy air rushes inside and wraps around me. Shivering, I pull my borrowed jacket tighter around me, and Scott looks down with a sheepish smile.

"Holly," he replies quietly, the picture of contrition. Holding his hands out in front of him in surrender, he takes a step back and gives me some space. I say nothing, waiting for him to explain why he's back. He's still not getting into this house without Evan's permission.

"First, I want to apologise. This case has me worked up. Finding those girls... it's all I've thought about since Amanda disappeared. Still, it's no excuse. I should never have said what I did. I'm so sorry. Please don't be mad at me."

With a *please forgive me* look, which I'm sure works ninety-nine percent of the time, he places his hands together in front of him in a pleading gesture.

"I want us all to be friends."

Now I definitely don't believe him. Scott will never be happy being friends with me while I date Evan. His hatred of him runs too deep.

"You're right. You shouldn't have. What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

Scott narrows his eyes when I don't immediately accept his apology, but then he blows out an enormous sigh and rubs a hand over his stubbled chin. He's frustrated by my unwillingness to let him off the hook so easily, but he's trying to hide it. My gaze travels to Scott's truck, drawn on instinct, where I see a silhouette in the passenger seat.

He's not in his police car. This is an unofficial visit this time.

“That’s fair. It wasn’t appropriate for me to discuss an ongoing case with you.”

I nod, remaining in the doorway where the overhang shields me from the worst of the elements. On cue, thunder rolls in, and I flinch at the loud boom.

“But more importantly, Ben is still caught up at the accident. He asked me to come and get you. Said it might be a while and he didn’t feel comfortable leaving you alone when Evan isn’t here.”

Something about that doesn’t ring true, given their extremely frosty relationship. Plus, I find it hard to believe Ben would volunteer to Scott that Evan’s not here with me. Scott’s expression is neutral, but my gaze drifts to the truck once more as suspicion makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Following the direction of my gaze, he smiles and waves a hand casually toward the vehicle.

“Serena said she’d come for the ride. She’s been cooped up at home all day. Maybe you can hang out at hers until Ben is done.”

“Is her place not your place?”

I think I remember Evan saying they live together in their parents’ old house. They inherited it when Bobby Golden passed. Their mother never returned, so it went to Scott and Serena.

“Technically. Not that it matters, really. You’re welcome anyway.”

His words send adrenaline flooding through every cell of my body. That’s a blatant lie. Serena has made it clear she’s no longer a fan of mine, either. Now she wants to hang out?

Ben said the road up from town was blocked, and that’s why he *had* to go. Either that was a lie he told Ben, and Scott really has driven up here from Serena’s house, or Scott’s lying now, and they’ve come down from the opposite direction. Which means he could have helped with the accident and Ben needn’t have gone out in the storm.

Either way, this isn’t good.

Sensing my hesitation, Scott frowns, looking decidedly less patient. His eyes look hard and flinty as he takes in my tense body language and the way my fingers curl around the door. Sticking a boot out to stop me from closing it, he grips the edge and pushes it open a little wider, an aggressive gesture from someone supposedly here to help.

“Holly, I’ve had a shit few days. It’s my job to keep everyone in this town safe, and you’re not making it easy for me.”

Using guilt as his last-ditch attempt to manipulate me into leaving the house, Scott shakes his head in disappointment when I still don’t jump at his offer. That’s the final nail in the coffin for me. Why is it so important I go with him? Why is it so urgent? I’m safe here.

When I glance at the truck again, I struggle to contain my gasp. There’s no mistaking the faint glow of yellow eyes in the darkness. Eyes I’ve seen before, following me, stalking me, and turning my dreams into nightmares. Struggling not to turn and run, I force my shoulders to drop and attempt to look relaxed.

“Sorry, I just didn’t want to be a burden,” I say meekly, smiling up at him. “Just let me grab something.”

Scott’s hand shoots out and grips my wrist a little too hard as I turn away.

“You don’t need your phone. Ben knows where we live,” Scott says sharply. “We really need to get going.”

Ignoring the pinch of my skin in his firm hold, I brighten my smile and tilt my head at him, as though the way he’s holding me isn’t making me want to kick him in the balls.

“No, not my phone. You’re going to love this. I found John’s last journal! I haven’t read it yet. Figured you’d be able to make more sense of it than me.”

Scott looks shocked for a second before he grins and nods, a relieved look crossing his features. He nods, giving me permission to retrieve it from the house.

“Good work, Holly. Bring it with you, and I can read it when we get to Serena’s.”

Beaming as though his praise does something other than turn my stomach, I walk as casually back into the house as I can. Despite the blood rushing through my ears and the panic starting to close in, my next goal is crystal clear: escape.

Every fibre of my being is telling me that getting into that car will be the end of me. As I pass the sitting room, I push the door wide open to make it look like I’m going in there. Instead, I continue straight to the kitchen and out through the back door. Closing it softly behind me, I glance both ways to make sure Serena hasn’t worked out what I’m up to.

It won’t take long for Scott to realise I’m not coming back, but it’s all I can come up with.

There’s no way I can outrun them, but I won’t go without a fight. The woods might be dangerous, but I’d prefer to take my chances out here than find out first-hand what Serena wants with me.

Clutching the metal object against my chest, I pray for Evan to be nearby. Tilting my face away from the driving rain, I creep down the steps of the back porch and dart across the small rear lawn. Slipping into the trees, my senses scream at me, convinced Serena is right behind me, breathing down my neck.

Looking all around, I’m reassured when I see no sign of her and press on.

Not that I expect to see her coming—*I’m* the one who’s out of her element here.

The weather is making it slow going. Wind stings my face, slowing my progress as I crest a hill and rush to get down the other side before I’m spotted. The ground is mucky, and wet leaves slip and slide beneath my feet as I jog down as fast as I can, skidding and stumbling down the slope.

“Holly!” Scott calls out, his voice carrying to me on the wind. I freeze, pressing my back against a tree as I hold my

breath, afraid any movement will give me away. He's not back at the house—he's closer than that. They're already on my trail.

“Come back, Holly. It's not safe out here. I just want to talk to you about the journal.” Serena's voice is friendly, but I'm not fooled. The sketches from John's journal flash before my eyes as I imagine being hunted down by something terrifying, with claws and teeth. By Serena.

Fear is making me shake, and I'm struggling to get enough air into my body, but I don't have time to freak out right now. I saw the gouges in the trees near my cabin and the footprints in the soil. I've seen Evan's claws up close. He held back, and they still sank into my skin like knives into butter.

Swallowing hard, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to gather some bravery. I might end up as another body in the woods, but I'll take my chances. It's better than delivering myself to her for whatever she has planned. She took those girls before she killed them; God only knows what torture they endured. Going with her will only delay the inevitable, and there are worse things than death.

“You're on your own. Nobody's coming to help you, Holly. Just give up.”

Stubbornness flares up deep within me. I'm not tough, but I won't just roll over and accept this fate.

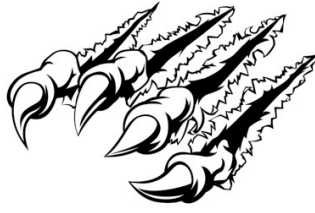
With trembling fingers, I tug on the necklace Ben gave me and bring the metal whistle to my lips. Sucking in a deep breath, I blow as hard as I can until there isn't any air left in my body. No sound comes out that I can hear, but I silently pray it works and Evan will come. It's my only hope.

Blowing once more for luck, I tuck it back into my t-shirt.

And then, I run.

CHAPTER 47

SCOTT



Serena appears at my shoulder and grabs me with a painfully tight grip. She hisses in annoyance when she turns me to face her, rain dripping down her unshielded face.

“She has a fucking whistle. He’ll come for her if he’s close by,” she grits out. Scoffing, I raise my hands to the side, letting rain drops accumulate on my palms before they fall through my fingers. I gesture around us to the swaying branches and the howling wind.

If I didn’t hear it from a hundred metres away, King won’t hear it from wherever he slunk off to looking downbeat and miserable. Serena’s eyes flash yellow, and she looks at me in irritation.

“It’s a dog whistle, Scott. That’s why you can’t hear it, but I did and King will.”

Shrugging her arm off my shoulder roughly, I glare hard at my sister and step into her personal space. Serena shrinks back under my anger and averts her gaze. My sister rarely gets annoyed with me, but she’s not happy that her latest plaything has gotten away. Still, that’s no excuse for her smart tone.

“You’d better hurry and go get her then,” I snarl. “Don’t kill her. She found John’s notebook. I need to know where it is and find out who she showed it to.”

Serena nods, but her disappointment at not being allowed to let her beast have free rein is clear. My sister has never had the same penchant for playing with her kills that I do. She

lives for the hunt, but once they're caught, her fun is over, whereas I enjoy their fear, their pain, their pleas for mercy. I live for how they all eventually submit to me, hoping that if they please me, I'll spare them.

Even though Serena doesn't partake, she gets off on seeing my pleasure, so it's a win-win for everyone. Everyone except Holly, that is.

"Check if it's in the house before King gets back." Ordinarily, I'd refuse out of spite—she's not the one who gives the orders. Today, though, we don't have time for petty arguing. King could arrive at any moment. We need to get Holly back to our house like we did with the others. I can take my time with her then.

When I nod, she shifts, letting her beast take full control with a guttural roar. In the darkness, her yellow eyes are bright, and the sick desires within her shine through. Her dark brown fur repels the rain as she stretches and shakes off her shredded clothes. She might not be as large as a male, but she's still bigger than most human men in this form, and her strength is astounding.

Her tongue darts out as she scents the air, and a deep growl rumbles in her chest. Digging her long, lethal claws into the rain-soaked mud beneath our feet, she waits for my instructions.

"Go." The word is barely out of my mouth before Serena takes off, leaping over a fallen tree and crashing through the forest. She doesn't care about making noise; Holly already knows she's hot on her heels, and her terror as she hears Serena catching up to her will make it even better for Serena.

"Remember, we want her alive." Tugging my hood over my head, I turn and walk back to the house. I'm not sure she'll be able to contain the beast's urges this time.

Something about Holly really rubbed Serena the wrong way. She never likes the women I'm interested in, but she really took Holly picking Evan over me personally. I didn't take it too well myself, but she's made her choice. I have no

interest in having King's sloppy seconds. She's smarter than I thought she was, and that's what sealed her fate.

I find John's notebook carelessly left on the sofa, where anyone could walk in and find it. Pausing to consider whether to leave more evidence here to be found, I decide against it. The bodies in his yard and another girlfriend going missing should be enough to make a solid case against King. I can always come back and leave traces of blood after we get Holly into the car. It's unlikely she'll get through her encounter with Serena unscathed.

Reluctantly, I push back outside into the chilly night and jog to catch up with my sister. Her trail is easy to follow; large paw prints and broken twigs guide me through the undergrowth.

When I find them, I creep closer, watching my sister circle Holly menacingly. Vicious snarls fill the air as she snaps her teeth and drags her claws through the mud, drool dripping from her razor-sharp teeth onto the forest floor. Holly presses against a large boulder, cornered, her wide eyes telling me she hasn't seen King fully shifted yet. She can't believe what she's seeing.

I'm about to step into the open when a flash of golden fur streaks across the clearing and lunges at Serena. I've never seen a pale beast before. Blonde fur is rare, though not really desired—they're considered a curse to anyone around them.

The beast crashes into Serena's side, and they tumble across the ground in a tangle of limbs and fallen debris. It can only be one person: another fucking King here to save the day.

Kali climbs to her feet and readies herself to attack again, but this time, she doesn't have the element of surprise. Serena's waiting for her. As they clash in a blur of teeth and claws, Holly screams. Kali barks, telling her to run while she can, but Holly is frozen to the spot. Serena seizes the momentary distraction to drag her claws down Kali's side. The wound is deep, and blood splashes onto the leaves strewn across the ground.

Kali wasn't prepared for how viciously Serena fights. It's obvious my sister has the upper hand, and when she steps back to reveal the damage she inflicted, Holly gasps. Even I grimace at the gaping wound in Kali's neck. Holly's hand flies to her mouth, and she visibly pales, shaking her head slowly in disbelief. I can see the tears welling in her eyes, even with sheets of rain coming down on top of us.

Kali drags her injured body to the side of the clearing, her pitiful whimpers hard to hear. Serena pads after her, making sure she doesn't get too far. As I step forward, Holly's head jerks up, and she swallows a cry. Holding her hands out in front of her to protect herself, she backs away from me, edging around the rocks.

"Holly. Come with me," I plead. "Serena is out of control! She won't attack you if you're with me." I try playing good cop to Serena's bad cop one more time. Holly wavers—she doesn't trust me, but now that she's seen what Serena can do, she's desperate.

"If you come, she'll leave Kali alone, and Kali's beast will heal her."

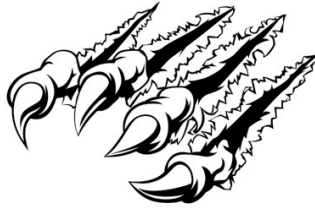
At that, Holly's gaze meets mine, and I slowly close the distance between us. That's a lie. I doubt anything will heal Kali with gaping wounds like that, but Holly doesn't need to know that.

