



LIONS PRIZE

SHIFTERS AND FORBIDDEN FATES

LOLA GABRIEL

LION'S PRIZE

SHIFTERS AND FORBIDDEN FATES: BOOK
FIVE

LOLA GABRIEL

Lion's Prize:

Shifters and Forbidden Fates - Book Five

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CONTENTS

Secret Woods Books

1. Kinley.
2. Braxton
3. Kinley.
4. Braxton
5. Kinley.
6. Braxton
7. Kinley.
8. Braxton
9. Kinley.
10. Kinley.
11. Braxton
12. Kinley.
13. Braxton
14. Kinley.
15. Braxton
16. Kinley.
17. Braxton
18. Kinley.
19. Braxton
20. Kinley.

Epilogue

Other Books You Will Love

Secret Woods Books

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KINLEY

I wrapped my arms around myself and ducked my head against the chilly breeze that came from the mountain. I sniffed the air—the weather was changing. The promise of snow was still far off, but gone were the summer days where heat clung to the city even after the sun set.

I'd grown up in Portland. I'd always loved it here, so close to the mountains. I'd gone on holiday to the coast with friends once when I was younger, and everyone I knew liked being at the beach and always dreamed of living there.

As much as I liked the ocean, I didn't want to be near it. I preferred to be in the forest, between the trees.

Maybe it was because I was a rabbit shifter, and being in the forest was where I felt most at home. No one else would understand that—I was the only one of my kind. Or at least, that is what I believed to be true.

I turned down the alleyway that I followed to get to my small house. I glanced over my shoulder, making sure I wasn't followed. This part of town was on the outskirts of the city, and it wasn't very safe, but it was affordable for someone with a minimum-wage job like me.

It was the best I could do for now.

One day, my dream was to live somewhere else, somewhere removed from the hustle and bustle of the city. I dreamed of living in a small hunting cabin somewhere in the woods, far away from people so that I could just be who I was without having to hide.

It had been three years since the first time I'd shifted. I'd been twenty-one then and just finished with college. I'd found my own place to live, although the rent was crazy steep, and I'd started a life of my own... only to realize that I was a freak.

For a while, I'd had this strange feeling that I was meant for something bigger than this simple life, something that *mattered*.

That feeling passed after a while.

I blamed superhero movies, where the people who found out they were different always did something spectacular and became bigger than the sum of their parts. It turned out that there was nothing bigger out there for me. A rabbit couldn't exactly save the world, right?

And what would I even save the world from?

I'd fallen into a new routine where I'd found solace in going into the forest as often as I could. I'd started going on camping trips over the weekend, I'd withdrawn from my friends who were all talking about dating and settling down, and all I did in the human world I suddenly wasn't a part of anymore was work hard to be able to keep living, keep surviving in this weird, screwed up life that belonged to me.

"Hey, pretty lady," a deep voice said in front of me, and I stopped in my tracks, nearly running into a burly brute.

I hadn't paid attention, too lost in my thoughts, and I hadn't checked my surroundings.

Shit.

"What's a girl like you doing in a shitty neighborhood like this?" He was tall and broad with yellow teeth when he grinned at me. The stubble on his chin had to be a couple of days old, and his eyes were filled with menace.

"I'm just on my way home," I said.

"Why don't we hang out for a while, you and me?" he asked and put a large, meaty hand on my shoulder.

“No, thank you,” I said. “They’re expecting me home any minute.”

That was a lie, but maybe if he thought someone would come looking for me, he’d leave me alone.

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” he said, and something slid behind his eyes, something that shouldn’t have been present in the eyes of a man.

“Too good for us, eh?” another voice sounded behind me.

I looked over my shoulder. Another man came toward me, about as tall as the first, but not as wide. He was just as menacing, and I tasted my heart in my throat.

I was in trouble.

“I’m not interested,” I said firmly, hoping that I didn’t sound as terrified as I felt.

I was outnumbered, and a quick glance along the street told me I was alone. The streetlights made yellow pools of light underneath them with stretches of darkness in between, and the only cars around were parked and without their owners.

I willed a car to come down the road and see us, but this time of night, most people were tucked safely into bed.

Exactly where I should have been right now.

The Chinese restaurant I usually bought my dinner from was already closed. I’d worked a double shift, and it was later than my usual routine. I couldn’t even cry out for someone in the restaurant to help me or look for refuge there until these two brutes lost interest.

“Come on, let’s kill some time together,” the first guy said, putting his arm around my shoulder. He smelled like sweat, and bile pushed up my throat.

“I said *no*,” I replied, louder.

“Didn’t your mother teach you manners?” the other one said.

“She told me not to talk to strangers,” I sneered.

They both laughed.

The second one looked at me. “You’re funny.” He wrapped his arm around my waist, and I was stuck between the two thick men, their arms on my body.

“Let me go!” I cried out, but neither of them listened.

The first guy swung me around and slammed me against the wall. He pressed his body against mine, hands groping me.

The second grinned, his hands going for his belt.

Shit.

There was no doubt what they were going to do to me if I didn’t get away.

I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on the magic that lived inside me. The only way I could get out of this asshole’s grip was if I was smaller than I already was.

I hid my magic from everyone—no one knew I was a rabbit shifter, and I preferred to keep it that way. I’d figured, just like in the movies I’d grown up with, someone would want me for testing and prodding if they knew what I was, and I didn’t want that. If I couldn’t be some kind of hero, then I wouldn’t be a test subject, either.

My magic grew, prickling beneath my skin as I found my rabbit and pulled her forward.

In no time, my body shrunk, slipping into the furry form of the rabbit, and I dropped to the ground. I hopped around the corner and into the alley, leaving my clothes, my bag, my phone... everything behind.

“What the fuck?” I heard one guy exclaim.

“She’s a fucking rabbit!” the other cried out.

“They’re not supposed to be real.”

“Two can play at that game.”

I paused behind a trash can, the sound of my little heart drumming in my ears. My ears turned this way and that as I listened for the men to retreat once they realized I was gone.

The sound of clothes ripping drew my attention, and then a loud roar followed.

My blood turned to ice.

A moment later, a panther jumped onto the trashcan, nearly pushing it over. I squealed and ran.

Shit, shit, shit.

He'd turned into a panther. I had no doubt it was one of the guys. The magic was suddenly so thick all around me, it grabbed at me like claws, tugging at my fur.

I ran as hard as I could. The panther was right behind me, and the only thing that saved me was my size. I could wriggle through fences that the panther had to jump over, hop through holes, and cross roads without being seen very clearly.

The panther would have easily gotten to me if we were in an open field.

It didn't take very long before I ended up between the trees in a park. Now that I was away from the street, I didn't have to worry about cars and people.

I ran faster and faster, bounding between the trees, over bushes and shrubs, looking for a burrow I could crawl into in the hopes that another creature didn't already occupy it.

Another panther appeared in front of me, and I skidded to a halt. The panther held its head low, teeth bared, ready for me to come to it. Twigs cracked not too far off, and the panthers both looked in the direction of the sound.

I took the opportunity to escape, and I bounced to the side and crawled underneath a shrub.

The panthers looked around, searching for me. I'd been too fast for them. I trembled under the leaves, hoping they'd lose interest and leave me alone. If they searched for me, they would find me, and then I'd be done for. I didn't know what they'd do to me, but I could guess, and I wasn't ready. I couldn't lose my virginity that way—I'd waited this long for the right guy to come along, and I wasn't about to let them steal my virtue.

“What the fuck are you two doing out here?” someone asked, a naked man walking toward the panthers.

I stared. What was going on?

One of the panthers shifted into the burly man who’d stopped me first.

“We’re looking for a rabbit,” he said.

The third man snorted. “Seriously?”

The other panther shifted into the second assailant. “A rabbit *shifter*. If we bring one of those home—”

“Are you serious?” number three asked.

“Would I lie to you?”

“Well, if you’re so sure of it, you better find it and bring it home.”

A growling sound was the only agreement I could hear, and I watched as one panther started sniffing around. The other man, still in human form, started moving around the trees and shrubs, looking for me.

“Here, rabbit, rabbit, rabbit,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“You sound like a jackass, you know that?” the third guy said.

“She’s here somewhere,” Number One answered.

“She?”

“We picked her up in the streets.”

“Classy.”

Number Two, who was still in panther form, answered with a grunt.

They crept closer. I couldn’t run. If I did, they would find me, and this time, I wouldn’t be so lucky. I’d had the element of surprise on my side earlier, but pure instinct told me that this time, they were ready for me and in a group of at least two. Maybe Number Three was some kind of shifter, too, and then I was royally fucked.

The only way I could get a handle on this thing was if I used the element of surprise again.

“What are you going to do with it when you find it?” Number Three asked.

“I don’t know. Fuck it. Kill it. It would be a nice little trophy to show the others.”

“You’re sick, man,” Number Three said, but I could see the grin on his face through the leaves, and my stomach twisted. “You’ll find it the moment it moves, if it’s so different from us.”

“Yeah, the magic is something else. She’s around here somewhere; I can *feel* it. If she so much as moves her fluffy little tail...”

I couldn’t run at all, then. I was in over my head. The only way to get out of this alive was to go on the offense. Wasn’t that what they said about a good defense?

I wished it didn’t have to be like this. I was just a woman, making my own way in the world. And now this!

This had become a matter of life or death.

My mind spun. The only thing in my favor would be to do something they didn’t expect. I was willing to bet my life—literally—that they wouldn’t expect an attack.

Not that I could do much. I’d had self-defense classes after college, but would that help me?

I was about to find out.

I crawled out from underneath the shrubs that kept me hidden, and under the dark of night, I crawled toward Number One, who still looked into the trees. Number Three had his back toward us, and Number Two was digging under a bush that hadn’t been mine.

It was now or never.

At the last moment, I shifted into human form and kicked him between his legs from behind. Since he was naked, his three-piece was perfectly exposed, and he howled in pain,

falling to his knees. I grabbed a branch from the ground, barely thinking at all, and hit him over the head. My survival skills had taken over completely.

A sickening crack sounded, and the limp body fell to the ground, blood matting the dark hair.

I stared at the limp body, horrified.

Strong arms wrapped around my body, and I screamed. When a hand covered my mouth, I bit down on to the fingers, and I tasted blood.

“Fuck!” the man cried out, and I figured it was Number Three.

When the panther came up in front of me, he shifted into human form. I tried to shift again, but Number Three grabbed me by the ears when I did and held me kicking and squealing in the air.