Stretching out a hand, I edge closer, but once more, Holly continues to back away. Anger flares within me—I might not shift into a beast, but it's still in my DNA. Quick and strong, with my father's fiery temper, I feel my strength bubbling in my veins.

My eyes must flash, something that only happens when I'm really mad. Holly blinks once then spins away, taking off through the trees with me and Serena hot on her heels.

CHAPTER 48

HOLLY



My senses are on high alert as I plunge further and further into the dark woods. Sharp branches tug at my coat and scratch my face as I run blindly through the forest. Catching my toe on something sticking up from the ground, I stumble, landing hard in the dirt.

Smothering a cry of pain, I try to stay quiet, afraid of giving away my position. I must keep going. As if I can feel the hot breath of Serena's beast on the back of my neck, and I shudder. It scares me enough to keep moving. Fear pushes me to keep running, even though my lungs burn and my legs ache.

I've never felt pure terror like this, hearing her and knowing she's chasing me down. There was pure hatred in her eyes when she cornered me earlier. If not for Kali appearing out of nowhere, she would have ripped me apart.

Oh God, Kali.

I can't get the image of her bloodied coat out of my mind. Now, here I am, fleeing like a coward instead of staying to help her. Deep down, though, I know staying would have been pointless. Kali has fangs and claws and still, Serena took her down.

And she *enjoyed* it.

I could see the way her yellow eyes gleamed with delight, how she looked at Scott for his approval. For some reason, Serena despises me and, more disturbingly, she looked jealous. When her gaze landed on me, it was clear she wanted blood. She'll do the very same to me if she gets the chance.

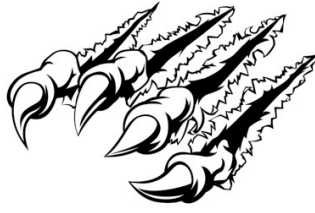
Disturbingly, that might be preferable to Scott's plans. If he just wanted to kill me, he could have done it plenty of times already. He wants more, and I feel sick at the thought of what that might be.

Shoving myself back to my feet when I land on my backside once more, I wince as my knee screams in pain. When I put my weight on it, it nearly goes out from underneath me. Leaning one hand against the rough bark of a tree, I tug my whistle out and give it another quick blast before I steady myself and push on.

Please come, Evan. I need you.

CHAPTER 49

EVAN



My claws dig into the soft ground as I run. Pushing myself hard, I'm already racing through the trees toward my home when the ear-piercing blast of a whistle reaches me. There's only one thing that can mean: Holly's in trouble.

Changing direction to aim for the forest behind my property instead, I pray I get to her in time. Ben is a fucking hero for giving her that thing when I was too stupid to stay close by and protect her.

Scott is going to pay for luring Ben away and casting suspicion on me. If he gets his hands on Holly, he'll make her death look like it, too, was my doing. I can't let him hurt her. She will *not* end up another woman buried in the dirt. Holly is my mate, my everything. I need to tell her that, that I'll never leave her side again.

Even if she wants nothing to do with me after all this, I'll keep her safe for the rest of my days.

I hear heavy breathing and pounding footsteps ahead; Holly is running blindly through the woods. Without enhanced vision or hearing, she's easy prey. Honing in on her exact location, something else catches my attention as I approach.

Blood. Lots of it.

My beast whines—it's not Holly's, but I recognise the scent. Kali. What the hell is she doing here?

My footsteps falter. I understand what the strength of the scent means. She's badly hurt. As I crash into the clearing in front of me, I skid to a stop beside my cousin. She lies motionless on her side, bright red pours from a nasty wound and drips from her nose and mouth. She's completely vulnerable, unable to protect herself in her badly injured state. Serena is still here and could easily circle back to finish her off, if her injuries don't do the trick before I can get her to safety.

"Go, Evan. Go. I'll be fine," Kali whispers without opening her eyes, her voice weak. Rasping sounds come from her chest, and her breathing is laboured, most likely from a punctured lung. I can't leave Kali to die, but there's no way I can abandon Holly to go get her help.

Fuck!

"I'll be back, Kali. Hold on."

I need to end this, and I need to do it fast. Every second I waste gives Kali and Holly less chance of surviving. With no time for stealth or finesse, I track down Serena. She hears me coming and turns to fend me off as I launch myself over a small formation of rocks and land on top of her. Her sharp teeth sink into my shoulder, and she twists her head, tearing at the flesh with sickening enthusiasm.

When I get my legs between us and shove her off, I drag my claws down her underside. The scores on her belly are deep, but she merely chuffs and grins. Lapping at her own blood and licking her lips, she growls in approval, loving the fight.

Lunging for her throat, I grip the scruff of her neck as we tussle, rolling across the floor, picking up twigs and fallen leaves in our coats as we go. The scent of Holly's fear spurs me on. Serena cries out as I dig my sharp claws into her side and twist, feeling the warmth of her blood oozing out over my fur.

Her pain distracts her, and the momentary lapse in concentration allows me to grab her front paw with my jaws. I bite down hard, keeping the pressure until I hear a loud crack,

and she howls in agony. I'm about to rip her throat out when she shifts back.

“Please, Evan. Please don't.”

I snarl and snap right in her face, and she flinches, cradling her broken arm. “It was Scott's idea. He's crazy. You need to stop him.”

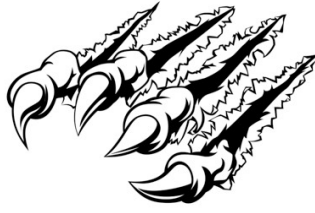
If she thinks her innocent act is fooling me, she's got another thing coming. She was the one following Holly, staring in through her window and stalking her at night. Serena had plenty of chances to warn her about her brother's plans. Hell, she's a beast—she could overpower him easily if she wanted to.

When I growl and crawl over her, forcing her to lie back and submit, I see the anger flashing in her eyes. She's filled with rage, not remorse. She's every bit as guilty as her brother.

With one, hard swipe of my paw to the head, I knock her out cold. Leaving her in the dirt where she belongs, I spin and take off after Scott, praying I get to him before he finds Holly. He's going to wish he never fucked with Evan King.

CHAPTER 50

HOLLY



My knee is making it impossible to hurry over the uneven terrain. A sob of despair suddenly wells up inside me when I hear Scott's steady footsteps close behind. He's toying with me. I barely had a head start, and with my injured leg, he could have caught me at a jog.

"It didn't have to be this way," he taunts and I flinch at the sound of his arrogant voice. "You could have been mine, Holly. I would have treated you like a princess."

It's bad enough that he's getting off on my terror, dragging this out for his own entertainment. Now, he's forcing me to listen to his grandstanding bullshit about how this is my fault for not falling in love with him? If Scott and Serena killed all those women, it was always going to end this way. He's fooling himself if he thinks we were ever going to have a happily ever after. The man isn't capable of it.

The snap of a twig makes me jump; he's mere metres behind me. Glancing over my shoulder, I see him sauntering after me; menacing and like he's just out for a stroll through the forest. I grit my teeth and struggle along, bracing myself against one tree before pushing off of it toward the next.

Ben or Evan will come back. They'll see the house empty and come for me. I know it. I just need to buy more time.

"Holly, just stop," he's exasperated with my pathetic attempt to escape. "This is just embarrassing."

"No," I say stubbornly. If he's going to kill me, I refuse to make it easy for him. He's going to have to drag me kicking

and screaming out of this forest.

“Serena told me you weren’t worth the hassle. She knew you were going to turn out just like the others—weak and pathetic.” He’s goading me, and it works. Annoyed on behalf of the innocent women he killed, I shake my head, chuckling darkly into the nothingness.

“Scott, your sister is deranged. She’s hardly the best judge of character.”

I stumble into a small clearing, waiting for him to strike while I squint and attempt to make out where I should aim to walk next. I hate having him at my back, but I refuse to lie down and die.

“My sister is loyal. There’s no other woman I can say that about,” Scott snarls. Comparing your sister to your girlfriends is weird, especially when he must see the way she looks at him. Granted he *is* an evil psychopath—I suppose anything goes.

My heart aches again as I think of Kali. This far out in the wilderness, in the middle of a storm, it will take a long time to get her medical help. Ben and Evan are her best shot.

“Serena’s a fucking bitch, Scott.” The words are barely out of my mouth when his fingers clamp around my arm and dig into my skin. He yanks me backward, my shoulder pressing against his chest. I can feel his warm breath on my face as he glares down at me, his lips pressed into a vicious line.

“Watch your mouth,” he warns. Spittle hits my face, and I flinch away from him, trying to tug my arm out of his bruising grip. I’m scared and furious at the same time, frustrated by my helplessness.

“And you, you’re a disgrace. Pretending to be a good guy when you’re really the Devil.” When I twist and jerk my body to get away from him, he releases me suddenly with a nasty grin, and I fall backward. I throw out my hands, trying to stop myself from falling. Crashing to the ground with a heavy thud, I land on my hands and knees, sinking into the rain-sodden ground.

In an instant, he's standing over me, one hand resting on his belt buckle as he draws back his boot and gives me a swift kick to the ribs. The force of it topples me over onto my back and knocks all the air from my lungs. Gasping, I cough and clutch my side as I roll onto all fours again.

As I claw at the soil, scrambling to get away, Scott leans down and grabs my ankle in a bruising hold, dragging me back to him. Leaves and muck invade my mouth as he pulls me along. Stretching out my hands, I reach for something to hold on to, but there's nothing substantial enough.

"I *am* the Devil, Holly, and there's nobody here to save you from me."

Kneeling down behind me, I hear the jangle of his belt, and my heart jumps into my throat.

"No! No fucking way," I scream, flipping over onto my back and kicking out at him wildly. "Get away from me."

Scott's belt is undone, along with the top button of his jeans. He smirks wickedly as he bats away my feeble kick. Snagging my ankles, he pins them to the ground before sitting on my thighs to keep my legs where he wants them.

"You all say you want a good guy, but you don't. Amanda was the same. So, I'm going to show you a *real* bad boy. Amanda loved it when I finally got my hands on her, and so will you. Unlike King, I'm not enough of a pussy to keep letting my women get away."

Grabbing my shoulder, he rolls me over and presses me face down into the cold, wet forest floor. Bucking, I try to get him off me as he traps both my hands over my head with one of his. He's freakishly strong, and my wrist hurts where he squeezes the bones together. His other hand searches under my layers of clothing for the waistband of my trousers while I curse and shout and sob.

His icy fingers slide along my belly as he reaches around to my front. I scream, thrashing wildly to get him and his filthy hands off me. When he covers me from behind, his weight on top of me and his lips against my ear, I feel like I'm

going to be sick. I can feel how turned on he is, his hard cock pressing into the back of my hip. This can't be happening.

“Scott, don't,” I plead. I've never felt so helpless. “Don't do this.”

“Too late, princess. I'm going to show you I don't need a beast to claim you. If being an animal is what you love about King, then I'm happy to oblige.”

I can't believe this is the same man I went on a date with. Even though we didn't end up together, he's the guy I would have set my friends up with, singing his praises for being such a catch. How could I have been so wrong?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I whimper as his rough fingers touch my hip. Salty tears roll down my face, dripping onto the muddy ground below me as Scott wrestles his trousers open further. When I crack my tear-filled eyes open, I see two amber orbs silently approaching. Evan is completely quiet as he slinks closer, and I bite my lip, trying not to give away his presence.

He doesn't make a sound, even though his lips are pulled back in a ferocious snarl. As he gets closer and sees Scott attempting to free his hard length from his trousers, he growls, low and terrifying. Somehow, the measured way he does it is even scarier than a loud roar.

Scott freezes, but he doesn't immediately climb off me. Without taking his eyes off the beast in front of him, he slides his fingers to the back of his waistband. When he pulls it back out, a glint of light bounces off the steel.

“Watch out!” I scream, staring on in horror as Scott grips the gun in two hands like the professional he is and points it straight at Evan.

CHAPTER 51

EVAN



Creeping through the darkness, I keep as quiet as I can. I don't want Scott to do anything hasty and hurt Holly, but nothing could prepare me for what I see when I emerge from the dense scrub. Scott has Holly pinned face down on the forest floor. My little mate is twisting and bucking to get him off her, but he's far too strong. When he tugs his trousers down around his hips and I get a glimpse of Holly's pale skin where he's disturbed her clothing, my stomach drops.

I feel sick. Anger replaces dread at the thought of what he might have done already.

An eerie calm settles over me as my beast takes full control. I no longer have a say in what happens. For most of my life, I've struggled with his aggression and desire to dominate. They don't always go hand in hand with living harmoniously with others. On this, however, we're total in agreement.

I see a faint glint of light bounce off the steel as he pulls his gun on me. Holly screams, trying to warn me of what's coming, but my beast doesn't care. He's focused single-mindedly on getting this man off our mate and spilling his blood. I want to taste it, see it soaking into the mud around us.

Burning pain slices through my side, but strangely, I enjoy it—he's done his worst, and it's not enough to stop me. Scott fires again, and I feel the bullet skin my flank as I land on top of him. My claws hit his shoulders and topple him backward,

away from my mate. Holly needs to be as far from this as possible. I can't risk her getting shot.

With a thud, we hit the dirt, and Scott grunts as his back hits the ground. He shoves his hands into the dark fur on my chest and tries to push me off, but I've already latched onto his shoulder with my teeth.

Turning my head, I take pleasure in his pathetic scream of pain as I rip a chunk of flesh away and spit it onto the ground beside me. He's stronger than the average human, but he's no match for me.

Blood gushes from the wound and coats my muzzle; his arm hangs limp at his side, and the gun slips from his grasp.

At the edge of my vision, I see Holly scramble away and hide. I feel guilty she's about to watch me kill someone when she's been traumatised enough, but there's no way I can stop myself now. He has to pay for what he's done.

My beast is in a frenzy as our razor-sharp claws slice into Scott's body, inflicting as much damage as possible. Each cut eases some of the blood lust within me. Watching the realisation in Scott's eyes that it's over for him feels like I've got some kind of justice for everyone he has hurt.

"Do it. Kill me like the fucking animal you are," Scott shouts. "I'll get what I want, anyway: you behind bars for the rest of your life."

This is his last pathetic attempt at saving himself. By trying to make me afraid for my own future, he thinks I'll let him live. But I want revenge for the women he killed in cold blood. Inside my head, I laugh. There is no reasoning with my beast. This man tried to hurt our mate. He has to die. It's that simple.

My jaws close around his neck, and I pause, enjoying how his bravado deserts him. He uses his one functioning hand to force my head away, but it's useless. Clamping down, my teeth puncture his skin, and warm, coppery blood trickles into my mouth.

“Amanda didn’t leave you, King. I took her. I kept her for weeks until Serena got jealous and put an end to my fun. She asked for you, every day. Stupid bitch thought you’d come for her, but you never really bothered looking, did you? You could have saved her.”

His words devastate me to my core. Amanda is dead. At his hands. Grief and guilt threaten to overtake me, but my beast is even more determined that ending this mere excuse for a man is the only course of action.

“She’ll never want you after this,” Scott’s gaze moves to where Holly has concealed herself. He can’t resist getting in one last dig, even though his throat working to speak forces more blood out through his wounds. I wish I could speak so I could ask him why, ask him how he could do these things, but it’s probably for the best that I can’t. That would just be giving him what he wants.

With a vicious snarl, I tear a massive hole in his throat, ripping the front of it away completely. His hand comes up to the tattered flesh, his eyes finding mine once more before the spark leaves them and they turn dull.

Scott’s dead.

I step back and shake out my fur, blood flying as I turn to check on Holly. She’s frozen in place, staring out through the leaves at the lifeless body on the ground. I prowl closer, trying not to spook her.

When I press my snout into her, snapping her out of her daze, she tenses. I attempt to make reassuring noises, the closest thing to a purr I can manage, as her tiny hands find my fur and cling on tight. She strokes my back and lets me comfort her. I can feel my anger subsiding as I look her over and find her physically unharmed.

When she buries her face in my neck, her scent permeates the stench of Scott that covers me. I lick her cheek, her neck, across her collarbone. She tastes different, and I pull back, looking her over once more for anything I didn’t see before.

“Evan?” Holly asks, frowning at my change in demeanour. Something has my beast agitated. He’s getting riled up again. A low rumble escapes my chest. “You’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

I try to wrestle back control, but it’s no use. Holly’s scent is driving him wild, and he’s determined not to shift back.

“Holly, you need to come with me. Right now.”

Ben’s deep voice startles both of us, even though it’s barely more than a whisper. Holly looks relieved to see him, while my beast is furious at the interruption. He has plans for his little mate now that he knows she’s safe. Ben is not part of them.

“Ben? What’s happening?” Holly struggles to her feet and moves toward him, but I use my enormous body to block her path. Snapping in his direction, I stand between them, guarding her.

“Where’s Kali?” she asks suddenly, looking past Ben. “You need to find her. Oh God, she’s hurt.”

Ben blanches and hesitates, obviously wanting to leave immediately in search of our cousin. Instead, he ignores Holly’s questions and focuses on me.

“Evan, I get it. She’s yours, but the timing couldn’t be worse, brother. Wait, just a day or two.” Holly blinks and looks between Ben and I, trying to work out what he means. “He wants to claim you. I won’t leave you if it’s not something you want. Come with me, and we’ll find Kali.”

He extends a hand to her, and something inside me prays she goes to him, because I can feel how much the animal in me desires her. Her scent has changed, and she’s ready for breeding. Holly is alive, and all ours. Now, he wants to make it official, and the need to do so is all-consuming.

Holly shakes her head and waves him away.

“I’ll slow you down. Kali needs you. She’s bad, Ben. You have to find her now.” Her pretty eyes land on me. “He won’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know that.” My vicious snarl interrupts Ben, but he turns to me defiantly, raising his eyebrow as he points in my direction. “You don’t know that either.”

Stepping closer to me, Holly extends a hand, and I brush up against it, wanting to feel her touch.

“Ben, go,” Holly insists.

With a reluctant nod, he backs away and races off to find Kali. An eerie silence settles over us as we stare at each other in the dark. The only sounds are the patter of rain on the leaves above us and the swaying of branches in the waning breeze.

We’re alone.

A growl escapes me as Holly edges away, her eyes wild as they take in my heaving chest and glowing eyes. My desire for her has me rock hard already. When her eyes travel south and take in the massive erection I’m sporting, I see the alarm in her eyes. She takes another step back, but I don’t want any distance between us, so I close the space again.

But then she takes another, and another, and panic fills me. She’s going to do the very last thing she should do in this situation. She’s going to run.

CHAPTER 52

HOLLY



Running was stupid.

As I hobble awkwardly through the trees on my still-sore knee, I know this wasn't the smartest thing to do. I'm just so overwhelmed. Ben told me Evan intends to claim me, but I was more focused on getting him to leave and find Kali than what that meant. Until I saw Evan's thick cock.

The possessiveness shining in his eyes and the determined way he was stalking me triggered my fight-or-flight response. I'm not afraid of Evan, but I *am* afraid of how much I want this. After watching him kill Scott so easily, instead of being frozen in fear when he approached, licking a long line up my chest to my neck, it turned me on.

He came back and protected me when I needed him most. I *love* him. If he wants to claim me, I'm on board with that, but the reality of that literally staring me in the face, a giant beast with lust in his eyes, is another thing. So, I panicked and fled.

As I hear him following behind me, I know I won't get far. Each footstep has adrenaline pumping through my veins, and my pussy throbs in anticipation of what's to come. When he tackles me from behind, a powerful arm lifting me easily to protect me as we fall, it's exhilarating. We fall to the ground, Evan using his other arm to take the brunt of the impact, shielding me from the ground.

Clambering to my hands and knees, I try to scurry away, but Evan covers me instantly, his broad chest pushing against my back, radiating warmth into my body.

Looking down at the dirt, I can see his hand pressed against the ground beside mine. My pale skin glows in the shards of moonlight that break through the trees, where the black fur covering him looks almost blue in the silvery light. The worst of the storm is passing. The small break in the clouds and let up in the wind feels magical, focusing my attention on the beast at my back.

Panting hard, his hot breath against my ear makes me shiver, and I can feel myself already getting wet. My body is hungry for him. He nuzzles my cheek tenderly, even as a deep rumble escapes him, and the bare skin of his face pressed to mine tells me he's partially shifted back.

I can feel every muscle in his hard body tense as he struggles to hold back. His hard length digs into my backside, and I whimper, angling my hips up so I can direct it to my agonisingly empty core.

Moaning softly as he rocks his hips forward, I can feel him shaking. It's empowering to know he wants me this much; I feel sexy and desired rather than scared or vulnerable. This is what I want, what I need. I stretch my pinky finger across and touch his hand, stroking it softly, wrapping it around one long black claw. I'm ready.

Evan's body pulls away from me, and my clothes are shredded and gone, leaving me completely bared to him. A ferocious roar explodes through the forest, warning anyone and everything not to come near us. I wait, frustrated and needy for his touch again.

"Evan!" I shout as his face suddenly presses between my legs from behind and he licks me from clit to ass. All the while, he's growling, the steady vibration making the sensation indescribable. He does it again, and again, and each time his long, rough tongue strokes over the sensitive bundle of nerves, I twitch and whimper.

He's priming my body to accept him. Every touch sets me on fire as he taunts and teases me. When he shoves that thick tongue deep inside me, twisting it and pulsing it in and out, I

know what he's doing. He's stretching me to take the monster between his legs.

When I'm right on the edge of coming, he pulls away, and I cry out in desperation, clawing at the earth in frustration. I've never felt so needy. When he lines the thick head of his cock up with my dripping pussy, I still. Evan pauses, not driving home, and my impatience grows the longer he waits. I rock back, trying to push him inside me, but he moves away, leaving me empty and aching for him.

"Mine."

The word comes out raw and savage, threatening violence on anyone who dares contradict him. His claws wrap themselves in my long hair, and he pulls, forcing me to arch my back even more. The sting on my scalp where he tugs the strands tight, combined with being trapped like this, completely at his mercy, reduces me to a whimpering mess.

I need him. I need him to shove his cock inside me and fill me up.

"Please, Evan. Take me," I beg, and when he slams into me in one brutal thrust, so hard I nearly fall forward, I realise that's what he was waiting for. He needed to hear me say it. Now, he has my confirmation that this is really what I want, and there's no holding back.

He maintains his tight grip on my hair, keeping my ass tilted up to make the angle deeper as he thrusts hard into me again. I cry out, the sudden fullness and the rush of pleasure as he stretches my body more than I think I can handle.

I'm not getting away from Evan now.

He slams into me, his hard cock dragging in and out, pushing me rapidly into the orgasm he withheld earlier. I'm already racing toward it when he falls forward and licks along the back of my shoulder and neck. My skin quivers, electric tingles dancing across it, and a fresh gush of wetness flows from my body over his wet cock.

"Oh God," I moan as his sharp teeth graze my skin, and my head swims with lust. Am I really doing this? Am I really

craving the bite of the hairy beast pounding my pussy? My insides tighten, and I almost climax just at the thought of it. It's raw and wild and feral, and I've never wanted anything more.

Evan keeps thrusting hard into me, rocking me forward each time his hips snap into mine and his long cock fills me to the hilt. Blinking my eyes open, I stare into the trees, the rain stopped for now and the forest in silence. It feels surreal.

“Bite me, Evan. Claim me.”

With a possessive growl, he sinks his teeth into my soft flesh, and an orgasm races through me. Screaming out his name, my arms give way, and I land hard on my elbows in the dirt. My legs shake from the force of it as pleasure pulses through my body and my vision goes dark around the edges. Evan roars, a dominant sound of victory as he retracts his teeth from my skin and his thrusting becomes frenzied.

I'm floating on a haze of delicious ecstasy as Evan chases his release when a strange sensation drags me out of my orgasm-induced stupor.

“Evan?” I whimper as a feeling of overwhelming fullness consumes me. His cock feels like it's growing inside me, and I whimper as he stretches me even wider.

“Evan?” I repeat, glancing back over my shoulder, but he's lost, consumed with lust as he continues to pound into me, one hand gripping my hip roughly to hold me in place. He's growling and snarling as he slams into me once, twice, three times, and then, with a final, brutal thrust he stills, his claws scoring the earth as he digs them in hard.

I feel every jerk of his cock buried deep as he spills jet after jet of his cum into my willing body.

Those aftershocks, as he twitches inside me, make me come again, gripping his impossibly huge cock tight with my pussy. The feel of his warm seed painting my insides and his cock pulsing with each spurt is so erotic. It seems to just keep coming. At my back, his heaving chest rumbles contentedly, and he kisses me softly along my spine.

“Evan, what the hell is that?”

CHAPTER 53

EVAN



Holly looks back at me over her shoulder in confusion, but as she does, she rocks forward, and the movement drags my thick knot along her inner walls again. I groan as I come again, my cock shooting more thick cum into her. It's trapped inside her body by my knot, the bulge at the base of my shaft designed to keep us connected and my seed from spilling out.

My chest swells at the thought of her belly growing round with pups. I've never thought about having kids before, but now, I'm obsessed with the idea of a mini-Holly or mini-me running around.

"Ooh!" Holly lets out a high-pitched, surprised cry as her tight pussy flutters around me, another mini climax rushing through her. Her lips part, forming a perfect O as she gasps in pleasure. My cock stiffens further, excited at the prospect of that luscious mouth wrapped around it.

This is better than I ever expected.

Gritting my teeth and forcing my beast to withdraw, I wrestle back control and force the shift. Everything looks very different as my awareness of where we are slowly returns.

Assessing our surroundings with the eyes of a man rather than an animal, my thoughts shift from desire to making sure Holly is okay. The mating frenzy is over for now, replaced by the need to care for her.

I stroke my now human hands, the black claws and dark fur gone, down Holly's spine and kiss her shoulder tenderly.

She purrs as I nuzzle her neck and wrap my arms around her, using my body to keep her warm and hopefully make her feel safe.

“Evan? What is that?” she whispers dreamily as I pull us upright. Holly is on her knees, sitting on my thighs, her back resting against my chest and her head on my shoulder. Her core quivers again, another aftershock caused by the movement of our bodies. She moans, eyes closed, silky dark hair cascading over my chest and tickling my skin.