I tried to shift, but that just had him holding me by the hair, and that had me naked in their grasp.

No, thank you.

I shifted into a rabbit again. At least, that way, I wasn't completely vulnerable.

“Well, this is interesting,” he said.

Number Two kneeled in front of his buddy and whistled through his teeth. “He's dead.”

“You're kidding me.”

My body ran cold.

“Yeah, who would have thought? Good thing, or he would never have heard the end of it that he was bested by a rabbit.”

They didn't sound horrified that their friend was dead. I could barely breathe at the news, but they were *joking* about it.

“What do you want to do with her?” Number Two asked, straightening up. He was still naked, and I was disconcerted.

“I think we should take her back with us. The boss is going to want to see this.”

Number Two nodded, and they walked through the trees, falling into step side-by-side, carrying me like some kind of roadkill.

Now what?

BRAXTON

I stood in front of the double-volume full-length windows that looked out over the valley with a glass of Bourbon in my hand. I wore only my jeans, the fireplace warming up the great room, and everyone was out doing their thing, just as I'd ordered.

This was the fucking life.

I was removed from the city here, away from all the bullshit that happened there every day, but that didn't mean I didn't have a finger on Portland's pulse at all times.

"Alpha," Dagger said, coming into the room. His wavy dark hair was a tangled mess, and his broad face serious.

I turned to face him. Dagger was my beta and the only shifter who could bother me at any time of the day. The others had to make an appointment, or there would be hell to pay.

"I have bad news."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Inigo is dead."

"What?" I asked with a frown. "How?"

"I don't know that yet. He probably stuck his nose in someone's business where it didn't belong, and it caught up with him. You know what he could be like. He was a loose cannon on a good day. You started working him out for a reason."

"How did I not know about his death?"

“You know now,” Dagger said, sitting down on the rustic furniture in front of the fireplace that crackled happily.

I sipped my bourbon, pissed off. I knew everything that went on in my city. I had eyes and ears all over the place, and everyone reported back to me on the daily. If someone died and I didn’t know about it, that was bad news. That meant something slipped through. If something like that could slip through, a sly demon with murderous intentions could slip through, too.

“Where was he stationed?” I asked.

“On the outskirts,” Dagger said. “I’m trying to figure out what’s going on, but I don’t think this is personal.”

“Everything is personal,” I said, downing my drink.

Dagger didn’t answer me. I knew he didn’t agree, but he also knew better than to cross me.

Fuck, something had slipped through the cracks, and now one of pack members was dead. How had this happened?

I ran my city with a hell of a lot more control than most other alphas did, but that was my prerogative. The other alphas didn’t have a demon after them to end the bloodline, an axe hanging over their heads. No one would get it, but I didn’t expect them to.

They ran shit the way they liked it, and I did the same.

“Hey, bro,” Cal said, walking in, and I groaned. He dropped himself on the couch next to Dagger, throwing his arms out wide over the backrest, feet up on my coffee table.

He was a bear shifter like the late alpha had been, but he didn’t carry himself like one. Too pussy for that, in my opinion. He should have been a cat shifter instead... a *house* cat.

“Get your feet off my furniture,” I growled.

“*Our* furniture,” he pointed out. “Dad left us both the place, remember?”

I grumbled. Hauser Holt, the previous alpha, wasn't my blood father. He'd taken me in when my family—all lion shifters—had been brutally murdered when my real dad had fucked with the wrong people.

Coming after their *pound of flesh* had resulted in him and my mom being slaughtered brutally in front of me. If Hauser hadn't come onto the scene when he had, I would have been dead, too. The alpha of Portland at the time had been kind enough to take me in, and now that he was dead, the mantle had passed to me.

Calhoun Holt was his son by blood, but the good-for-nothing piece-of-shit mooching asshole didn't have what it took to be alpha. For that, he had to get off his ass and actually do something, and he preferred it when everyone else did the work and treated him like he was worth something.

Was he pissed off that he wasn't alpha? Hell yeah.

Was he going to do something about it? Probably not—that would require effort, and until now, he hadn't done much about his position other than whine about it like a little bitch from time to time.

Bless Hauser for making the right choice.

I'd had a very good relationship with him, and I hated that he was gone.

The arrangement Hauser had left behind was fine by me. As alpha, I could make sure that I was safe, and that the demon who'd killed my parents and wanted to finish the job wouldn't get around to doing it.

"It's the last day of the auction," Cal said.

"What?" I looked at him, irritated.

"You know, the auction where they sell blood slaves to vampires and sex slaves to the rest of us? It's still running."

"Are you fucking kidding me? I shut all those down decades ago!"

"It's not in your jurisdiction, so don't get your panties in a twist, brother." Cal grinned at me, but it wasn't a happy grin. It

was a sly one.

I *hated* seeing women be exploited and actively worked against it. Cal liked it when I got all riled about something.

He went out of his way to piss me off.

“It’s the last day, so you get to join in on the fun if you still want to. I mean, not that fun is something you’d understand.” He laughed and held out his hand to Dagger for a high-five that Dagger refused to return.

Cal didn’t seem to care he’d been left hanging. He scratched his short beard instead, ran his hand through his slick long hair, and flexed his muscles for good measure.

If he wasn’t Hauser’s blood, I would have gotten rid of that asshole a long time ago.

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“Come on, you’ll like it. They have all kinds of epic beasts to sell, you know. Word on the street is they caught a rabbit shifter.”

Cal had my full attention now. “A *what?*”

“That’s supposed to be the stuff of legend,” Dagger said.

“Yeah, we’re going to see if that shit’s real,” Cal said with a shrug. “Come on, you know you’re curious, at least a little bit.”

Cal was right—I was curious. I knew rabbit shifters existed, but they were an anomaly. They only showed up once every thousand years or so. Nobody I knew had ever seen a rabbit shifter in person, despite some shifters living to be hundreds of years old.

“We’re going,” I said to Dagger.

Cal grinned. “Yeah? It’ll be nice to hang out, some brother bonding time for a change.”

I bristled. “That’s *not* what this is.”

“You’re no fun. Since you became alpha, you’re so boring, you know that?”

“Thanks for the personality assessment,” I said sarcastically. “We’re leaving, *now*.”

Cal chuckled, ignoring my clear irritation with him, and got up to get his shit together so we could go.

“You’re serious about this?” Dagger asked.

“Are you kidding me? A rabbit shifter?”

“You know, it’s probably a fake.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to see,” I said.

I could figure out who the fuck was running a shifter auction and shut them down while I was at it. Besides, I could use the distraction, anyway. I was pissed that one of my own had died and I didn’t know how. An icy hand clutched my heart, wrapping me up in fear. What if it was the demon, coming closer to make good on its promise to take care of me?

Let him try.

I’d been around for two centuries, and I was still here. I might have had to look over my shoulder every minute of the day, but I was still alive and kicking, and as long as I could keep it that way, then I won. Demons lived forever, but that didn’t mean that I couldn’t outsmart the son of a bitch.

“I guess not,” Dagger said and stood. “I’ll call Uma, let her tag along. She’ll be able to tell us if it’s real.”

I nodded. Uma was a fae and Dagger’s best friend. Dagger had been Hauser’s beta, and when I’d come into power, he’d pledged his loyalty to me. He’d always said Hauser had done the right thing, plucking me from the demon’s claws, and Uma was right by his side, willing to help however she could. It was thanks to her that the demon was kept at bay. Her spells helped me through.

It was always a good idea to have a fae on the alpha’s side—any alpha who made the fae their enemy left themselves wide open for attacks.

“Let’s see what she has to say about it.”

Dagger nodded and disappeared to invite Uma along.

By the time we were ready to leave, Uma had joined us.

“So, the rabbit shifter news is making the rounds, huh?” she asked, her eyes sparking with excitement. Her blonde hair was in a bun on her head, and she wore grunge type clothing, with a flannel shirt tied around her waist and jeans ripped at the knees. She had to be almost a millennium old, but she dressed like a teenager. “I heard she killed a panther shifter.”

“Really?” Dagger asked. His face darkened, brows knitting together.

“I can’t wait to see what it’s all about,” Cal said, rubbing his hands.

“Rabbits can’t kill,” I snorted.

“Of course they can,” Uma said, her face serious. “You have no idea what rabbit shifters are capable of. They may look cute and fluffy, but they’re more dangerous than your biggest shifter with the most teeth.”

I grinned at her. “That I have to see for myself.”

Uma smiled sweetly at me. “And challenge it for dominance?”

“There’s only room for one most-powerful beast in my town.”

“Even the biggest and baddest has a weakness,” Uma said cheekily. “I hear she’s pretty, too.”

I rolled my eyes. I was more interested in the fact that she had a different kind of magic than what she looked like. I was a lone lion. I didn’t have a pride like the rest of the shifters with their kind, and that suited me just fine. The fewer people in my circle, the fewer there were who could betray me. I didn’t need to be stabbed in the back just because I trusted the wrong people. Control was about having the monopoly, and having the monopoly meant going at it alone.

Still, if there was something with a lot of power out there, I wanted to see it. I wanted to taste that power, and more often than not... I wanted to *own* it.

KINLEY

I wasn't the only person bound in chains and kept in a cage like an animal. Beings were all around me, all in different shapes and sizes, and the magic around me was like a giant smorgasbord. Most of them were naked, like I was. I tried to cover up, to tuck my hands over my chest and cross my legs, but it was hard to do with the manacles they'd clamped around my wrists and ankles.

I'd tried to shift out of the manacles when they'd put them on, to escape when I'd had my chance, but something didn't work right. They had to have had some spell put on them that stopped my magic from working. I still had it, I could *feel* it. I just couldn't reach it. My rabbit was tucked away in the recesses of my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find her. It was like she was hidden behind a screen.

They're all shifters.

Maybe the same chains were what stopped the others from shifting, too, and that was the only reason they were all in human form. They just sat there, undressed and taking it as if this was normal. Or maybe they'd been captives for so long, they'd stopped trying to fight, resigned to their fate.

I was the only one that seemed to feel uncomfortable naked.

I hadn't known I wasn't the only shifter until last night, when I'd been attacked. For years, I held the secret of my abilities close to my chest, because I didn't think anybody else

would understand. If I had only known that other people shifted into beasts, I wouldn't have felt so alone in this world.

Now, I realized that the world was full of shifters like me. Every single person around me emitted some kind of magic—I could feel it, although I had no idea what I was feeling. I just knew that whatever they were, they were more like me than any human I'd grown up with.