“My knot. It keeps us connected, but it’ll shrink soon. Just enjoy it while it lasts.” I rock my hips to prove my point, and Holly makes a low, keening sound as she comes again, her nails digging hard into my thigh as she clamps down around me.

“No, no more.”

She shakes her head, the movement jerky from exhaustion, but a soft smile curves her lips. Sweeping her hair to the side, I kiss her cheek. Her skin is soft, and her scent is deliciously sweet. I can’t get enough, but this isn’t the time or the place to luxuriate in my newly-claimed mate.

Finally, I slip from her body, and Holly grumbles at the loss. I can’t help but smile at her reaction, despite the increasing urgency to get Holly out of here. I didn’t finish off Serena. Who knows where she is.

As Holly slides to the floor, no energy left to get to her feet, my chest squeezes with regret. This should not have been our first time, but there was only going to be one outcome when she ran. When she stretches her hand up to me, looking for me to help her up, her eyes drift over my naked body hungrily. She doesn’t appear to be too upset about it.

“I’m sorry, Holly. About this. About everything.”

When I haul her up, she grips my forearm as she balances precariously on one foot. Wincing as her toes touch the ground, I curse. She’s hurt.

“This was Scott’s fault, not yours,” she says bitterly, her gaze drifting toward where Scott’s body lies further back in

the clearing. The sight of Holly shivering, whether it's from the cold or shock, spurs me into action.

Scooping her up in my arms, I'm careful not to jostle her bad leg as I begin the journey back to my house. My temperature runs high; pressed tight against me, she'll absorb my body heat until I can get her inside and dressed.

"Is Kali going to be okay?"

Holly's voice cracks, and I lean down to kiss her forehead as a tear slides down her cheek.

"Ben would have called for us if he needed help. Hopefully, they're on their way to the hospital already and she'll be right as rain. We're a tough bunch, and we heal fast."

I don't go as far as saying she'll definitely make it, because I have no way of knowing. There was so much blood, I can't ignore the very real possibility her injuries are too extensive to survive. I owe her everything for coming to protect my mate. If she lives, I will be forever in her debt.

Holly accepts my words, too tired to argue and happy to have a shred of hope to cling to. She sighs as she rests her head against me. Looping her arms around my neck, her fingers absentmindedly stroke the back of my neck as she speaks.

"What now?"

Clenching my jaw to stop the anger from causing another shift, I choose my words carefully.

"You rest. We make sure Kali is okay. We make sure Serena's locked up forever, and we help the police work out exactly how Scott and his sister killed those women."

Nodding thoughtfully, she shifts in my arms, and her nails draw a figure eight on the bare skin of my neck.

"Then what?"

Dropping my gaze to hers, I frown at the vulnerability in her tone.

“Holly, in case you have any doubt, I’ve claimed you. If you want to go, I won’t stop you. You probably wish you never came to Sutton.”

My lungs constrict as I force those words out, not even remotely sure they’re the truth. Just saying them out loud leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I have to give her a choice, especially after letting her down so spectacularly. Her eyes widen in alarm, and I scramble to reassure her.

Words and feelings have never been my strong suit.

“If I could have my way, you’d come home with me right now and never leave.”

Staring at her pretty face, I beg for her to see how earnest I am. This woman deserves better than me, but I’m not a good enough guy to let her go. I want her tucked up in my bed, living in my house, sitting on the back porch with her feet up while I work.

“Okay.”

One word. So simple, and yet that one word breathes renewed life into my tired, weary soul.

“Okay?” I grin at her as I pick up the pace, hurrying now that the rear of my house is coming into view.

“Yes, okay.”

Bursting in through the back door, a quick pause tells me that nobody else is home. Carrying her straight to the sitting room, I lie her gently on the giant sofa and hand her a blanket. Reluctant to leave, I let go of her for two minutes while I run to my room. Pulling open the wardrobe, I snatch a t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms from the shelf and race back to where I left her.

She doesn’t comment as I dress her, fussing and making her rest her leg on my knee to keep it elevated. Her heavy eyelids fall closed, and she snuggles deeper into the plush cushions as sleep threatens to pull her under.

“Go. Find Kali and Ben. They need you. I know you won’t be far.”

Sliding my hands into her hair, I lean over and press a gentle kiss to her lips. I don't want to leave her alone again, but I can't rest until I know Kali and Ben are safe. Somehow, she still has her whistle, and I smile as she clutches it in her hand while she drifts off.

"I'll be right back," I promise as I pull away. She nods and waves me on, her eyes still closed. Her tiny body curls up into a ball, legs tucked under her, arms pressed tight to her chest. Holly mumbles something, and I lean closer, trying to hear what she's saying.

"Mm. Be safe, Evan. Love you."

CHAPTER 54

EVAN



When I'm exploring in my animal form, sometimes, we hunt and eat prey. Let's not forget, I just ripped a man's throat out with my bare teeth.

Still, the sight of Serena's mangled body, limbs bent at unnatural angles and skin torn from her body, has bile burning the inside of my throat. The lake of blood underneath her looks like a mirror in the moonlight, illuminating her pale skin as her vacant eyes stare unblinking at the canopy.

She was evil, just like her brother, and while her injuries are horrific, I'm not sorry she's dead. Thinking of her standing by and watching, even enjoying, as Scott tortured those girls makes me feel sick to my stomach. Serena and Scott both deserved everything they got.

I wish we knew exactly what happened to those women, but I doubt we'll ever find out.

Were there more? Did he really murder Amanda, or was he just trying to make me angry? John is still missing, but I'm not sure I'm ready to voice the possibility that he met his end at Scott's hands, too.

Emerging from the trees and standing at my side, "Did she tell you anything else about the others?" Ben asks. Hands thrust deep into his pockets, his shoulders hunch.

I would never have thought this level of overkill possible from him, but I can't say I feel bad for her.

Turning to face me, he frowns. "What do you mean?"

I point at Serena's lifeless form, "What else did she tell you?"

We're all exhausted. His brain will start working any minute now.

"I didn't do this," his confusion is obvious, "You did."

When I shake my head, we both turn to the mess in front of us. If neither of us killed Serena, who did? I twist on the spot and stare into the dense trees around us. What the hell is going on?

"Where's Kali?" Leaving Serena alive to pursue Holly was a risky move; with the relief that she's been taken care of, my concern for Kali surfaces immediately. I know, given the condition she was in when I left her, there's no way she could have done this.

"Her house. I waited until Maisy and Dr. Sullivan got there, and then I came back to deal with Serena."

Turning his back on Serena, he stares down at the forest floor, disturbing the pine needles and fallen twigs with the toe of his boot.

"How is she?"

I'm afraid to ask. Ben scrubs a hand down over his jaw and swallows hard.

"Sullivan says it's going to be touch and go. It all depends on whether she's got enough strength left for her healing to kick in."

Something about this isn't right, but the most important thing is that Kali's safe and receiving the best help she can get. Scott and Serena can't hurt anyone else. We got to Holly in time. Those are things to be grateful for and all I can focus on right now.

"I should have known something was up."

Ben's voice is thick, his face pale as he takes in the carnage around us, and we both consider how things could have gone tonight.

“You couldn’t leave Adam trapped there in the storm. They just took advantage of the distraction. It’s their fault, not ours.” Even as I say the words, guilt gnaws away at me. “If anyone’s to blame, it’s me. I should never have left Holly, and it’s a mistake I don’t plan on making twice.”

Especially if there’s someone else running around out here with a taste for violence. Trying not to think about what that could mean, I pull Ben into a hug and squeeze him so hard, he shoves me away so he can breathe again.

Hopefully, when we get back into town, someone will come forward to say they saw Serena attacking Kali and stepped in to help. It’s the only explanation I can come up with. I can understand not wanting to hang around and get caught. The viciousness of the attack, though... this looks like more than just coming to someone’s defence.

“That whistle... you’re a genius. I owe you.”

Ben’s wry smile tells me he’s pretty proud of himself, too. “I’ll keep you posted on Kali. Go and take care of Holly.”

He gives me a mock salute, taking one last glance at Serena’s corpse before he disappears into the dark forest.

Kali’s had a tough life. When John and I convinced her to move here, we were hoping things would be easier for her in Sutton. Both people and beasts here are a little more progressive and welcoming than in her hometown. We’ll do everything we can to get her through this. Dr. Sullivan is used to patching up our kind; if anyone can save her, it’s him.

Creeping back into my house, I quietly remove my boots so as not to disturb Holly. I check to make sure she’s still sleeping then tiptoe back out of the room. Much as I want to join her, there are some practicalities to sort out before I can truly relax.

Henry, Scott’s deputy, picks up on the first ring. When I explain what we suspect Serena and Scott of doing, there’s stunned silence on the other end before he laughs in disbelief.

But when I tell him where to find the bodies, there’s no more joking around. He switches back into professional mode,

asking me a dozen questions before ordering me not to leave my house or touch a thing. It's going to be a circus around here pretty soon.

Henry is one of us, so he'll keep this as quiet as he can, covering up any injuries as an animal attack if he can get away with it. Henry looked up to Scott. Accepting that his boss is the villain in this story might not be easy for him, so I'm definitely not off the hook yet.

Which means every second I have with my new mate is precious.

Carrying her into my darkened bedroom, I undress and slide under the sheet, pulling her warm, soft body into me. She comes willingly, her back to my chest and her firm backside nestling against my groin.

I should let her sleep, but when I drape my arm over her and my hand settles on her stomach, the need to fill her with my seed roars to life again.

Brushing her hair back from her neck, I kiss her silky soft skin gently, loving how she smells. Rocking my hips against her, I stifle a groan as my cock rubs between her firm, juicy cheeks. She sighs contentedly and settles back to sleep in my arms, pushing her ass harder into me. I snake one arm under her thigh and lift her leg, pushing it forward and opening her sweet pussy for me. When I trail my fingers across her slit, she's wet, and a moan passes from her lips.

Emboldened by the sultry noise, I dip two fingers just slightly inside her on the next pass. Clamping down around my digits, her body reacts to me even without her knowing. She wriggles, parting her legs and allowing me better access. Holly rolls her hips, grinding against my hand as I push further inside. Her greedy pussy quivers, and she whimpers when I pull my fingers out, dragging her wetness up over her swollen clit to give the bundle of nerves some attention.

Rubbing tight circles around it, revelling in the way her breathing quickens, I position the head of my aching cock against her greedy cunt.

“Holly?” I murmur against the shell of her ear, kissing and nipping her earlobe before moving to the elegant column of her neck.

“Mm?” She’s still more asleep than awake, but she arches her back, encouraging me to sink inside. I continue to stroke her, using her juices to make her clit deliciously slippery beneath my fingers. She moans quietly when I push the broad head of my cock inside her tight channel.

“Fuck,” I groan as she pushes back against me, pulling me in further, one hand coming up over her shoulder to grip the back of my head.

“Evan,” she whispers, her voice husky from sleep and rough with need. As she slowly wakes up, she digs her nails into my skin and gasps loudly. “Evan?” I can hear the arousal and confusion in her tone, but she rolls her hips again, and I sink a little deeper inside her warm, welcoming body. We both cry out in pleasure, but still, I don’t drive home.

“I need you, Holly.”

It’s true. I feel like I’m going to lose my mind if I’m not inside her soon, but that won’t be enough. I want to breed her; mind her and our babies for the rest of my days. It’s like I’m possessed by the idea.

“Tell me I can take you,” I beg. Stroking her clit a little harder, I bite down gently on her shoulder before licking away the sting. “I want to wake you up every day with my cock in your cunt or my tongue on your pussy.”

“Jesus, Evan.” Holly reaches back and holds my hip, wiggling back to force my cock deeper. “I want you. Please.”

The scent of her arousal in the air thickens, but she hasn’t agreed to my demands. She doesn’t think I’m serious.

“Tell me. Tell me I can sleep with my cock buried inside you, that I can put a baby in you. You’re mine, Holly. This pussy is mine.”

Her core clenches around me, and she cries out, tipping her head back so it rests against my shoulder. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are swollen with desire.

“Yes. You can do whatever the fuck you want with me.”

Smiling at her easy agreement, desperation clear in her voice as she begs me to fuck her, I thrust my hips forward, filling her with one stroke. Her ass jiggles as my hips meet her body.

“Ugh.” Her groan is deep and guttural, and her fingernails scratch harmlessly at my skin as I slowly stroke in and out of her. Holly’s mind is just waking up, but her body has been alive for a while. In her relaxed state, her climax arrives quickly, catching her by surprise. Gasping and panting as she rides each wave of pleasure, she holds me tight to her, milking my cock.

“Fuck, Holly. Please tell me you’re not on birth control.”

Without waiting for an answer, I grab her hips and roll her to her front, never leaving her body. Using my weight to hold her down, I shove her hands above her head, pressing them into the mattress.

“I’m not on anything, but are you sure...”

Not letting her finish that sentence, I growl in satisfaction at her answer. Pressing down on her lower back, I tilt her hips higher to deepen my angle.

“I’m going to fill you full of my seed. It’s going to be dripping out of your sweet cunt for the rest of the day.”

Unapologetically explaining my plans for her, I wait for an objection that never comes. My hips slap against her flesh, making her ass shake each time I pound into her.

“Jesus, Evan,” she moans, her face against sheets. I cover her, falling forward so my chest is touching her back. Loving the feel of her skin against mine, I reach around to massage her breasts while I continue to roughly take her. Fuck; but my Holly loves it, crying out in delight when I pinch her nipple hard and tug gently on the tight bud.

She explodes around my cock again, clenching around my rock-hard length tightly enough to make me see stars. I follow her this time, my balls lifting and cock firing jet after jet of

creamy cum into her. Watching as it leaks out around my cock, I frown, pushing it back inside with my finger.

“Oh!” The stretch of my cock and now my finger inside her has Holly lifting her head from the sheets and craning her neck to see what I’m doing.

“This stays in.”

CHAPTER 55

HOLLY



Part of me knows I should be more concerned about Evan's determination to keep his cum inside me. This is definitely not something I've encountered before, but for some strange reason, I feel completely at peace with it. He's asked me to stay in Sutton and be with him. After all we've been through, after everything that's happened between us, we've skipped past the getting to know you stage. I trust he's serious about this thing between us.

Since his claiming in the forest, I feel different. I can sense him, like he's part of me now. By accepting the beast and the man, I seem to have given him the confidence to trust this. He's calmer, but that could just be all the sex. Even though I've stolen into the bathroom to clean up, it's like he's still with me.

Shivering at the memory of the frenzied rutting, I graze my fingertips over the slightly raised bumps of his bite mark on my neck. It seems to have a direct line straight to my core, and I moan as my pussy clenches tightly. Now, I don't want it to heal.

"That looks good on you."

Evan sweeps my hair to the side and kisses my neck tenderly, his eyes locking onto mine in the mirror as he walks in. Moving away, he fills the tub and rising steam quickly filling the small space. As he straightens, he looks around and frowns, running his hand over the old wooden door and the rustic bathroom cabinet.

“We can move somewhere nicer, or I can knock some rooms together to make them bigger. This place isn’t fancy, but it has potential.”

My heart melts that he’s thinking about our life together, but I love his house. It’s *not* fancy, but I don’t want that. His place is big enough for us, with all the mod cons and a giant deck at the rear. I don’t mind where we live, as long as we’re together.

“It’s perfect, Evan. I don’t need anything else.”

He wraps a protective arm around me and tucks me into his side. I can’t resist turning into his body, stroking my palms up his well-defined chest and into his short, dark hair.

“I know that, but maybe we’ll need more space. Hopefully.”

Evan’s hand drops to my belly, and he caresses it tenderly, a wistful, excited look in his eye as he throws me a wink. Blushing, I look away.

Secretly, I love how determined he is to make me his in every way he can think of. Holding out a hand for me, he helps me climb into the bath and leans down to give me a sweet kiss. He handles me like a precious doll, a stark contrast to the way he hunted me down and claimed me outside.

Watching as he fusses about, finding my shampoo and conditioner and lighting candles, warmth blooms in my heart. It’s not all about the insane attraction between us. This is a good man. He might be gruff with other people, but I know he’ll treat me like a princess.

“You’re not joining me?”

The bubbles part as I glide my hands back and forth across the surface. Warmth seeps into my muscles, and I relax, sinking deep into the water. It’s been a tough few days and it feels good to unwind. Without a doubt, the reality of what happened has yet to sink in. I haven’t processed how close I came to ending up as another victim.

There’s so much more I need to know, just not now.

“Tempting as you are, Henry is on his way. He’s going to take me in, Holly. Before that, I have some things to sort out with the bar and the garage to keep things ticking over until this all gets sorted out.”

Seeing the worry in my eyes, he dips his arms into the bath and wraps them around me, even though I’m soaking wet and dripping water all over him.

“It *will* get sorted. Henry’s a good guy and he’s just doing his job. I’ll be home in no time.”

He bops me on the nose and smiles, but it’s not natural. He’s forcing himself to be positive. Nodding, because I don’t know what else to do or say, I give him a weak smile before he kisses me again. Then he pulls the door closed behind him as he disappears, phone in hand.

Telling myself to only focus on doing the next thing to be done, I try to clear my mind. Speak to the police. Tell them it wasn’t Evan. Make sure Kali is okay and see what I can do to help her. Give Ben a dig out with the bar and the garage where I can.

The deep rumble of Evan’s voice from down the hall reassures me he’s not going anywhere right now, but I can’t pretend I’m not scared. They wanted to pin the missing women on him before, and now there are even more bodies close to his house. Kali and I are hardly impartial witnesses, and she won’t be in any condition to give her interview to the police for a while. I’ll hand over all of John’s records. Hopefully, someone can find proof in those, or at least in the last notebook.

There must be something which will support Evan’s version of events and incriminate Scott and Serena.

Is Evan’s eye colour going to be enough?

As I dry off and get dressed, my thoughts continue to spiral. Of course, Evan’s going to tell me everything will be okay, but he can’t guarantee that. What if he doesn’t get out? What if I’ve let a man who’s about to go to jail for the rest of his life knock me up?

Groaning, I cover my face with my hands. Every time he talks about breeding me, I lose my head, but I must be more sensible until he's in the clear. We'll prove his innocence and Scott's guilt. I won't rest until I do. It's all going to work out.

A gentle rap on the door startles me.

"Holly?" It's Ben. "Henry's here for Evan. I thought you might want to say goodbye."

Yanking the door open, I sprint past Ben and run down the hall, my feet bare. As I round the corner, a quiet click makes me stop dead in my tracks.

"Holly. It's okay. It's just procedure."

Evan's voice is strong and sure, reassuring me when I should be the one telling him he's going to be alright. Ignoring the attempts of the officer leading Evan away to keep me back I fling myself at Evan.

Clinging to him, I sob into his t-shirt before clutching his face and kissing him desperately. When a firm hand grips my upper arm, Evan growls, but Henry doesn't pull me hard, just tries to coax me away.

Rounding on him, I keep one arm wrapped around the man I love.

"But he saved me. Scott was going to kill me!" I shout in disbelief. Henry looks pained but merely nods along, keeping his response impassive and neutral. "You can't take him away from me," I whisper.

"I killed Scott, baby. I have to go in and explain why. But it's going to be okay."

Evan presses his forehead to mine and shuts his eyes, not looking as confident as he sounds. Henry has the good grace to look sympathetic as he rests a hand on my arm.

"Ben is going to drive you down when you're ready, and I'll take your statement. You've been through something traumatic, so come when you feel up to it." I glare at him, even though I know this isn't his fault. I'll be forcing Ben to bring me there immediately. "We have people out at the

Golden's property turning everything over already. We'll get this straightened out as soon as we can."

Even though it sounds positive, I can't believe this is happening. Evan dips his head and presses his cheek against my own before dragging his lips over mine.

"I love you, Holly. Do you hear me? I'll be home soon."

Nodding, I allow Ben to pull me back as Henry opens the door of the waiting patrol car for Evan. He goes willingly, speaking quietly to Henry, who doesn't display any anger or animosity toward him. If he genuinely thought Evan had murdered Scott in cold blood, he would be hostile.

Surely, that's a good sign.

Hanging on to that glimmer of hope, I watch as they drive away. Ben's arm is wrapped comfortingly around my shoulder, but I still feel more alone than I ever have.

"Can I get you some tea?" he asks, eventually leading me inside long after the car disappears from view. I appreciate the gesture, but I don't need babying. Lifting a box of John's things, I shove it into Ben's arms.

"No, but you can help me search through all of this again."

CHAPTER 56

EVAN



“**Y**ou’re free to go.”

Henry stands at the entrance to the small cell and holds the door open wide for me. He looks like shit; I doubt he’s slept more than a couple of hours in the last three days.

“I’m sorry it took so long, but this whole thing is a shit show. I’ve been trying to keep the press away from it, from you and Holly, but they might still be sniffing around. I’d lie low for a while.”

Nodding at him, I bite my tongue to hold back the grumpy retort that’s dying to escape me. It’s not his fault. He’s been doing his best to clear my name without making the existence of this town’s unusual inhabitants public knowledge. Not easy when you have a dead cop on your hands, and that’s all while coping with the fact that his friend turned out to be a serial killer hiding, right under his nose.

“I appreciate you taking me seriously, Henry, and not just assuming the worst.”

Shaking his hand, I wait until he looks me in the eye and finally nods. Scrubbing a hand down over his stubbled jaw, he sighs.

“Like I had a choice. Holly’s been camped here. Maisy, too. They’re even more persistent than the reporters.”

Just hearing my mate’s name lifts my spirits. She was here. She didn’t change her mind and decide I’m more trouble than

I'm worth. Not that it would have mattered—she's mine and we both know it. I would have chased her down and reminded her.

The need to see her is overwhelming; it's a struggle to maintain my composure and not rush outside to find her.

“Hold your horses, Loverboy. She's not here. Ben came to pick you up.”

Henry pushes through the door into the main station and waits for me to follow. It takes me a moment to hide my disappointment and keep going, and Henry just grins a lopsided smile, shaking his head. “Jesus. You're as lovesick as she is.”

I'm barely listening as I stride through the office toward the entrance and out through the open doors, sucking in a big lungful of fresh air. Being trapped indoors in that tiny, windowless room was torture. I felt anxious and claustrophobic, but the crisp mountain air and the sky above me calm my beast instantly.

Open spaces and my mate, that's all I need.

“Don't go far, Evan. I might have more questions.”

Without turning around, I nod, raising a hand in acknowledgement over my shoulder. Closing my eyes, I relish the sun on my face. I can feel Ben's eyes on me from where he leans against his truck, arms folded across his chest.

“Good to see you, brother. I thought they were going to keep you this time.”

With another slow inhale, I turn to face him and smile. He's right—it would have been easier for the police to pin the lot on me and paint Scott as the martyred hero.

“Where is she?” I ask, walking past him to the passenger door and climbing in. He thinks I can't see him roll his eyes, but I do.

“I think what you meant to say was, *it's good to see you too, Ben. Thanks for minding my business and working tirelessly to help prove my innocence while I had a little rest.*”

Pushing his sunglasses on as he slides behind the wheel, he stares at me, refusing to drive until I give him some praise for his efforts.

“I appreciate it.” I do. I just can’t think of anything right now other than my mate. “Is Holly okay?”

Ben’s lips thin, and alarm bells go off in the back of my mind. I growl, stretching out an arm and gripping him by the front of his shirt.

“I love you, Ben, but I *will* kill you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

Instead of flinching away from my aggression, he smiles. It’s incredibly irritating, and my blood pressure rises further.

“Holly’s fine. I forced her to go for a nap. She hasn’t stopped since you got brought in. Maybe you’ll have more luck than me convincing her to take it easy.”

Nodding, I sit back, relieved that’s all it is. I know exactly how I’m going to get her to rest. I’ve put her to sleep with orgasms before, and I’ll happily do it again.

Slowly, my fingers unclench, and I let go of the material bunched in my hand. He looks down at his crumpled shirt and raises an eyebrow before smoothing it dramatically with one hand.

“Thank you for looking out for her.”

Ben pulls onto the winding road, checking both ways, despite the town being deserted. He glances at me nervously before twisting his hands around on the steering wheel. The leather creaks in the deafening silence of the vehicle.

“Well, hold on to those warm, fuzzy feelings because I have some bad news.” The muscles in his jaw twitch and he grinds his teeth. This is not good.

“Spit it out.”

He looks at me again before returning his eyes to the road.

“Kali’s gone. Not *gone* gone. Fuck. Bad choice of words. Missing. She’s gone missing. Nobody has seen her for three

days.”

My head spins. This doesn't make any sense.

“How could she be up and about so soon?” I ask, my brain quickly trying to work out how a woman with catastrophic injuries just a few days ago could have run away.

“She didn't leave. She was taken,” Ben admits with a grimace. “Maisy was there, in the house with her, waiting for Doc to arrive. She left the room to get more towels, and when she came back... Kali was just gone.”

Ben sighs and shifts in his seat, getting agitated as he tells me what happened.

“We've looked everywhere. The whole town is out searching, but she didn't just wander off, Evan. She wouldn't have been able to, not on her own.”

Kali's been gone for three days. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to think who would do that when she clearly needed medical help. If everyone has been looking for her all this time and found nothing, she's no longer in town.

Could it be one of the jerks from her old town who loved to give her a hard time because of the colour of her fur?

That's too obvious. Ben would have checked there first.

Then who the hell took her? Where could she be?

CHAPTER 57

HOLLY



Groggy and feeling hungover despite not having a drink since that night with Kali, I rub my eyes and roll over. The lingering smell of Evan on his sheets makes me hum happily, despite the ache I feel deep inside at his absence. I try to relax, curling into the mattress and tugging the duvet around me like a cocoon.

It's okay. He's going to be home soon.

"You're not going to let me in there?"

Evan's deep voice makes me jump. Whirling around, I stare at him in disbelief. He's standing right there, one edge of the duvet in his hand, like he was just about to slide under before I wrapped myself up.

One eyebrow raised in a devilish smirk, I see he's already taken off his jeans and boots. With his knee resting on the edge of the bed, he waits. I can sense his turmoil; he's not sure whether climbing into bed beside me right now is okay.