My human side was freaking the hell out. Panic lodged in my throat, impossible to swallow down, and my skin was slick with sweat, even though I was cold.

My rabbit side wasn't freaked out at all. She'd known she wasn't the only one all along. Her calm bled over to my human side, and the panic didn't take hold and choke me to death. It allowed me to think clearly, which was a new sensation in a stressful situation.

How the hell was this possible? I'd grown up thinking I was human, only to realize I wasn't. Then I'd gone through my life thinking I was alone.

Again, clearly, I wasn't.

Although, with the way everyone stared at me and sat as far away from me as they could, that last part might not have been true.

One good thing that came out of this was that the other prisoners' whispers gave me small insights into this world that I didn't know existed.

This was what I'd learned in the past couple of hours since I'd been taken:

I wasn't the only shifter, but I was the only rabbit shifter. Most of the other beings seemed to be a predator of some kind. Where were the rest of my kind? Maybe they'd put me in the wrong cage.

Or maybe they knew what they were doing, keeping me with the dangerous ones.

Everyone seemed to think I was some kind of devil when word had gotten out that I'd killed someone.

My stomach twisted just thinking about it. I hated that I'd killed that guy. It had been nothing more than self-defense.

Would a court see it that way? Would they believe anything I told them? Would I even end up in a court, considering that everyone in this alternate reality I'd been thrown into was... *different*?

A large man with dark hair and pale eyes came to the cage where I was locked up with a handful of other people and unlocked the door.

Everyone stiffened as he looked them over. They avoided eye contact. I looked away when his eyes fell on me, but he pointed at me, anyway.

“You,” he said. “You’re up next.”

I shook my head. I wasn't going out there. They were auctioning off the shifters that were in the cages, parading them on a stage like they were animals, and people bid on them like their lives didn't matter.

I was very far from home and way out of my comfort zone.

When I wouldn't get up as the jailer asked, he stepped into the cage, grabbed the chain that linked the manacles around my wrist, and yanked me forward. I yelped and shuffled along. The chain between my legs wasn't long enough to take proper steps.

He all but dragged me onto a stage, and my heart beat in my throat. I struggled to breathe, and I shivered with fear. The air was cold, and a lot of hungry eyes fell on me, studying my body, staring at me as if I was some kind of freak.

Weren't they all freaks, too? Or were those humans down there?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the auctioneer said, turning his head so that his lips were still pressed against the mic on his podium while he looked at me. “I give you the very first rabbit shifter!”

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

“That’s right! We haven’t heard of one in existence in a long, long time, so now’s your chance to get your hands on something rare. The bids will start at two million.”

More gasps and unhappy murmurs.

My ears rang. Two million? That was a *lot* of money.

It eliminated a lot of the bidders who’d bought people before me, and I looked around at the unhappy faces. Only a few were grinning. All men, and all staring at me like I was edible.

I shivered and tried not to curl away in horror.

The bidding started, and the price hiked up to four million, and then five, in no time at all. After it reached six, two more bidders fell out, and only two were left. My ears rang as the price went higher and higher.

Magic drifted toward me from the crowd. It tuned out the bidding, the numbers they called out fading to the background. I tried to focus on the magic. It was hard to find at first—the magic on the chains that wrapped around my ankles and wrists made it hard to focus.

The magic grew stronger and stronger, and finally, I found the source.

I looked at him, and our eyes locked. His eyes were amber, almost glowing gold, and he had blond hair and a scruffy beard. He stood upright and tall, with stacked muscles, and he oozed confidence, arrogance, and something scary. He was handsome, though—attractive. Something inside me twisted, and I couldn’t tell if it was fear or something darker and dirtier.

He was one of the two final bidders. That meant that he would end up having me if he won.

The other also had a beard, but long hair and a sly grin as he called out numbers. I didn’t like him at all. He had shifty eyes, a suave manner about him that looked like he thought he was God’s gift to womankind, and although he *was* hot, that attitude made him disgusting.

They chased each other up, the millions climbing into the tens and then the twenties.

“Things are getting heated!” the auctioneer called out when they hit twenty million.

“Twenty-five,” Amber Eyes said, glaring at the guy with the long hair.

“Thirty.”

“Fifty.”

The glare was ferocious, animalistic.

The guy with the long hair shook his head.

“Fuck you, Braxton. If you want her so bad, you take her. I’m not wasting my money when I can get a piece of ass for free.”

“I always get what I want, Cal,” Braxton said. “You should know that by now.”

“Dickhead,” Cal said and turned his back, sauntering away.

My ears rang louder when the gavel dropped, and the deal was sealed—I belonged to the man with the amber eyes.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. I was escorted off the stage and taken to a VIP section where Braxton—my new owner—and a few others waited for me.

Up close, Braxton was even more delicious to look at. His shirt clung to him like he was doing it a favor, his jeans hung off his hips just right, and under his beard, he had a square jawline. Deep-set eyes, a nose straight as an arrow—he was built like a *god*.

My rabbit was drawn to him, but in the back of my mind, my human voice screamed at me.

This man bought me. This man owns me. What does he want with me?

I could stop it if I wanted to, I decided. I’d killed before to save myself. I hated myself for it, but if it came down to me or them, I would choose myself.

I would kill again.

He took a step toward me, and his power pushed against me. My rabbit responded and pushed back.

Fear coiled tightly inside me, but my rabbit's power was bigger than my human fear.

He raised his eyebrows, but he didn't say anything to me. Instead, he turned to a young blonde woman who flanked him.

“Get her something to wear so we can get out of here.”

She nodded and smiled warmly at me.

“I'm Uma,” she said. “We'll get you covered up and home in no time.”

Home.

Could it be home if I belonged to someone else now?

Hell was the word that came to mind instead.

BRAXTON

Fuck. Me.

Everything about her was hot.

Perfect curves, a sweet face, dark brown hair, and eyes the color the sky was named after. Her fear was palpable, but something underneath it was strong, defiant.

I liked that. It made me want to pin her down and take control. It made me want to get her to submit.

“Are you happy?” Cal asked after Uma took the rabbit away.

Kinley, they’d said her name was.

Kinley.

“I am,” I said.

“You’re such an ass. You can’t just let me have my fun.”

“Fuck off,” I said, irritated with the foster brother I had to deal with. I was forever grateful to Hauser for taking me in, but it was a damn shame his death had left me with this piece of shit to deal with for the rest of my life. “You’re the one who invited me along.”

“I didn’t think you were going to steal my fun.”

“I thought you were fine getting some ass for free,” I said.

Dagger whistled through his teeth and leaned against the wall of the building where we waited for Uma to get Kinley for travel.

Cal pulled a face. “If you weren’t the alpha, I would have fucked you up right then and there.”

I growled and grabbed Cal by the throat. I lifted him enough that only his toes scraped the ground, and he clawed at my hand, his face twisted.

Dagger only watched.

“The only reason you’re alive is because I owe it to Hauser to keep you this way. Let’s get one thing straight—we’re not buddies. I’m the alpha, and you don’t talk shit to me. Get it?”

Cal made a gurgling sound. Once upon a time, he’d bullied me and acted like he was the bigger guy, because for a while, he had been. That had been before I’d come into my own, with more power than his. He was a bear shifter, but as a lion shifter, I had more magic. I’d become alpha because I’d had the power to beat the shit out of him when we’d battled it out. He’d cried mercy like a pussy instead of taking the death for what it was.

That was how it worked—when we fought for the position of alpha, it was usually to the death. And since Hauser supported my role as leader, I became alpha.

A part of me wished Cal had never tapped out, so that I could have ended him once and for all.

It wasn’t what Hauser would have wanted, and I honored the former alpha’s memory more than I cared about Cal.

“Sorry,” Cal gurgled like the squealing bitch he was, and I let go of him. He stumbled when he stood on his own two feet again and clutched at his neck.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” he complained in a hoarse voice.

“Why don’t you get out of here, go back home, or find that ass you were looking for or something,” I suggested. He was getting on my last nerve, and if he didn’t remove himself from the picture, I would do the honors myself.

When Cal stumbled away, losing himself in the crowds, Dagger chuckled.

“You two are going to have problems one day.”

“One day?” I asked. “We’re having problems now.”

“Bigger problems,” Dagger said with a shrug. “He’s a pain in the ass, and you have a particularly low tolerance for bullshit.”

“Yeah, well, he’s family, right?”

“I guess so,” Dagger said. “Why did you buy her?”

“Because I wanted her. She’s a rabbit. It will do me good to have an edge.”

But that wasn’t true. I could never support these horrific auctions. When I laid eyes on her, I knew that no one else could have her. The thought of one of those assholes putting their filthy paws on her made me seethe with rage. I couldn’t admit that, though—mostly because I didn’t understand the primal attraction I had to her.

“Is it only about control?”

I glared at Dagger. “Yes.”

But I didn’t want to control her. Kinley’s eyes held fury and strength. Her magic tasted different on my tongue when she was close, and her body... well, there was a lot of carnal shit I wanted to do to her.

I just had to be careful. Rabbits were rare, and there was a lot of magical drama around them. I would get Uma to fill me in before I did anything drastic.

As I thought it, Uma and Kinley stepped out of the building. She wore leggings and a loose top that flowed around her body and accentuated her curves. Her dark hair was pulled up into a ponytail so that her eyes seemed bright, fiercer.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Home,” I said.

“Where you’ll own me.”

I nodded. “That’s how it works, sweetheart. You’re mine now.”

“I don’t belong to anyone.” She glared at me.

Fuck, she was even hotter when she was angry. Her feistiness was a turn-on, and my cock hardened in my pants. I wanted her on her knees in front of me, her lips wrapped around my cock. I wanted her on all fours; that perfect round ass pointed at me so I could fuck her.

I wanted a lot of things from her, and she belonged to me, so technically, I could have it all. That wasn’t why I’d bought her, though. I would never harm her, even if she technically belonged to me. Other males out there, fucked up males, would do what they wanted.

I wasn’t one of those men. I’d seen the way Cal had talked about the shifter auction, like it was a buffet, like they were all there to satiate needs, but I wasn’t going to allow that.

The moment I’d heard about the rabbit shifter, I’d decided she would be mine. Fuck knows what someone else would have done with her—she would never have been safe in another shifter’s hands, and she deserved to be safe.

All females did.

It was *never* okay for anyone to do anything to someone else that went against their will. I’d lost my mother, an innocent bystander, who hadn’t had a choice in what had happened to her.