Blinking back the tears of relief at seeing him, I push up to my knees, clumsy because I'm tangled up in the sheets, and throw myself at him. He catches me as I crash into him, burying my face in his chest. I cling to him like he's going to vanish again if I let go.

"Shh, Holly, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

His voice, strong and sure, calms me, and I relax my death grip on his shirt just enough to pull back and smile up at him. He cradles my cheek in his palm and stares down at me.

“You stayed.”

Frowning, I scoot back and pull him onto the bed with me, kicking the covers loose so he can get in. Tugging his arm, I coax him to settle at my side so we’re lying face to face.

“Of course, I stayed. Is that alright? The new ranger is arriving this week, and there was some damage to the cabin in the storm. They needed me out so they could finish the repairs.”

“I meant you stayed in Sutton,” he clarifies, stormy grey eyes boring into mine. Evan has always been intense, but now, I know he’s not doing it to intimidate me. He’s trying to figure something out.

“What are you talking about? I said I would.” In my mind, it’s that simple. I love this man. Even if nobody else ever believes him, I know he didn’t do anything wrong. If I could have sat in that jail cell with him, I would have.

“I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d left. You didn’t have to stay just because you said you were going to.”

Our hands rest only millimetres apart, but the gulf between us seems huge. He’s holding back from me.

“You think I’d have left you? Honestly?”

I’m not angry, just curious. Evan has had three, long days of wondering whether he was going to have any kind of life at all. Everything he worked so hard to build, his bar, garage, this house, could have been taken away from him.

Evan shrugs his shoulders, reaching out tentatively to stroke my cheek and wipe away a tear I didn’t even know had fallen.

“Never,” I whisper, grabbing his face with my two hands and kissing him hard. He closes his eyes, and I see him struggling to accept my words. His parents left and never looked back. John is gone, leaving so many unanswered questions. Amanda rejected him when he showed her his true self.

Even if she hadn't fallen prey to Scott, she wasn't coming back.

"Look at me, King." Evan growls at my use of the surname everyone else uses, but not me. Not anymore. "Never."

I smash my lips to his again, still holding his stubbly face between my palms. Pouring every ounce of my heart into that kiss, I show him I mean it. This is for keeps. Shoving him onto his back, I straddle him, my knees on either side of his waist. At first, he's gentle, careful with me, but as I let my tongue tangle with his and bite down hard on his lower lip to bring his beast out to play, he growls.

Snaking his hand into the back of my hair and grabbing it roughly, he takes control.

"Doesn't matter anyway," he grumbles, coming back to his bossy self. Forcing my head to the side, he buries his nose in my neck and inhales deeply, growling in satisfaction. "I'd hunt you down."

When he licks a path between the valley of my breasts, over my collarbone and along my neck, I buck under him. Tingles race across my skin at the drag of his long, rough tongue over my skin. Grabbing my hips, he drags my pelvis back and forth over his. He's already rock hard, and the friction on my throbbing clit is incredible.

"Would you now?" I tease. "What if I said no?"

My tone is playful, but his beast doesn't care. He clearly doesn't like not getting what he wants. Evan's face darkens, his cheekbones becoming more pronounced and his skin taking on a greyish hue. I tug on the bottom of his t-shirt until he gets the hint and rips it over his head one-handed.

"I'd fuck you until you remember who you belong to."

His fingers grip the neck of my top and rip it right down the middle. He shoves the torn halves off my shoulders and cups my breasts, taking their weight in his palms before squeezing them roughly.

"I'd bend you over and bring you to the edge, over and over, until you begged me to take you home and finish the

job.”

I let my hands drift over his chiselled torso, admiring every dip and bump of his hard muscles. My hands run down his arms, over the hint of downy fur appearing there now that his beast is close to the surface. Evan lifts me onto my knees and shoves his boxers down with one hand. His cock, veined and so dark it's almost black, bobs free, slapping against his stomach, and I swallow hard. I stare, transfixed, a sudden urge to taste him taking control.

I take him by surprise, swirling my tongue around his broad head, tickling the surrounding edge before sucking the top like a lollipop. The ridges along the top of his length are pronounced, and now I understand why it feels like he's rubbing every nerve within me when he's inside me.

“Fuck!” he shouts out, his hands going to my hair in an attempt to shove me away. Stubbornly, I take him further into my mouth. Licking up the vein on the underside, I dip my tongue into his slit, gathering the salty pre-cum already pooling there. Vaguely, I hear material shredding before cool air hits my bare pussy. Evan tosses away my torn underwear and flops back, his head sinking into the pillow as he grits his teeth, his eyes screwed tightly shut.

When I tug on his swollen balls, his eyes fly open, and he looks down his body at me. Now that I have his attention, I hold eye contact and make a show of popping off and licking my lips. Then, ever so slowly, I take his hefty cock back into my mouth and as far down my throat as I can.

“Jesus, Holly. That's the hottest thing I've ever seen.”

Feeling triumphant, I relax my throat and let him slide in further before swallowing around him. His hips pulse higher of their own accord, and he buries his claws into the mattress, ripping the sheets as I pull off him. As I dive back in, determined to drive him crazy with my mouth, he grips my arms and yanks me off, spinning us so I'm underneath him in one swift movement.

I gasp at his speed and strength; the way he can man-handle me is such a turn on, and it sends a giddy rush of

excitement straight to my core.

“No. I’m not wasting my cum on your throat.” He shoves a finger deep inside me, humming in satisfaction when he finds me dripping wet and ready for him. “It all goes in this pretty cunt.”

Pinning my hands over my head, he stares down the length of my body and nudges my legs wider. Positioning himself at my entrance, he growls possessively. Gripping my waist hard with one hand, he keeps me pinned exactly where he wants me as my legs flail uselessly, snarling before driving home in one hard stroke.

“This body is mine. This pussy belongs to me.”

My nails dig into the hand holding me down, and my hips arch off the bed, overwhelmed by the sudden fullness. Rising up onto his knees, he lifts my hips off the mattress so just my shoulders remain on the bed. With furious thrusts, he pounds into me, using his strength to circle my hips as he moves.

My clit rubs against his stomach with each pass, and in this position, I’m helpless to do anything except hold on for the ride. Moaning and writhing, I press my hands against the headboard to keep my balance as he continues to fuck me hard.

His fingers find my clit and stroke in time with his thrusts, harder and faster until I break, clenching and pulsing around him. Whispering his name over and over, I shake in his arms from the strength of my release.

Gasping for breath, I’m boneless when he falls over me, sweating and shaking as he presses his lips to mine in a claiming kiss. Evan thrusts into me once, twice, three more times before hitching my knee up to deepen the angle and spilling his seed into me. He holds his hips tight to my body, painting my womb with jets of his cum.

Cursing and squirming beneath him, I scratch my nails down his arms as his knot swells, pushing against my already-singing nerve endings. My core clenches around him, setting

off another wave of aftershocks as I grip him. I forgot. How did I forget about this?

“That’s it, Holly, suck my cum deep into your womb,” he whispers against my ear.

Oh fuck.

My head is spinning, and I swear I’m high on this man’s cock. Evan growls in satisfaction every time another slight thrust of his hips has me moaning and clenching again. My insides ripple around him in waves with each orgasm he wrings from my body, and we’re still connected when I feel my eyelids falling shut. It’s been a hard few days, searching for Kali and trying to dig up every shred of evidence we could to prove Evan’s innocence.

I’m exhausted, and Evan’s just fucked the last ounce of energy out of me. Once again, I decide he’s definitely done it on purpose—not that I’m complaining.

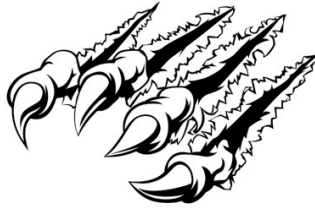
Stroking my hair, he kisses me tenderly, nuzzling into my neck and surrounding me with his warmth.

“Sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up. I’m never leaving you again.”

His words ease my last worry, the fear he’d be taken away again, and I allow myself to slip under, wrapped in his arms, safe in his bed.

CHAPTER 58

EVAN



A steady thrum of anxiety has been coursing through my veins for the last three days. I haven't been able to stop picturing Holly with Ben, tears streaming down her beautiful face as I was driven away in the police car. I've swung from deciding she was better off without me to wanting nothing more than to hold her and never let her go.

Lying here with her sprawled across my chest and her glossy hair tickling my neck, I know I was a fool. There's no way I could let her walk out of my life.

Not that she seems to want to. Even in her sleep, she's clinging to me, one of her arms wrapped around my bicep and her leg twisted around mine. With her wrapped around me like this, I slept like a log.

Smiling, I watch as she slowly rouses from sleep. Confused, she lifts her head, trying to figure out where she is. When she realises she's lying on top of me, she squeaks and tries to clamber off.

"Evan! I'm squashing you. Why didn't you shove me off?"

I wrap my arms around her waist and growl, not wanting her to move even an inch. She laughs at me, slapping my chest lightly and continuing to wiggle until I reluctantly let her go. As she slides to the side and down onto the bed, I slip from her body and her eyes widen at the sensation.

"Oh my god." She blinks rapidly, and I see her trying not to look down as cum spills from between her thighs. "Evan, what did you do to me?"

Holly blushes furiously and shoves her face into my pillow as more and more liquid leaks from her.

“You fell asleep while we were still knotted together.” I twist so I can see her face. She glances at me out of the corner of her eye before shaking her head in embarrassment, letting out another mortified groan muffled by the pillow. “If anyone should be embarrassed, it should be me. My mate fell asleep while I was still inside her.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she whispers. Her cheeks flame red once more as she kicks her legs behind her and presses her palms to her hot cheeks. Laughing, I stretch and push to my feet.

“I think that’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.” Admiring her ass as she lies there with her bum stuck up in the air to avoid the wet patch, I can see wetness between her legs.

“Evan!” she squeals. “Stop staring, you pervert. Look at you! You’re loving this.”

Chuckling, I disappear into the bathroom and turn on the shower, making sure the temperature is just right. She watches me as I approach, trying to shove me away as I scoop her off the bed. Looping her arms around my neck, she twitches as more wetness seeps from her pussy and drips onto my arm.

“I *do* love it, because I love you.”

Holly groans and presses her face to my chest.

“This is the least romantic time, ever, to say that.” Setting her down gently, I kiss her forehead and grab a couple of towels from the shelf. Pulling back the shower door, I hold out my hand and gesture for her to step inside. Her lips twitch; there’s something else she wants to say but doesn’t. That’s okay. I can wait.

I stay quiet as she accepts, slipping her small hand into mine and letting me help her step inside. Tucking her dark hair behind her ears, I turn her around so she’s standing with her back to the spray.

“I know you’re just buttering me up because you’re trying to stick a baby in me. Babies aren’t just for Christmas, you know.” There it is.

Holly doesn't look at me. Instead, she tips her head back to wet her hair, a sigh of pleasure passing her lips. I watch, utterly captivated as water sluices down her lean body. Rivulets cascade over her shoulders and over her breasts, thrust forward as she arches her back.

Will I ever get over the desire to bury myself inside her every minute of the day?

I wish my parents had told us about some of this stuff before they left town. It's not the kind of thing you can talk about with just anyone.

But those thoughts will have to wait for a moment. We need to have this conversation first.

"I'll admit, my animal is obsessed with breeding you. It's primitive and instinctual, but just know that if it doesn't happen, or if you don't want that, I'm perfectly happy with just practising." Placing my hand at the base of her throat, I force her to turn so I can see the faded pink outline of the bite I gave her. Tracing my finger over it, I hum in satisfaction. "This is what I want. You and me."

Kissing the mark, I hold her steady as her legs wobble. She's still weak as a kitten, clearly tired out. My protective instincts win out over my desire as I release her neck. We'll have plenty of time for that when she's back to full strength.

After washing her carefully, taking my time to worship every inch of her body, I dry my mate off with a towel. When we dress and head down to the kitchen, Ben's already there, bowl of cereal in hand, spoon poised in front of his lips.

"Well, well, well. You finally let her up for air."

Holly ducks her head and presses tight to my side. Glaring at Ben, I let him know he needs to cut it out. This is her home now; I won't have her feeling awkward. Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and give her a side hug to reassure her. He rolls his eyes, not as worried as I am about Holly's feelings.

"Any news on Kali?" It's an obvious change of subject, but I don't care. I want to move the conversation away from my

sex life. Expecting an immediate no, my head jerks up when he doesn't respond. Holly grips my t-shirt, waiting to hear what Ben has to say.

“She called Henry. Said to call off the search, that she's okay. Sore, but okay.”

I should be relieved, but it's a kick to the stomach that she called Henry and not us. Could it be that she wants nothing to do with me after getting hurt protecting Holly? Or because I left her badly injured to stop Scott from killing my mate? I wouldn't blame her.

My hold on Holly tightens. None of this was her fault, but I'll take it on the chin if Kali is pissed off with me. I deserve it. I've been agonising over my decision to leave her.

“Did she say where she is?”

Maybe I can talk to her, explain why I left her. Sensing my mood, Holly rubs her hand up and down my back, soothing my inner turmoil. I can feel my blood pressure returning to a normal level just from the effects of her touch.