Death had been quick for her, thank fuck, but that wasn’t the case for other innocents. It grated my tits that there were men out there who ran auctions to sell shifters, who took what they wanted without asking, who thought it made them stronger when they could dominate.

I had never taken a woman against her will, and I wasn’t about to start. There was a special karmic hell for beings who did that to females.

I sighed. I would take care of her, make sure she was safe, but I wouldn’t get any closer than I needed to get to her. Not if I could help myself.

This damn attraction was something else, but I was stronger than that.

It was weakness that had gotten my dad killed once upon a time. The demon after me wouldn't let me keep her safe, and that was a generational curse. That fact that it could happen to me still haunted me, but at least sex, alcohol, and a rush of power drowned it out most of the time. The rest of the time... I tried to ignore it and not let my conscience get the better of me.

Or show anyone that I actually had one. That was one way to get myself killed or kicked out as alpha—showing mercy. In this life, there was no room for it. My parents had died without mercy, and if I buckled at all, I would die, too.

There was only room to be the alpha, and to do what needed to be done to stay at the top.

Uma and Kinley walked in front of me, and I watched Kinley's ass as it swung from side to side.

Fuck. Me.

KINLEY

A large, expensive car took us from the action grounds out of the city and toward the forest. When the trees got larger and taller all around me, my heart yearned to be out there, to be free.

I belonged to Braxton now. What did that mean? What would happen to me? It felt like a lifetime ago since I'd walked home from work and had been attacked. How many days had it been? Two? I'd lost track of time between waiting in cages in a dark warehouse, sleeping, and waking without knowing the time.

Maybe if I had people in my life who cared, they would have come looking for me. Conveniently, I had no one. The girls at work were only there to pass the time at the water cooler with, none of them even knew where I lived or had my phone number. My foster parents had died, and my boss could easily replace me.

Even before I'd disappeared, I'd barely existed.

Go figure.

It was still hard to wrap my mind around someone owning me—this wasn't something that should have been possible in this day and age, in this modern, free world.

I glanced at Braxton. He sat in the front seat, next to his right-hand man, who drove the car. Braxton's presence filled the car, and the way he talked was with authority. He moved with a strange, fluid elegance that didn't seem possible for a man of his size. I was acutely aware of every movement—the

way he scratched his beard, drummed his fingers on his thigh, clenched his jaw. The way his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. They talked about some kind of business, their voices filling the car in low baritones. Braxton was gruff, but it looked like his second in command respected him.

Uma sat next to me, twirling her blonde hair around her finger. When she caught my eye, she smiled encouragingly at me. It didn't help to calm me. I clenched my hands in my lap, my heart beating too fast, and my breathing was shallow.

Where were they taking me?

We drove through the trees for a while, climbing up, up, up against the mountain.

Finally, we stopped in front of a large mansion built against the mountainside. It hung against a cliff like a bird.

"Take her to her room," Braxton ordered. He looked at me, and his amber eyes flashed golden. They softened for just a second. "Make sure she has everything she needs." He turned his back on me, and Uma led me into the house.

The place was incredible. We walked through an entrance hall and through a large living area, with a fireplace that crackled welcomingly. Large windows stretched from an impossibly high ceiling all the way to the floor, and the view took my breath away.

"This place is incredible," I breathed, looking out over a valley.

"Braxton loves the cabin," Uma said warmly. "He spends most of his time here, even though he has a house in the city."

I let out a laugh. "*Cabin?*" This place was huge. It was a villa, a mansion, a *palace* rather than a cabin.

She chuckled. "Yeah, well, that's what we call it. Come on, you're down here."

She led me down a hallway with rich wooden floors, and the smell of pine filled my nostrils.

My door was the second on the right, and when we walked in, I turned around, my jaw dropping.

It wasn't a *room*. This place was an entire suite. Couches huddled intimately around a fireplace, with bookshelves on either side. A thick rug lay on the wooden floor, and on the far side of the room was a king-sized bed with posters and a sheer curtain that would block off the room from the sleeper. A vanity with a plush armchair stood against the wall, and next to it, a wooden door led to a large bathroom, showcasing a jet bath from what I could see from here.

"This is for me?" I asked.

"Yeah," Uma said, nodding.

"This is... not the kind of place I thought I'd be in as *property*."

Uma frowned before she shook her head. "Right. The auction thing. Braxton bought you, but he won't treat you like an animal, you know." I glanced at her, and Uma giggled. "Yeah, yeah, I know how it sounds, with everyone being shifters and all, but still. He'll make sure you're comfortable, at least. He looks like a brute, but he's the most humane creature out there. More than humans, sometimes."

"Humans," I said softly.

It felt like a whole different life out here, where the human world I'd grown up in faded more and more to the background.

"Someone will make sure that closet is filled with clothes that fit you," Uma said, pointing to another door I hadn't noticed. "We didn't expect you. You're free to make yourself at home, but you can't go outside without permission, for obvious reasons."

"The auction thing," I said, throwing Uma's words back at her.

"Right," she replied. "It's going to be okay, you know."

"Will it?" I asked.

A lump rose in my throat unexpectedly. Until now, I'd been standing strong, keeping it together, but everything about this world was different, and I was suddenly in the lap of

luxury with people who acted like they *cared*. I hadn't had that in a while, and after being treated and auctioned off like a slave, it was jarring.

"I'll leave you to get settled," Uma said. "If you need anything, just shout."

"To whom?" I asked.

"There are staff everywhere, and if you need me, just ask for me, and someone will find me. Trust me, it's going to be fine."

I blinked slowly. I wasn't sure I could believe that. Nothing made sense, and that was a red flag. Not that my life had made a whole lot of sense since I'd shifted into a rabbit the first time, but this had gone from weird to bizarre in record time.

"Oh, you should know..." Uma stopped at the door. "Braxton asked me to put a spell on the place so that you can't leave. So, don't try to escape, okay? It won't work."

"Are you a shifter?" I blurted out.

"Oh, no, honey, I'm fae."

"What?" I asked. "What's that?"

Uma looked confused, but she smiled.

"We'll talk sometime, okay?"

She left the room without saying anything else, and I was left alone. I walked to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress, testing its firmness.

It was *divine*.

I walked into the bathroom. This room alone was bigger than my entire house. The jet bath was the size of a splash pool. Glass stretched along the far wall with a waterfall shower behind it, and there was a toilet and a bidet side-by-side. When I reached out to touch the fluffy towels, they were warm.

Everything was so extravagant.

It only made me feel more lost.

I opened the faucet and splashed cold water on my face. Maybe this was all a crazy nightmare, a weird dream.

Maybe I would wake up from it at any moment, exhausted after not getting enough sleep for my next shift.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, Braxton stood in the middle of my room.

I stopped in my tracks.

“Oh,” I said.

He didn’t answer me. His eyes slid down my body and back up again, and I blushed. His gaze was like a physical touch, filled with hunger. His magic reached out to me and licked me like a giant tongue. My magic responded, my rabbit pricking her ears, but that wasn’t all that responded. My body tightened in all the right places, and my breath caught in my throat.

“You’re comfortable?” he asked in a deep voice.

I swallowed hard, trying to get myself under control.

“As comfortable as can be expected.” My voice didn’t sound nearly as uncertain as I felt.

“Good,” Braxton said. He glanced toward the closet. “Your things will be collected for you if you give me an address.”

“My things?”

He nodded. “I’ll have someone pick them up so you can be more comfortable in your space.”

“So, this is permanent,” I said, my stomach sinking.

A part of me had hoped it was only temporary, that eventually, I would be able to go home.

“You’re not going back to your life before this,” Braxton said.

“Yeah, I guess that falls under the term ‘owned,’ huh?” My chest tightened. I was starting to panic. Reality was setting in

—this was my new normal. I wasn't a free woman, and my life didn't belong to me.

Braxton shook his head. "It's not just that. You're a rabbit shifter. You're rare, and now that word is out there that you exist, they'll want you all to themselves."

"Who?" I asked.

"Everyone," Braxton said simply. He pushed his hands into his pockets.

I pressed my lips together, getting irritated. "Don't tell me that you're keeping me here for my own good. I know how an auction works. I understand what slavery and ownership of another person means."

Braxton didn't answer me, but his eyes darkened, becoming a deep honey color.

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"You just want me for yourself."

"I did pay for you."

"And now you get to decide my fate." My anger rose as I talked, my skin getting hotter.

Braxton's anger rose to match mine, our power facing off in the room.

I wasn't usually this outspoken. I tried to keep my head low, to not attract too much attention to myself. That had been before, when they hadn't known who and what I was. Now that I was bang in the middle of a world that was apparently just like me—sort of—I didn't have to hide anything anymore.

I'd been attacked, pushed around, caged, and sold. I wasn't in the mood to play nice anymore. My patience had worn thin, and now I was just angry.

"Watch your tone when you talk to me," Braxton snapped.

"Or what?" I challenged before I swallowed hard.

He could do anything he wanted to me. Out here, I doubted I had rights, or the law on my side, or anything else that would

protect me.

Braxton took one big step so that he was right in front of me, so close I could feel his heat roll off him in waves. His jaw was set, and his eyes were angry, but I wasn't scared of him. My rabbit didn't want to run away, the way I usually acted.

Something about Braxton drew me to him, and instead of cowering, my rabbit leaned into the magic that rolled off Braxton, rubbing herself against it like a cat.

What the hell was going on?

"I'm the alpha," Braxton said in a deep voice. "Your life is in my hands. I demand respect."

"Respect or fear?" Where was all this coming from?

Somewhere deep inside, from a place I hadn't known existed. I wasn't a scared freak anymore. I was an equal.

My rabbit was small, but the magic that poured out of me was more powerful than it had ever been, and I went with it. I couldn't run, so I would fight if that was what I had to do.

"You're feisty," Braxton said in a low voice, and his eyes changed again, going from honey to the color of molasses.

I was suddenly very aware of how close he stood to me, his muscles flexed and his large form towering over me. I glared up at him, but he wasn't terrifying anymore.

I wanted him. I ached for him.

I'd never been with someone, and my experience with anything sexual was minimal, but I needed Braxton inside of me. I didn't know how that was possible, how I could crave something I didn't know, but it was so powerful that I struggled to think clearly.

The atmosphere shifted, becoming thick and hot, and Braxton's eyes slid to my lips. My breath hitched, and he closed the short distance between us. He paused fractions away from me, and my lips tingled in anticipation.

He didn't move. He waited there, inviting me to close the distance.