“No, but Henry said it was definitely her, and there was nothing to suggest she was under duress.”

Ben studies me, sensing my reluctance to accept it so easily. I want to see her with my own eyes and hear from her mouth where she has been. Sighing, he places the bowl on the counter and flicks on the kettle.

“We should just be grateful she's still alive. Whatever is going on, she'll tell us in her own good time. Be patient.”

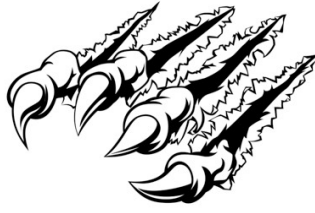
One look at my face, and he scoffs at the absurdity of that idea. Patience is not my forte.

“Okay, maybe not. Just give her some space. She's used to fighting her own battles, remember? Maybe she just wants to be left alone to lick her wounds.”

Holly frowns beside me. She's not convinced either, but since we can't find her anywhere, there's not much else we can do.

CHAPTER 59

HOLLY



I watch from behind the bar as Evan lifts the wooden chairs one-handed and turns them to rest upside down on the tables. His thin t-shirt does little to hide the muscles moving beneath it, and I sigh. Watching him lift heavy things will never get old.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asks, setting the last chair in place and walking back toward the bar to collect the giant broom resting there. I go to grab it, but he’s quicker, shaking his head and wagging a finger at me for even trying.

“Nope. You’ve been on your feet all evening.”

He gives me a quick peck on the lips before wrapping one arm around my thighs and lifting me to sit on the bar. Catching me by surprise, I shriek, grabbing his shoulders for support and laughing when he gives my ass a hard squeeze before going back to his work.

“Nothing really planned for tomorrow. The new ranger moved into John’s cabin yesterday. I thought I’d swing by and say hello, let him know he can keep any of John’s equipment that’s still there, if he wants it.”

Henry told us the cabin was now being occupied by Sutton’s new resident. Hand-picked by John to replace him when he retired, he moved here sooner than planned. With a beast of his own, he’s the best man for the role; any other outsider would be a liability. Secrecy will be a big part of his job description.

“Maybe I should come with you.”

Evan stops sweeping and straightens his back, watching me with concern. Crossing the room, he steps between my legs and smooths his hands up over my thighs.

“Maybe I should make sure he’s a good guy before you call around on your own.”

Rolling my eyes, I slap away his hands, even though his caresses never fail to set my heart racing.

“I’m sure he’s lovely. John wouldn’t have brought him here if he wasn’t a good guy.”

Evan’s not to be deterred, and his hands re-settle on my hips. His interest in talking about the new ranger is all but gone now, distracted by the arousal he can scent so quickly on me. He presses his enormous body even closer, and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist.

“I want to ask him if he’ll help us keep looking for John,” I admit. Evan sighs and cups my face in his hands, pressing a soft kiss to the tip of my nose. At this stage, he’s resigned to the idea that John met his fate at the hands of Scott and Serena. I’m not so sure.

If Scott used his last breaths to taunt Evan about Amanda, why not John?

“I’m sure he’ll be glad to help, but he might need a day or two to wrap his head around where we’ve looked already and what to do next.”

Nodding, I bury my face in his chest, trying to hide the emotions welling up inside. The police investigation didn’t yield any clues about where he could be. There was nothing to suggest he had even been at the Golden siblings’ property. Crime scene techs had found traces of blood and tissue in the basement from multiple individuals, but none of it male. So, nothing for John.

They even searched the butcher’s shop, where, horrifically, they suspect Bobby Golden disposed of his cheating wife’s body. I think Evan and Ben genuinely expected them to find John stuffed in a freezer, but he wasn’t there either. I’m not

sure which is worse: If we knew he is dead, or that we have no idea what happened or where he is.

The sour mood at home isn't helped by Kali still refusing to tell anyone where she is. She's called her parents and Henry, again, to confirm she's alive and well, but she refuses to say where she is or when she's coming back. After being so badly hurt, I don't blame her for being angry.

"Hey." Evan tips my chin up to kiss my lips. "What can I do?"

"Just give me a hug," I say, hearing the sadness in my voice and wishing I could snap out of it. When Evan's arms engulf me and I feel his strength surround me, I do feel better. He's here for me. Even when he was trying to convince himself to stay away, he protected me.

Maisy was right: deep down, he's a good one.

"How about we leave the cleanup to Ben in the morning, and I take you home and tuck you into bed?"

Moaning in delight at the prospect of being snuggled up in bed within the hour, I hug Evan back, wanting to show him I appreciate how much he cares for me.

"That sounds amazing."

Ordinarily, I wouldn't dump extra work on Ben, but he's been slacking lately. He keeps saying the bar and the garage can barely support me and Evan, let alone him as well. So, he's been pouring his time and money into a new business, an adventure tour company running out of the hiking goods store in town. We're supportive, but when he failed to turn up and open the bar for deliveries yesterday, Evan had to read him the riot act.

It's not like him, but he hasn't been himself lately. I suppose everyone deals with grief and trauma differently; I'm a little more sympathetic than his brother.

Waiting outside while Evan locks up, I can't help staring out into the trees, where only a couple of weeks ago, a pair of yellow eyes stared back. Shivering at the memory, I tug my

jacket tighter around me. Evan joins me, and we stand side by side, remembering that night.

“I never thanked you properly for keeping me safe.”

Evan turns and stares down in confusion before resting his chin on my head and pulling me in close.

“Yes, you did. You stood up for me to Scott. You trusted me, and you didn’t run.”

The drive home is quiet. Our intertwined hands rest on Evan’s thigh, and he’s lost in thought as we pull up to his house. The lights are all out; Ben has been staying at Kali’s to give us some privacy, and it looks like he’s still there.

With a massive yawn, I push open the passenger door, but somehow, Evan is already there, lifting me down. He holds my hand as I practically stumble toward the front door. When I get to his room, or our room now, I sit on the mattress and try to kick off my shoes. Nearly crying with exhaustion, I groan when they don’t come off easily.

“Here, let me.”

Evan squats in front of me, grabbing one shoe and then the other, gently tugging them off and placing them gently on the floor. His thumbs press into the soles of my feet, and I moan loudly. The pressure of those little circles is exquisite.

“God, I love you,” I mumble, eyes closed as I tilt my head back and relax into the impromptu foot massage. The words fall so easily from my lips now, I don’t think twice about saying it whenever I want. When a strange silence fills the room and his hands pause on my feet, though, I frown and open my eyes. Normally, he says it back straight away.

Evan is still in front of me, except instead of squatting, he’s on one knee. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small square box, and I gasp, suddenly feeling a little more alert.

“I love you too. This might seem too fast, but I knew from the moment I saw you that you were going to turn my world upside down. You fought for me, Holly, even when I was too

blind to see it was never going to end any other way. We belong together.”

Forgetting what he’s supposed to be doing, he leans forward, crushing his lips to mine as he buries his fingers into my hair. It’s passionate rather than sweet, and when he pulls away, my lips are swollen and my heart is pounding.

“You’re already mine, but I want to be yours. Forever. Will you marry me?”

Cracking open the velvet box, he reveals a glittering diamond sitting on a sparkling gold band. I swallow hard and look up at him with tears glistening in my eyes. He watches me, a mixture of heat and uncertainty there as he takes out the ring and reaches for my hand. Pausing, he waits for my response. I think he’s stopped breathing.

“Yes. Yes. Of course, I will!”

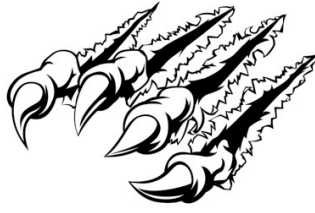
The ring feels cool as it slides over my skin, and I wiggle my fingers in front of me, scarcely believing what’s happening. Evan grins at me, looking like the cat that got the cream. I loop my arms around his neck and drag my nails across his scalp, watching as his eyes light up, arousal bringing his beast closer to the surface.

Strong fingers find the waistband of my leggings and tug them down. He frowns at my underwear as if the sight of it offends him, and I doubt it’s going to get the same gentle treatment.

“Mine,” he growls possessively, rising and pushing me back onto the mattress before ripping the white lace from my hips. “All fucking mine.”

EPILOGUE

EVAN



“I think you broke her.”

Ben rests his back against the counter, arms crossed over his chest, as Holly stares unseeing into the fridge.

“What do you mean?” I whisper, leaning beside him and frowning as I watch my mate pull her car keys off the shelf inside and hold them up, staring at them like she’s never seen keys before. When she turns to face us, enormous eyes looking lost and a little watery, her lower lip trembles.

“I was looking for these all morning. Did I put them in there?”

I’m about to laugh when I see the devastated look on her face and think better of it.

“See? You fucked the smart right out of her.”

Hitting Ben with a thump in the arm, I cross the room and pull her into my arms. Smoothing a hand over her hair, I lead her to a stool and coax her onto it.

“It’s okay. You’re just tired.” I press a kiss to her lips and pull back, noticing, not for the first time, that her olive skin looks a little pale, and she has dark circles under her eyes. “Let me make you some breakfast. What would you like? Toast? Eggs?”

With my head stuck in the fridge, I start pulling out all the ingredients for a massive brunch. Maybe Ben is right. I forget sometimes that she doesn’t have the same stamina as I do. I need to feed her better and make sure she gets more time to

rest. When she says nothing, I pull back and look at her, then to Ben, who looks equally confused by the vacant look on her face, and back to my mate once more.

“Oh God.”

Holly turns as white as a ghost before clamping a hand over her mouth and running for the door. Her footsteps echo down the hall, followed by the loud slam of the bathroom door. A big smile slowly spreads across my face as I turn to my brother, feeling giddy as a schoolboy.

“I moved out to give you space, not so you could kill the woman with dick. You’re not taking care of her...”

Ben pauses his lecture and points a finger at me accusingly. Tilting his head to one side, he blows out a frustrated breath.

“This isn’t funny, Evan. Why are you so happy?” My smile seems to be getting him even more worked up, and he steps into my personal space, going toe-to-toe with me on behalf of the woman I love. Fuck, do I appreciate him for it. “Wipe that fucking smile off your face and go take care of your mate. Do I need to send Maisy up here to get through to you?”

Instead of answering, I squeeze him half to death in a massive bear hug.

“She’s pregnant. I know it. She’s fucking pregnant.”

It’s probably highly inappropriate for me to voice my suspicions to my brother before we know for sure, but I’ve never been so certain of anything in my life. Her scent has changed ever so slightly over the last couple of weeks, but I wasn’t sure if that was just a result of being marked.

“So, get out of my house so I can go break the good news to her.”

Ben’s eyes are as wide as saucers when I pull back. “Holy fuck, man. This is...”

“Top secret. Don’t tell anyone, just in case it’s not that.”

But it is. I know it as sure as I know my own name. Ben nods thoughtfully before shaking my hand hard.

“Congratulations. You deserve this. I’m so happy for you.”

With a salute over his shoulder, he heads for the door. I pour a glass of water and follow Holly down to the bathroom, knocking gently on the door.

“Holly, are you okay?”

Pushing the door open, I step inside to find her sitting on the lid of the toilet, her head in her hands. Resting on the side of the bath is a pregnancy test. Her eyes lift to mine as I drop to my knees in front of her, my heart practically beating out of my chest.

“I feel like crap,” she mumbles, and I nod sympathetically, rubbing my hand up and down her back.

“Come on.” Lifting her into my arms, I carry her into our room and set her down in a chair beside the bed. Waiting until she takes a sip of water, I tug her jumper over her head and slip her shoes from her feet. She’s not getting out of this bed for the rest of the day, regardless of what that test says. I press a kiss to her forehead.

“Maybe I’m just sick,” she mutters as she leans back and closes her eyes. I press a kiss to her forehead, saying nothing before slipping out to the bathroom and bringing the test back to her. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to look at the result while I hand it to her.

“Ready?” I ask, and she nods weakly before turning it over and gasping. Holding my breath, I wait. What if I’ve pushed her into this and she’s having doubts? What if now that we’re here, she’s not as happy about it as I am?

“Well?” I can’t resist asking. The anticipation is killing me. My eyes must be flashing with my beast so close to the surface.

“We’re pregnant,” she whispers, staring in awe at the little white stick in her hand. With speed I didn’t think she had, she flings herself up and topples me to the bed. As she smothers my face with kisses, I can’t even speak. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d get this lucky. Finally snapping out of it, I lift her and cradle her against my chest.

“Thank you.” My voice is thick with emotion which she politely pretends not to hear. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, and this is just the cherry on top.”

Resting her head against my shoulder, she sighs happily.

“We’re going to have our own little family.”

As her eyes close and she falls asleep in my arms, I relax. She’s safe. Our baby will be happy and loved. More than ever, I’m determined to make life in Sutton better for our kind. Up until now, we’ve all lived isolated lives. The humans in town have kept our secret, but we still hide away like we’ve done something wrong. I want my child to grow up in the type of community I never had, that Ben and Kali never got to experience. It’s what John always wanted but could never give us as a human himself.

And so, it begins, with Sutton and The Devil’s Claw at the centre of it all.