I could back away. I could still end this.

I leaned forward, and our lips pressed together.

When he touched me, electricity ran through my body, charging me like a live wire.

Braxton pushed me backward until my back was against the wall next to the vanity and his tongue was in my mouth, his hands in my hair and on my neck, and he ground himself against me. His cock was hard, and I shivered and moaned softly at the back of my throat.

Braxton let out a low growling sound, a reminder that he was a beast, not a man, but I wasn't scared of him. I wanted this.

I flashed on an image of us, naked on the bed just a few feet away from me. My body pinned underneath his, his glorious torso rearing up as he penetrated me, hips bucking while he fucked me.

I mewled with need, and heat washed over me, pooling between my legs.

Braxton pulled up the shirt I'd been given, and his fingers found my bare breast. I quivered when he touched me, currents of need running from my erect nipple to my sex, and I cried out when he tweaked my nipple.

My stomach twisted in bouts of pleasure.

Braxton cupped my pussy through my leggings, his fingers running along my slit, and I exhaled sharply.

I ached for him, but I'd never had sex before.

Fear unfurled at my center. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if I was ready. I didn't know anything, and this man didn't have a reason to stop. He owned me, and he could do anything he wanted.

Braxton froze and broke the kiss. He looked me in the eye, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling. His face

had become stony.

He let go of me and tugged my shirt down again.

He stepped away.

“This is your home now,” he said in a smoky voice—the only sign that something had just happened. Otherwise, he seemed perfectly put together where I was still trembling and gasping, balanced between the need for pleasure and the fear that had started to grow inside of me. “If you want something or need something, ask one of the staff members.”

“Where will you be?” I asked in a small voice.

“Where I’m needed,” he said gruffly, and turned away from me.

He stepped away from me, took a deep breath through his nose, and turned toward the door. When he walked away from me, I had the strangest sensation that I was losing something. I didn’t want him to go.

He left the room, shutting my door behind him, and I was alone.

I sagged to the floor, my back against the wall where Braxton had left me, and covered my face with my hands.

What was going on with me? I shouldn’t have felt this way about him. Braxton was a total stranger who’d *bought* be. Nothing about this made sense, nothing about this was normal, and nothing about this should have been so damn attractive.

And yet, I was drawn to him like a magnet.

Was it something crazy? Something fucked up? I was gaga for my captor in no time at all—Stockholm Syndrome on steroids.

I’d never wanted someone more in my life. I’d never been this worked up.

And I’d never been this scared of what the future would hold.

One part of me was terrified of what he would do to me, what he would take from me.

Another part of me wanted to give it all.

What was happening?

The door opened, and I jumped up, heart beating in my throat.

A pale woman poked her head around the doorpost.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am. I brought you some things until they can fetch your clothes for you.”

“Oh,” I said. “You... work here?”

She nodded. “I’ll be taking care of you. Whatever you need.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jane,” she said.

“Is it awful to work here?” I asked, the words tumbling out of my mouth.

She blinked, surprised. “Not at all. Braxton is very good to us. He’ll be good to you, too. Don’t look so scared. You’re going to be okay.”

Everyone kept telling me that.

Jane walked to the closet and put a stack of clothes on the shelf for me.

“I’ll need your address so we can get the rest of your things,” she said. “And tell me if you need something specific. I’ll see if I can find it.”

It was getting hard to think. Nothing made sense, and everything happened so fast.

While I talked to Jane, telling her what she needed to know, my mind drifted to Braxton.

Despite my relief that he’d stopped, I wished he would come back.

BRAXTON

Uma sat in the living room, her feet tucked under her, shoes on the floor. She was reading a cozy mystery.

The sun slowly set, dusk creeping in, and it painted the valley in colors of blue and purple as the light drained away. I loved the way the world changed when the sun came and went. Everything looked different depending on where the light came from. I liked to think that life was like that, too.

“Did they get her stuff?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Uma said, closing her book. “Dagger is still out there, looking into a couple of things.”

“Good,” I said. My hands itched for a glass of something to drink, but I didn’t. Instead, I sat down opposite Uma. “What do you make of her?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know... she’s a rabbit shifter. She’s an anomaly, something that doesn’t come along more than once every millennium or something. There’s got to be a catch, something to look out for with a shifter like her.”

“She’s different, that’s for sure,” Uma said, nodding. “The truth is, I only know what I learned from books and what my family has passed on, since I haven’t actually seen one up close like this. She’s still a person, you know.”

I snorted. “Thanks for that.” Uma was a fae, and she didn’t cower in fear when it came to my power and position as alpha. Sometimes, I was glad that we could talk like equals. Other

times, it pissed me off that she wasn't afraid of me and told me straight up how things were.

"I'm just saying, I know you own her and everything, but you shouldn't underestimate her."

I grunted in response.

"She's a rabbit, which means she'll unlock her abilities as she goes on."

"What kind of abilities?" I asked.

"I don't know. That's the thing... I've heard that they have unique abilities. Every rabbit has something different. We won't know what powers she has until they're unlocked, and she starts to use them."

"How does she unlock them?" I asked.

Uma offered me a leveled gaze.

"Losing her virginity."

"What?"

"When a rabbit shifter has sex for the first time, her powers are unlocked. Or at least, that's what the legends say."

"Do we know that she's a virgin?" I asked the fae.

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. But I can feel her power brewing under the surface. If the legends are true, then it's likely she is."

"That means... Fuck." I ran my fingers through my beard and turned over the information in my mind.

If she didn't know what her powers were, it was because she hadn't had sex. That explained her fear, despite the obvious pull between us. I hadn't been able to resist her. I didn't want to stop myself around her, but that fear... there was no way in hell I would ever do something to her if it wasn't what she wanted. I was a lot of things, including her owner now, but I wasn't *that*.

"You're attracted to her," Uma said.

I tried to keep my face neutral when I looked at her. “She’s attractive.”

“Yeah, I guess she is. Men will feel that way about her all the time. It’s a part of her power.”

I growled. It was involuntary, but it rolled out of my throat when I so much as thought about someone else having her the way I wanted her.

“Oh,” Uma said softly. “It’s like that.”

“Like what?” I asked, aware that I was reacting in ways that didn’t usually happen.

“Do you think she’s your fated mate?”

“Excuse me?” I demanded. How had we leaped from attraction to fated mates? “Just because I think a female is beautiful doesn’t mean that we’re fated. I think a lot of females are beautiful.”

“Look, I get it. You’ve got that whole thing going on with the threat of your life hanging over your head. Maybe finding your mate isn’t on your mind, but this is serious.”

Uma was the only person besides Dagger who knew what had happened to my parents, and that the demon was still after me. She and Dagger were close, and Dagger had been with Hauser as his new beta the night the former alpha had taken me in.

“Pay attention to me, Braxton,” Uma said, her voice hard. “I’ve been doing some research, talking to some elders, reading some of the tomes that we still have around. She’s not like other shifters. If you have sex with her, and this is something she chooses, too, she’ll be bound to you whether you’re fated or not. It’s just how it works with them. It’s the curse of being a rabbit. Every upside has a downside, and this is hers.”

“So, if I sleep with her...”

“She’s yours for good,” Uma confirmed.

“And what about me?” I asked. “Will I be mated, too?”

“If you sleep with her, you’re *choosing* her, Braxton,” Uma said, her words very precise. She pinned me with a hard stare.

This really *was* serious.

Thank fuck I’d backed off when I had. If she hadn’t been scared of me, scared of what sex meant, then I might not have held back when I’d been in that room. I might have fucked her and gotten myself a mate without even knowing it.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I said.

Uma nodded. “You’re welcome.”

“Get closer to her,” I said. “Find out what you can, and help her if she needs it.”

“And report back to you?”

I nodded. “That goes without saying, but this isn’t just about me. It’s about her, too.”

“That’s unlike you,” Uma said, frowning. “You’re usually so cold.”

“Yeah,” I responded, not feeling the need to say more.

I wasn’t going to explain to her that her fear had gotten to me. I had this crazy urge to protect her, and her fear had pulled me up short. I didn’t know what it was about her, but I wasn’t going to let anything happen to her until I got to the bottom of whatever was going on. Fated, or just a bond, didn’t matter—Uma had to help me out with this one because if I was this drawn to her, and I didn’t know what she could do, we were both in trouble.

Me, because she could be my weakness when I couldn’t afford it, and Kinley, because if that demon knew there was someone else to take down with me, he wasn’t going to hold back. He didn’t have to kill my mom and the rest of my family, after all, but thanks to what my dad had done, my parents and my four siblings had all been doomed.

How long had it been since I’d heard of him? I’d lost track. Centuries. He’d found me when I’d come of age, but Hauser and a bunch of fae had fought him off. It hadn’t been permanent.

We'd all been left with the promise that the demon would come back for blood.

It had taken a lot of fae and a lot of spells to hide me, with Uma keeping the delicate balance in place, but all I needed was for one wrong person to catch wind of where I was, and I was fucked.

And by extension, Kinley would be fucked, too.

I refused to do that to her.

The front door opened, and the night air spilled in. The sun had set while we talked, and it was almost completely dark out.

Dagger walked in, the darkness clinging to his clothes before he shrugged out of his jacket.

"It's getting colder out there. I think winter will be here early this year."

I watched him as he walked to the fireplace and outstretched his hands, warming up after he'd been out all day.

"Everything good over here?"

"Fine," I said. "Where's Cal?"

"Sulking in a bar in the city. He's pissed you outbid him."

I snorted. "He's an idiot."

"Yeah, but you better keep an eye on him. He's going to be more trouble than he's worth if you look for too much shit with him."

"I can handle him," I said with a wave of my hand. "What did you find?"

"I followed up on Inigo's' death," Dagger said. "Something didn't sit right with me. I went to find Lennox, you know, the bear that lives down at the creek?"

"Yeah, I know him," I said.

There wasn't a shifter in my territory that I didn't know—they were all part of my pack—and I liked to keep tabs on the

humans when I could, too. It was a hell of an operation to run, but I had to know where everyone was if I wanted to stay safe.

“Well, he and Inigo were close, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” I bristled at the thought.

Inigo had been one of mine, but his loyalty had been questionable. He hadn't always kept his mouth shut about my business, which was why I'd started pushing him out. The problem was that the more I'd pushed him out of the group of shifters I usually held close, the more he'd buddied up to outsiders, pissing me off. I was pretty sure he'd done it on purpose.