THE END

TO FIND out what happened to Kali, pre-order book 2, [Into the Night](#).

READ on to get a sneak peek at the start of her story!

SIGN up here to get Into the Dark bonus content, including some spicy ART and a chapter from Ben’s point of view

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INTO THE NIGHT - CHAPTER 1

G riffin

Slamming the door shut, I climb from my truck and stretch, relieved to be out of the tin can after the long drive. The beast inside me is already calmer. John was right about leaving the army and moving away from the city. The wide-open spaces of wild, untamed places like this, along with the physical exertion of my job as a ranger, have been the only thing that stops the rage that burns inside me. I stride around the back, grab my pack, and sling it onto my back. I don't really need to bring anything with me, but if I meet anyone on the trail, it looks odd for me to be hours from home with nothing but the clothes I'm wearing.

My new job doesn't start for a month. I plan to make the most of my time off and enjoy the solitude. The few things that are important to me from my old life I've packed up and brought with me, fitting neatly into one small cardboard box. The rest I sold or donated before moving all the way across the country on the advice of a stranger.

My mother despairs. How am I going to find a woman living like a hermit halfway up the side of a mountain?

But the alternative is slowly losing my mind. Or worse, being locked up because the tight rein I have on my beast slips. And he gets to wreak the havoc he so desperately wants to do.

I fall into an easy pace, eating up the distance to the top of this mountain without difficulty. This hike is off the beaten

track, well away from the paths used by the fledgling adventure tour company that's opened up the next town over.

The next few days should be quiet and peaceful, both sides of me in harmony for once. Exactly what I want.

Kali

THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE HERE. And it's someone I don't know.

This old hunting cabin belonged to my grandfather. It's far from civilisation and the nearest roads. With no running water or electricity, it's as basic as it gets, but it regularly gets used as overnight shelter for those out roaming these thick, dark woods. Normally by my kind, but sometimes human hunting parties out looking for deer will bunk down here.

With the heavy rain last night, I'm not surprised someone chose to sleep here last night rather than brave the elements.

The beasts that are scattered in small towns around these mountains are solitary by nature. Living near others is only manageable if we regularly go off on our own to appease the animal inside us. Except there are no beasts on this mountain that I don't know. The stranger's scent has my heart beating a little faster.

"Hello?" I call, slowly pushing the front door open with the toe of my boot and peering inside. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloom, but I already know they're not inside. Taking a long breath in to commit the scent to memory, I step inside and scan the interior of the one-room cabin. Nothing is amiss. The place hasn't been vandalised.

Whoever he was lit a fire but replaced the firewood. He slept on the bed, but everything has been tidied up and put back the way it was. A well-worn pack sits on the floor just inside the door, but the man himself is nowhere to be seen.

Dropping my own bag right next to his, I go back outside. I won't be able to relax until I know who I'm dealing with and whether he's a friend or foe. After years of being tormented

because I am the last pale beast, I'm wary of new people. And also, some I know well.

Tilting my chin to pick up his alluring scent on the breeze, I catch his trail, following it into the tall trees surrounding the log cabin. Picking my way through the low branches, I make my way to the edge of one of the pools dotted along the river, which is still quite small, this high up in the hills.

As I approach, instead of walking straight out into the open, I hang back, keen to have a look at the male who's made himself at home in my sanctuary.

At first, I don't see him, but then a ripple across the surface of the calm water gives away his location. My mouth turns dry as he pushes to his feet, brushing his black hair back off his face as water runs down his bare abs and torso. He stretches his neck from side to side and wipes the water from his face. I swallow hard as he sluices water over every inch of his tanned skin and rubs it clean, his muscles flexing as he works.

Now I wish I had made my presence more obvious, because I feel like peeping tom watching him. It's quite a show I'm getting as he turns his back to me, and I get to see the swell of the top of his ass. His firm body, hard and dripping wet, is making my insides flutter, and observing him without his knowledge feels naughty and exciting at the same time. I can almost imagine how it would feel to drag my fingers over that gleaming skin.

When his movements slow, I know he's picked up on my presence. He's a big guy, which means his beast will be massive. We're all alone out here and I'm small, even for a female. He could be dangerous, even if he is nice to look at. Stepping from the cover of the trees and into the dappled sunlight, I lift a hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun and show myself.

"Hello there," I call, feigning confidence I don't really feel. After a pause, he shouts a greeting back, sounding tense and borderline unfriendly.

I shift from foot to foot awkwardly as he comes closer with a tight smile on his handsome face. Striding through the water until it dips below his waist, it reveals his rippling abs and the well-defined V that runs down between his hip bones. My eyes follow the line of dark hair that runs from his navel down to the surface of the water and I wish I could see where it leads. Or trace it with my tongue.

He catches me staring and I flush, embarrassed at being caught checking him out. With a raised eyebrow, his gaze goes to the small towel hanging over a branch nearby. Snatching it, I shuffle closer and toss it to him, before turning my back and allowing him some privacy.

The splashing of water tells me he's stepped out and my pulse races at the thought of him standing behind me, naked, rubbing himself dry. I hear him stepping into his trousers and the sound of a zipper.

"I didn't expect to meet anyone else out here." His voice is smooth and deep. Turning, I'm just in time to see him tugging a t-shirt over his head, hiding his washboard stomach from view.

"Normally you wouldn't. That's my cabin. I come up every now and again to get away."

His brown eyes widen in surprise, and he gives me a once over, taking in my jean shorts and trainers. I get that I don't look like your typical adventure bunny, but I'm a beast. He knows fancy equipment and footwear doesn't really matter when you can shift and run.

"Sorry. I'll clear my stuff out now."

Shaking my head, and waving away his offer, I force my eyes to look away as his fingers deftly do up his belt buckle.

"It's fine, honestly. I'm rarely there and I don't mind it being used once it's left the way people found it."

He nods, tugging the front of his t-shirt down and hiding the last strip of tanned, toned stomach from my view. As he steps forward to pick up his boots, I step back, staying out of arm's reach. The look he gives me is intense as he gazes up

and takes in my stiff body language and the distance I am careful to keep between us. Suddenly, I feel completely exposed, as though he can tell his presence puts me on edge.

“It’s okay. I planned on camping up here, anyway. When it started lashing rain last night, it was just too irresistible when I came across it.” He looks up at the clear skies above us. “It doesn’t look like it’s going to rain tonight. It’ll be a nice night to be outside.”

Nodding in understanding, I back away from him and retrace my steps to the cabin, feeling the weight of his gaze on my back as I slip through the trees.

“Take your time,” I call out, not wanting him to feel pressured to rush back and take his things. Back at the cabin, I take off my shoes and get settled. My beast is satisfied the man isn’t an immediate threat. After years of being persecuted for no reason other than the colour of our fur, she has a radar for assholes. This man isn’t one.

In fact, she’s intrigued by him. His beast is there, simmering under the surface, but it’s calm instead of overly aggressive like many males are. I wish I could say the same for my own who’s practically desperate for him to arrive so she can get another look at those soulful eyes and stubble covered jaw. With a quick glance in the tiny mirror on the wall, I smooth down some loose hairs and strip off the oversized flannel shirt I’m wearing.

It’s hot. I’m doing it for me, not for him. At least that’s what I tell myself.

“I’ll just grab this.” He leans through the door and grabs his pack, slinging it over his shoulder and straightening in the doorway. “Thanks for letting me crash.”

Leaving the door open behind him, he crosses to me and offers me his hand to shake. He angles his body in a way that leaves my path to the door clear and makes his broad shoulders and height less intimidating. Butterflies flutter in my stomach as his delicious scent hits me. Clean but manly.

“It’s Griffin, by the way. Seems only right you should know my name after I’ve slept in your bed.”

His gaze burns into me, and I blink, momentarily startled. Is he flirting with me?

“Kali.” I take his hand and he shakes mine gently, stroking his thumb over my skin in the tiniest of movements. But it’s enough to have my senses on high alert. Our eyes meet again and neither of us looks away. His beast flashes in his eyes as he smothers a low growl. He tries to hide it with a cough but it’s unmistakable, and I smirk a little as he pulls away, looking embarrassed.

“Okay Kali. I’m going to make camp outside if that’s good with you. I’m hiking on to Sutton tomorrow and the sun is already starting to set. I’ll wait and set off in the morning.” He turns to leave but hesitates. “Anyone else out here with you I need to worry about trying to chase me off?”

Despite my better judgement, I shake my head to say no. There’s no point in lying. He would have scented if there was anyone else with me. But why ask then?

“Okay then. If you need anything, just holler.”

Nodding, I watch silently as he disappears outside, stepping off the old porch and crossing the clearing quickly with his long strides. I lean against the doorjamb to steady myself, blowing out a slow breath. No man has affected me that way before. Probably because I can tell they don’t want anything to do with me.

My mother laughs at me when I say there’s something wrong with me and my libido. The right person will knock you off your feet.

Now I know what she’s talking about.

INTO THE NIGHT - CHAPTER 2

G riffin

WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT? From the moment I picked up her delicate scent on the breeze, the thing inside me has been acting like a lovesick puppy. Normally, he only makes his presence known with anger and rage, but this time, it's pure lust. More than that, it's devotion.

I glance back over my shoulder and spot her still watching me from the doorway. My chest swells as I remember the heated look, she gave me at the pool. The attraction is mutual, but she's wary. I don't blame her. The idea of her being out here all alone doesn't sit well with me. Anyone could be out here.

Even though I have no issue hiking through the night to get to Sutton, I don't feel right leaving. I'll camp nearby and make sure she's safe before I leave in the morning. Technically, this is still spending the weekend alone. I'll just be camped in her garden.

Clearing an area, I set up a makeshift bed and a firepit. Lighting a small blaze, I lie back with my pack under my head as a pillow. Staring up at the stars through the canopy of leaves, I take a breath and sigh in happiness. This is the life. The only thing that would make this perfect is someone to share it with.

I don't expect anyone to want to stay with me once they know the darkness that lives inside me, but even for a while, it would be nice to have some companionship.

Like the tiny blonde who hiked up the side of this mountain and is content roughing it in a falling down log cabin. The animal inside me thinks she'd be perfect for us. I fidget, pounding my pack into a more comfortable shape before rolling onto my side. I try to ignore the fact that I tend to agree with him and focus on getting some sleep. And not on walking up to her door and pounding on it just so I can see her pretty face again.

“Oh sorry. You're trying to get some sleep. I'll leave.”

Sitting bolt upright, I frown into the night. How did she sneak up on me? In her hands, she has a bag of marshmallows and sticks.

“No, no. Please, stay.” I shuffle over and pat the space beside me on my mat. Please stay, I repeat to myself as she hesitates before finally relenting and plonking down cross-legged on the thin foam beside me. Her knee brushes against my thigh and I tense, tempted to reach out and touch her but holding back.

“Want one?” She pierces a marshmallow with a long stick and dangles it over the fire. The amber glow from the dancing flames light up her face and I smile at her grin as I take one from her and do the same. We chat as we wait for them to turn gooey. She tells me she knows Sutton well, has family there actually, and to check out her cousin's bar if I'm staying there overnight.

I realise I've barely been listening to a word she has said when she looks at me oddly, giving me a curious smirk.

Did she ask me a question?

I completely zoned out watching the way her full lips move and her face lights up as she speaks.

I watch her intently as she blows on a marshmallow to cool it down. When she pops it into her mouth and moans, my body reacts instantly. Noises like that belong inside the bedroom.

Kali should only be making those sounds while she writhes around with pleasure. Preferably while I have either my tongue or my cock buried deep inside her pussy. She hums again, with no idea what those sounds are doing to me.

“What?” she asks innocently when she catches me staring down at her. She sucks the melted marshmallow off her index finger and releases it with a pop. My cock punches at the front of my trousers, desperate to replace her finger and have those rosy lips wrapped around it instead.

She lifts her thumb to her lips, but I snatch it before it reaches her mouth and bring it to my own. Her eyes widen as I press my lips to the pad and lick the remnants of the pink sweet from her skin. Kali’s pupils dilated as she feels the caress of my tongue. I wait for her to tell me how inappropriate that was for two people who’ve barely spoken, but she doesn’t. The air around us crackles with electric energy.

I’m not the only one who feels it.

“Griffin,” she murmurs as I brush my thumb across her lips before leaning down to kiss them gently. I lick across the seam of her lips, tasting the sticky sweetness of the marshmallows. “What are you doing?”

I’ve never felt so certain about something or someone in my life. It’s made me bold.

“Kissing you.” Brushing my lips lightly across hers again, I speak, our breaths mingling and the gap between is bare millimetres. “Do you want me to stop?”



To FIND out what happens next, pre-order book 2, [Into the Night](#) or join me on Ream to read as I write.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reece is a bestselling author of wickedly wild romance novels.

Her favourite stories to write are about sexy alphas, from diehard bad boys to cinnamon roll heroes, who don't just fall in love first, they fall forever.

From Ireland 🍀, she loves leafy green forests, lakes, and rolling hills, and while she doesn't get to spend as much time outdoors as my characters, her stories are all set in untamed locations with cozy small-town vibes.

The stories she writes are for people just like her who love a little light-hearted fun with their naughty heroes and edge-of-your-seat storylines.