“It took a while to get Lennox to open up to me. The bear shifter is a pain in the ass, and he doesn't think he needs to answer to me.”

“I hope you showed him otherwise.”

“Turns out a rabbit killed the panther,” Dagger said.

Uma's eyes snapped to mine, her eyebrows raised, and I stared at Dagger.

“What?!”

“Yeah, the story Cal was talking about was actually true. The rabbit...” He nodded down the hallway in the direction of Kinley's room.

“Fuck,” I said. I stood and walked to the window, scratching my beard. “What if she's here to get to me?” I looked over my shoulder at Dagger and Uma.

“How?” Dagger asked.

I frowned slightly, my mind spinning. “The demon...” I didn't know how else to say it.

“The demon isn't the reason Kinley is here,” Uma said.

“How do you know?” I asked, spinning around to face her. I balled my hands into fists.

“Because *you* bought *her*, remember? It's not like she chose to come after you. Besides, a rabbit hasn't existed in

centuries, maybe even a millennium. I doubt the demon got its hands on one just like that. Besides, there's no trace of dark magic on her, and if a demon commissioned her, I would have picked up something."

I let out a breath. Uma was right. Damn it, I was too paranoid.

"I'll see what else I can find out," Dagger offered. "About how she killed the panther, and why."

"I can damn well ask her," I said, irritated now, not only with the situation but with my paranoia. An alpha wasn't supposed to be like this.

"She's not going to tell you anything," Dagger said.

"And she's terrified of everything right now," Uma pointed out.

They were both right.

"We'll figure it out," Dagger said. "You're not in any danger right now, and it's going to stay that way. You've figured it out the past two centuries."

I nodded. Dagger was right, but that didn't change the fact that I was a target for a demon to finish his mission. Demons lived forever—they belonged to the Underworld and lived eternally, so this promise he'd made to take me out wouldn't die with him. It couldn't.

Fuck my dad for doing this to my family and fuck him for doing it to me.

"I need a drink," I said, walking toward the bar area that had a deck overlooking the valley.

"Sure, have your drink," Dagger said. He didn't have to add that *alcohol won't make your problems go away* because he'd said it often enough, and I *knew* that.

"It's going to be fine," Uma said. "We'll figure this out."

"I hope we do," I said gruffly. "I'm sick of this bullshit."

"Who knows," Uma added, "maybe the rabbit is an answer."

I didn't answer her, because I didn't know if it could be. All I knew was that more and more things were spinning out of my control, and I hated it.

KINLEY

I blinked my eyes open to a ceiling that was starting to become familiar. This room in the “cabin” wasn’t home by any means, but the last couple of days I’d been here, I’d felt safe, and that was a big deal. I’d been on my own for so long, always having to watch my back with no one there to look out for me. My foster parents had done what needed to be done—they’d fed me and raised me, but that had been it. The big stuff—the emotional stuff—I’d had to do by myself all my life.

I hadn’t exactly felt safe since I’d shifted into my rabbit form for the first time.

When it had happened, I hadn’t been able to talk to my parents about it. We’d never been that close, and they would have shunned me immediately, told me I was crazy. I’d grown up in a human home, and it had meant that my whole life had been around humans.

Until the night shifters had attacked me, I hadn’t even known there were others out there. It had been a rude awakening to find out the way I had, but everything had changed since then.

I got out of bed, stretched, and walked to the enormous bathroom. I turned on the hot water and stripped off my pajamas before I stepped under the waterfall shower. The water surrounded me, and I closed my eyes.

My rabbit was frustrated. She wanted to get out and run, but I wasn’t allowed to do that. I’d gone against Uma’s advice

and tried to escape. When the night had been at its darkest on the first night I'd been here, I'd climbed out of my window, shifted, and run... only to slam up against an invisible force field that threw me back and hummed through my body like I'd been electrocuted.

Electrocuted by magic.

Uma had been serious about the spell, which fae could do, apparently.

I *could* ask permission to leave, Uma had said, but that only made me feel like the prisoner I really was, and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want someone to stand by my side, to watch me like a hawk to make sure I didn't run away. I couldn't be treated as a possession.

I'd shifted a few times in my room, bouncing around—the room was bigger when I was a tiny rabbit, and space wasn't an issue—but it wasn't the same as being out in the forest, feeling the mulch under my feet and the fresh air ruffling my fur.

Being between shifters should have made me feel less alone now that I knew I wasn't the only one, but all my current situation had done was make me feel lonelier than ever.

I wanted to go home.

When I got out of the shower, I wrapped a towel around my dark hair and got dressed into my favorite pair of faded jeans, a long-sleeved shirt I'd worn so many times, there were holes around the sleeve cuffs, and a jersey I'd bought myself as a gift last Christmas.

Having my own clothes and photos with me made being here a little easier—at least I could make this place my home a little bit—but being back in my house would have helped so much more.

The night I'd been attacked, I'd shifted out of my clothes, and I'd left my purse with my phone behind. That was gone, but I'd asked Jane to let them bring my laptop when they'd brought my things, so I wasn't completely shut off from the world. I'd gotten permission from Dagger—who'd brought my

laptop to me himself the morning after I'd arrived—to send emails to my boss, where I'd quit my job.

Dagger had told me Braxton had taken care of the rent, so I had nothing to worry about on that front, either. My lease was up in sixty days, and then the place would be rented to someone else.

All of my things had been moved out of the rental, so I had nowhere to go, anyway. With the meager amount of money in my checking account, I couldn't afford a new place.

My savings account was non-existent. I was truly stuck.

Everything about being owned was bizarre. I was a prisoner, but I lived in the lap of luxury. It didn't change the fact that I was a prisoner—one that no one cared about.

No one would really notice I was gone. It was sad to admit, but the facts made it easier to deal with what was happening. No one would come looking for me. Just the thought was a downer, but I shrugged it off.

It's a good thing.

The last thing I wanted was for the few humans in my life to stumble upon the shifter world and get into the kind of danger they couldn't protect themselves from. Even if no one was really there for me and I wasn't close to anyone, I hated the idea of someone getting hurt.

I had to accept that this was my life now. This was my home for the foreseeable future.

I'd dried my hair and stood at the bookshelf, studying the books. They all seemed to be first editions. I ran my fingers over the spines, in awe of the collection.

Braxton seemed so cold and harsh, but he had a taste for fine things, and under that rough exterior, I had a feeling there was so much more he was hiding.

Why would he hide all of that? Why did he feel the need to own me?

A knock sounded at the door, and I jumped.

“Come in,” I called in a small voice.

When the door opened, it was Uma. I relaxed and offered a nervous smile.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay. I was just looking for something to read.” I turned my attention back to the books. “They’re all first editions.”

“They are,” Uma said, nodding. “A lot of the stuff in this house is one-of-a-kind. Hauser was like that, serious about things being real for what they were, and not just a cheap copy.”

I frowned. “Hauser?”

“The former alpha.”

“Braxton’s dad,” I said.

Uma shook her head. “Not by blood, but yeah, he raised him.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Braxton was adopted?”

“Something like that,” Uma said. She pointed to the couch in front of the fireplace. “Can I sit?”

I nodded.

Jane had built a fire early in the morning when I’d still been sleeping. She did that every day. The first time, I’d woken up, but the domestic worker always hummed when she worked, and it reminded me of my foster mom. I didn’t mind her being in and around my room—I was starting to get used to it.

“I was raised by a foster family, too,” I said.

“Yeah?”

I nodded and sat down on the other edge of the couch, hugging a throw-pillow to my chest.

“In the human world,” I added.

“That must have been tough.”

“Only when I found out what I was,” I said. “I just thought my real mom couldn’t take care of me. That was what my foster parents told me. That happens all the time, right?”

“It does,” Uma said carefully.

“I’m starting to wonder if it’s because they knew what I was,” I said, suddenly emotional.

“Maybe it is,” Uma said. “But not because they didn’t want you; they wanted to keep you safe.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “They had to have been shifters then, right? I mean, I thought it was just me and no one was like me, but from what I’m starting to see now, I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Uma hesitated before she answered. “Your biological parents were definitely shifters. You can’t be one if they weren’t. I think what you said about them not being able to take care of you could have been the reason you ended up with a foster family. You’re a very rare kind of shifter, and life for you would have been very dangerous in the shifter community.”

I stiffened. “It’s nice of you to suggest that they were doing me a favor, but I don’t see how leaving me alone in this world, trying to fend for myself without help, is keeping me safe.”

“Hmm,” Uma said.

She didn’t have an answer to that. It was because I was right, I was sure. If I had a child who was like this, so different from the rest of the world, I would do everything in my power to take care of that child and to help them, rather than just pushing them away into a human world to figure it out alone.

“How are you coping with everything?” Uma asked, changing the topic. “You haven’t exactly asked to go out, and your magic feels... volatile.”

“You can feel it?”

Uma nodded. “I’m fae. I can pick up on all kinds of magic, and your signature is so different from the usual shifter magic.

I can't help but feel it."

"I'm fine," I said. "I mean, I'd love to go out, but I'm not going to ask for it."

"They won't let you out unless you do. Braxton is a busy man, and Dagger is on a mission of his own."

I didn't answer her. I wasn't going to go to them like a child and ask if I could be let out, like a dog or something. It was ridiculous.

"What are you?" I asked instead, changing the topic away from myself entirely. "I mean, you said you're fae, but I don't know what that means."

"It means I work with spells and magic, and a lot of it is drawn from nature in some ways."

"I didn't know there was more than one type of... creature. I don't know what to call you. Or me."

"'Enchanted beings' is the right term," Uma said with a smile. "And there are a few, actually. On this earth, there are shifters and fae. Angels *can* live here, but I only know of one who does."

"Angels?" I asked. "I thought... Are they real?"

"We're all real," Uma said.

I guess that was true. Until I'd shifted, I hadn't known shifters were a thing, either.

"Vampires live on Earth, too, but they keep to themselves."

I tugged at my earlobe. "It sounds like a storybook. How is any of this possible?"

Uma started from the beginning and explained to me how archangels lived in the Overworld and chose pure souls after death to become angels, the same way demons ruled the Underworld and chose certain souls to become vampires.

Demons and vampires were all about dark magic, and archangels and angels used light magic, and angels had created shifters. Apparently, the fae just *were*. Uma wasn't sure where

she came from herself, and there was too much new information to process for me to get stuck on that part.

“There are dark fae, who work with the demons and vampires, but we don’t associate with them. I guess it’s the same as with anything else—we all have choices. We all get to choose if we want to be good or bad.”

“Except demons and vampires,” I said.

Uma shrugged. “I don’t know how to explain that part. Dark magic has always been a bit of a question mark, and I try to stay as far away from that as I can. I’m all about good magic.” She grinned at me.

I liked Uma. The more she told me, the more the world around me made sense, and I didn’t feel so lost and alone.

She asked me about my life before all of this had happened, and I told her about my small rental house, my job, and how tough things could be. It was better than nothing, though.

“I heard you attacked a panther,” Uma said carefully when we’d spent hours talking.

I shut down when she mentioned that.

“It was hunting me.”

“I can imagine that,” Uma said, nodding. “Panthers can be a real pain in the ass, and although shifters are part-human, they’re still animals, and their primal instincts take over.”

“They were talking about killing me,” I said grimly. “I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t mean to do it.” I started trembling. My rabbit was freaking out, and my magic bounced all over the room, laced with fear. Just thinking back to that night made me feel sick. I could still hear the crunch the branch had made on the back of that man’s head, and his limp body on the ground, naked and pale in the moonlight. It haunted me every time I closed my eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Uma said. Could she feel my distress? “You’re safe here.”

“What if they come after me for that?” I asked.

“They won’t,” Uma said.

I covered my face with my hands. I couldn’t believe that. Nothing made sense anymore. It felt like the moment that man had appeared in front of me, all hell had broken loose, and I was living a nightmare now.

“Kinley,” Uma said, and she touched my arm, carefully peeling away my hands.

When she looked into my eyes, her eyes were bright and filled with hope. Magic pulsed into me, and I wanted to pull away, but it was soothing. It felt like a salve, rubbed onto a wound, and the burning and pain inside of me slowly faded until it was enough to calm my magic from freaking out. My rabbit relaxed a little, and I was able to draw my power back in.

“It’s going to be okay,” Uma said.

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

I didn’t know if she was right. I didn’t know anything anymore.

“I think the first thing we need is to get you out of here. You need fresh air and to stretch your legs. Come with me.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Outside.”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“It’s just you and me, and I want to show you something. Trust me.”

I hesitated, but Uma left the room. When I didn’t follow her, she popped her head around the corner.

“Coming?”

I followed her out of the room.

She walked down the hallway and toward the kitchen.

“I’m starving.” She opened the fridge and took out a platter of ready-made food: sandwiches, chicken wings,

meatballs. My stomach rumbled. I ate all my meals in my room, and I hadn't had lunch yet.

"Do you have something... vegetarian?" I asked.

Uma glanced down at the platter.

"Oh. Right, that would make sense." She giggled. "This is a house full of carnivores, so I never thought about your diet. The staff are making you vegetarian meals, right?"

I nodded. "Yes. Jane made sure that my meals are meat-free."

"Great!" She looked into the fridge again and grabbed some hummus and veggies. She handed them to me.

"Isn't that for someone?" I asked.

"Yeah, for us. There's always food in here. Seriously, you should get out of your room and grab something if you want it. Come."

She carried the platter through the large house, her feet barely making a sound on the wooden floors. I followed her to a bar with stools and couches and a large television against one wall with speakers on either side. It was off right now, but the room screamed mancave.

Uma pushed open the sliding doors, and I followed her out.

As soon as I stepped outside, I gasped.

The deck we stood on extended over the valley, away from the house that leaned against the side of the cliff, and when I stood on the edge, the world fell away. The valley lay below my feet, stretching on either side of the house, and I felt like I was floating.

I'd only seen the other side of the house, the front garden my room looked out over, and the front door where I'd run from.

The breeze picked up, and it was icy, but I didn't feel the chill. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of the forest

that surrounded us, the crisp smell of water in a stream far below.

“This is incredible,” I breathed.

When I turned around, Uma beamed at me. She sat on a lounge, the platter on a low table, and she chewed. She pointed at another lounge on the other side of the low table, and I sat down.

“Can I come out here whenever I want to?” I asked.

“You can. You should.”

I nodded and picked up a cucumber, nibbling on it.

Maybe I would do that. Until today, I hadn’t felt the liberty to move around the house, and I’d stuck to my room, but being outside was like a dream. It wasn’t the forest, but it was as close to it as I could get, and if this was going to be my new home, I might as well get used to it and do what I could.

Between the spell and my things being here and the fact that I was owned, I knew I couldn’t leave, but a part of me didn’t want to.

A part of me wanted to stay with Braxton.

It was the rabbit part again, the part that didn’t make sense at all. I had no idea what I was feeling, why I was so drawn to Braxton, and why this place felt like home. But I *wanted* to be here, even though the logical part of my brain told me differently.

“Thank you,” I said and looked at Uma. “For everything today.”

“Of course,” Uma said with a smile. “I told you that I’m here if you need anything.”

When she’d said that first, I’d figured she meant clothes or something, but now I realized it covered a lot more than that.

Even friendship.

BRAXTON

She wasn't in her room when I went to find her. A myriad of thoughts ran through my mind—she'd infiltrated to look for a weakness. She wasn't as innocent as she looked. She'd killed, after all, and she was going to be my downfall.

I frowned, panic washing through me before I could manage to squash it.

Alphas don't panic.

Uma had put a spell around the place so that she couldn't get away. I trusted Uma, and the fae had pointed out that Kinley wasn't here because she had some kind of agenda. She was here because I'd brought her here.

“Calm the fuck down,” I scolded myself.

I walked out of her room and through the house. A breeze blew from the bar, and when I followed it, the glass doors were open. Kinley sat outside on a lounge, knees pulled up to her chest, head tilted up to the sun. Her eyes were closed, and she looked so peaceful.

I stood for a while and watched her.

She was a complete mystery. I'd heard of rabbit shifters, but they were so rare that seeing one in anyone's lifetime, even shifters who lived around half a millennium, was special.

My phone pinged in my pocket, and Kinley opened her eyes. She looked at me over her shoulder and stiffened.

I cleared my throat and stepped onto the deck. “I thought you’d be in your room.”

“I needed to get out and breathe,” she said.

I nodded, taking a step closer to her. I was careful with my movements, aware that I was a predator, and she was prey. I moved slowly, and she watched me with sharp eyes. Her eyes were cornflower blue today—I could stare at her eyes forever. They were filled with suspicion, and that pulled me up short.

“Do you want to get out?” I asked.

She frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“You haven’t been out in the forest for a while, and you need to shift. You’ll get cooped up, and if you don’t let your animal out, it can get ugly.”

I wasn’t sure if the normal rules for shifters applied. If a shifter didn’t shift often enough, the magic built up and almost fermented. It could make the shifters go crazy. I didn’t know if that was the same with a rabbit, but being cooped up in the house for days on end couldn’t be good for anyone, even someone without an animal.

Besides, Uma had told me to take her out, and the fae had a point.

I wanted to get to know Kinley better, anyway. I wanted to see what she was capable of, what her magic was like. Was she a threat?

In more ways than one, my little voice said. A threat as an enemy, or a threat as a lover.

I pushed away the thoughts, shutting down my little voice of reason—or fantasy, in this case.

Kinley hesitated.

“Come on,” I said and gestured for her to follow me. “Let’s go out. I could use the fresh air, too.”

Kinley stood, tugging her long sleeves over her hands before she followed me. I led the way to the front door and onto the gravel that led away from the house. When we

reached the perimeter of the area Uma had blocked off for Kinley, her steps faltered.

“I can’t go out there.”

Had she tried?

“Here,” I said and held out my hand. “I’ll take you.”

She hesitated before she stretched out her arm. Her sleeve pulled back, and her delicate fingers curled around mine. When we touched, warmth washed over me.

I looked at her, and her eyes locked on mine. They were a deeper, darker blue than a moment ago. Did she feel what happened when we touched each other? She had a hell of a poker face.

I guess she’d learned how to hide what she thought and felt if she’d been living in a human world. Uma had told me a bit about her backstory. Not a lot—the fae had been tightlipped—but enough.

I led her across the perimeter. Uma’s magic rippled over my skin like water, and Kinley let out a soft sigh when she passed through it, but she crossed without difficulty.

“How does that work?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Fae magic is a mystery to me.”

I let go of Kinley’s hand, and she tugged her sleeve down again, folding her arms around her body as if she were trying to keep herself together.

We walked into the trees, heading up the mountainside. The further we moved through the trees, the more Kinley relaxed. I watched her from the corner of my eye as she let go of herself, pulled back her sleeves, looked up at the branches and the leaves, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

She was fucking *beautiful*. Her face was delicate, but her jawline was strong and her cheekbones high. Whoever her parents were or had been, they’d been of powerful blood. I could tell in the way Kinley’s magic ebbed and flowed beneath the surface, responding to the forest.

As alpha, I could sense magic more easily because it bode well for me to know what was going on with my pack, but I'd never been able to sense magic the way I felt it with Kinley. Foxes had a keen sense for particular magic, but this wasn't that.

This was different. Everything about Kinley was.

We walked until I found a small clearing where water had gathered to form a small pond. It was my personal slice of paradise.

I pulled off my shirt and kicked off my shoes.

Kinley eyed me.

"You're going to have to strip if you want to shift."

She worried her bottom lip. "Could you turn around?"

A growl rose up in me. I wanted to tell her no; I wouldn't turn around. I was the alpha, and I did what I wanted. Besides, being naked for a shift wasn't a big deal. We all did it.

Except she wasn't like the rest of us. She'd grown up around humans, and they were so weird about nakedness, always trying to cover up, making a fetish out of being without clothes.

I grunted and turned my back to her. I pulled down my jeans and kicked them off. Behind me, I heard her clothes rustle as she got naked, too.

Everything in me ached to turn around, but I didn't. I didn't want to scare her away, and I wanted to respect her wishes.

Her magic came like a hot rush of power when she shifted, and I spun around.

She sat on the ground, a tiny sable rabbit. Her nose wiggled, and her ears turned this way and that. She shook herself out, and it was incredible to see something so small when her power was so great.

She hopped forward once, twice, and then she was gone.

In a flash, her little body disappeared.

Fuck.

Well, that was fun while it lasted.

I didn't know why I'd thought she would stay with me after I'd taken her out of the perimeter of Uma's spell. I was such an idiot.

I pricked my ears and listened to the sound of the forest. I couldn't hear a sound. She wasn't here anymore.

Anger grew inside of me and burned hot on my skin.

I paid good money for her!

Money was nothing, though. I could make that back in no time.

More importantly, if she wasn't under my protection, what if someone came after her? The thought made anger boil at my core.

I'd also wanted to get to know her better. I'd wanted to know what her magic was like, and what she could do.

I'd hoped I could win her over to be on my side, a part of the pack. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right?

I turned around, and suddenly, she was in front of me again.

"I didn't hear you," I said.

She looked up at me, her little nose twitching.

Usually, I could hear any animal in the forest. My keen hearing, thanks to being a shifter, meant that I could pick up on all kinds of sounds human ears couldn't, but I hadn't heard her. Not while she'd been running, and not when she'd come back.

I raised my eyebrows. Kinley hopped around, sniffing the mulch.

It was time for me to let my animal loose, too. I focused my attention inward and found my magic. I pulled the lion to the surface, and I felt the shift start at my core. My body

changed, and I dropped to the ground on all fours, fur sprouting on the surface of my skin.

Kinley backed away, and I could taste her fear.

My lion roared when it came to the surface, and the forest trembled all around us. I stretched out and yawned and lay down in the mulch. I rolled onto my back and stretched out my paws to Kinley. I needed her to know I wasn't going to hurt her.

She hopped closer, and I rolled over and stood. I shook myself out and headed into the trees. When I glanced over my shoulder, Kinley was following me.

She was faster than I was, but I was moving at a more casual pace. Every step I took, she covered two times the ground, hopping around, getting spurts of energy and running ahead, coming back a short while later. She stuck by my side, though.

I moved through the trees, and she explored the forest. I could almost feel the glee in her freedom as she ran between the trees.

This had been a good idea.

I didn't like running in lion form a lot. My human side was a fitness freak. I was fighting fit and ready to take on anything, but my lion, powerful as he was, liked lying in the sun. Sometimes, I hunted, but most of the time, I just rested until my need to let my magic loose was over.

We walked in a wide circle around my small clearing and finally ended up back where we started. The last part of the way, Kinley stayed next to me.

We shifted back and got dressed. I gave her my back so she could have the privacy she needed. The more time I spent with her, the more I felt like she needed to be protected. Not because she was weak, but because she deserved to be looked after.

“Thank you,” she said when I turned to face her. She wore her clothes as before and tucked her dark hair behind her ear. “I needed that.”

I nodded. "It's good to get out."

She glanced in the direction of the cabin. "Do we have to go back?"

"We can stay out here a while," I said.

She nodded and walked to the pond. She looked at her reflection before she sat down on a rock and looked around.

"It's peaceful out here."

"That's what I like about it."

"You're a loner," she said. "Don't lions usually have a pride?"

"There aren't a lot of us around," I said.

"I know what that's like."

I watched her as she picked up a twig and started breaking off small pieces of it. She was self-conscious, trying to keep herself occupied.

"How did you do it?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "What?"

"The panther."

She swallowed hard, and her skin paled. "I didn't mean to do it. They were going to hurt me, maybe even kill me."

Something in me lurched, my skin suddenly boiling with fury at the idea that they wanted to hurt her.

"I wasn't planning to kill him—just make sure they couldn't get to me first. The rest was an accident. I snuck up on him in rabbit form and shifted."

If she could move as quietly as she had when she'd run away and come back, I could believe that. She was a lot more dangerous than anyone realized because of her size. Everyone thought bunnies were cute and cuddly and not dangerous at all. Clearly, that wasn't true, not for a rabbit shifter.

I ached to know more. I needed to know what her magic could do, what I was dealing with, but I didn't think she knew,

either. That gave me an edge—I would find out about the same time she did. I hoped.

She was shutting down on me, so I changed the topic.

“You didn’t run away.”

She frowned at me before she lined up the small pieces of twig she’d broken off on her knee.

“When you shifted. You could have run.”

“You know where I live,” she pointed out. “You’re the alpha, and you have everyone in your pocket. You would have found me.”

She had a point. My heart sank. I’d hoped she’d come back for a different reason, but I was just fooling myself. I’d bought her, she wasn’t here for *me*. How could she be?

“Do you live in the giant cabin alone?” she asked.

I shook my head. “There are always people around. Staff. Dagger. Uma. Cal.”

“Cal?” she asked.

I bristled. “My foster brother. He’s a dick. He hasn’t been around since I b—” I swallowed. “Since we were at the auction. I don’t actually know where he is right now, but yeah, he lives here, too.”

“But no women,” she said. “Besides Uma, I mean.”

Was she trying to find out if I was single?

“Uma and I aren’t involved,” I said.

She nodded slowly. “I was just wondering, since... you know. The thing in the room.”

Ah. She wanted to know what kind of man I was, if I would take what I wanted no matter who was in my life and what they would do to me.

I walked to her and sat next to her on the rock so that we both faced the water.

“It’s not like that with shifters,” I said. “When we take a mate, it’s for life, and it’s serious. Fated is even more so.”

“What does that mean?” she asked. “Fated?”

“It’s when two souls are made for each other, two halves of a perfect whole. In the old days, fated mates always ended up together.”

“Not anymore?”

I pulled up one shoulder. “The modern world means there’s too much going on, too many people to meet. It’s made the world so big and so small at the same time. Shifters find love before they find their fated mate, and it’s more of a myth now.”

“Do you believe in it?”

“I do,” I said honestly. “I also think it can be screwed up really fast.” I tasted the bitterness of resentment at the back of my throat.

My parents had been fated, but my dad had fucked it up anyway, and now they were both dead. If they were lucky, my mom was somewhere blissful, where she could find peace. My dad... I didn’t give a shit where he’d ended up. He’d only wanted power, making deals with demons so that he could grow stronger. I didn’t know why. Maybe he’d wanted to overthrow the alpha or something—I’d been too young at the time. All I knew was that for that power, he’d been willing to sacrifice his family, and that kind of selfishness was unforgivable. He could be drifting in the Underworld forever for what he’d done, but I didn’t know how death worked, and I didn’t want to think about it too much.

Thinking about death felt like I was giving into the idea that I would end up there before my time, too.

“It’s sweet,” Kinley said, interrupting my dark thoughts.

“What is?”

“The idea of being one half of a perfect whole and knowing there’s someone else out there that fits you perfectly.”

She was a romantic. She looked at me, and her eyes were a deeper blue, the color of the ocean. I could fall into those eyes

if I wasn't careful.

The atmosphere changed, and I was suddenly aware of how close we sat to each other, how quiet it was all around us. We had more privacy here than we would ever have at the house, even when everyone cleared away and left us alone. There would always be someone, and shifters would always be listening.

Out here, it was just her and me.

She looked into my soul, her lips parted slightly, and I couldn't help myself.

This was trouble.

Getting too close put us both in danger.

If I kissed her, and I felt something the way I had last time, it meant there could be more, and I couldn't let that happen.

Despite knowing the facts, I couldn't resist her. My primal urges ignored my voice of reason, the logical facts, and I leaned in a little. When she didn't pull away, I kissed her.

KINLEY

Everything about Braxton was supposed to be scary. He was a vicious lion shifter, cold and harsh, difficult to get through to. He wore a poker face that wouldn't buckle for anything, and everyone jumped when he so much as *thought* about snapping his fingers.

Right here, right now, alone in the forest with Braxton, I wasn't scared of him at all. The magnetic pull was incredible. I didn't know what it was about him, but I ached to be closer to him.

When he kissed me, I melted. His power wrapped around me, the magic pushing up against me. It was strong, demanding. Instead of cowering to it, my rabbit leaned into the magic. She'd responded the same way last time.

Braxton slid his hand onto my cheek and cupped it, and his tongue slid into my mouth. I mewled softly—the taste of him was familiar, like in a different life. I knew this feeling, this taste. It was as if I'd known him for a lifetime.

What was happening? Why did I feel so drawn to a man I didn't know, a man I shouldn't have felt this way about?

All kinds of thoughts popped into my mind. At first, I'd thought this was Stockholm Syndrome, where a woman fell in love with her captor. This wasn't that. I'd have been drawn to him even if he hadn't owned me. It was just how it happened—our story of how we met.

That's crazy! You don't know him; he owns you, and you're thinking about romance stories!

He *was* a beast, though, and I was locked in his cabin, a beauty in distress.

I ordered myself to stop thinking. This wasn't that. This wasn't a fairytale. Everything in my life had been a nightmare since I'd started shifting. With my foster parents, I hadn't been able to talk to them, and no one else would have understood. I'd had to navigate it all alone, and after the attack, being auctioned off and belonging to someone wasn't a joke.

I just didn't get the idea that being a possession felt like this. Something about Braxton felt *right*.

When his other hand slid around my body, caressing my back, I stopped thinking altogether and savored the sensation of his touch. His hand was gentle but strong, and he drew mesmerizing circles. I leaned into his touch, letting him know I wanted more. He moved his hand only to push it under my shirt, and I relished in the feel of his broad, rough hand on my skin. Slowly, he moved his hand lower. He traced circles on my lower back, and finally, he cupped my ass as best he could while we were seated on the rock.

My body ached for his touch. I was wet; I couldn't help myself.

Heat washed over me, and I should have been terrified of this moment, but I wasn't. I'd never done any of this before, but Braxton was careful, gentle. His magic was thick all around me, and I could taste his desire, but he held back. I could almost feel his strain.

My heart raced as he kissed me deeper, more fiercely. My skin was on fire with need, every nerve ending alive with pleasure and anticipation. I wanted more.

I wanted it all.

You've never done this before.

Fear tugged at me. Braxton paused as if he could pick up on it.

"It's okay," I whispered.

My need for him was bigger than my fear. I wanted him to keep doing whatever he was doing.

Braxton broke the kiss and stood. He took my hand and pulled me up, so I was standing, too. He leaned down and scattered kisses across my cheek, my lips, my neck. Carefully, gently, as if I was made of glass, he drew his fingertips from my back to my hipbone, tracing a line on the bare skin. Electricity ran through my body, and my breath hitched in my throat.

“Do you want this?” Braxton whispered against my lips.

All I could do was moan in response. I wanted him more than I’d ever wanted anything. Anyone. I gripped his shoulders and pulled him closer to me, pressing our bodies against each other so that his erection pressed up against my stomach.

“Tell me what you want,” he mumbled.

I wasn’t used to verbalizing these things. I’d grown up in a very human, very conservative household. I’d had a few experiences with boys in school, but it hadn’t gone any further than kissing and groping. The rest, I’d found out through what my friends had said. Then, reality had happened, followed by the shift into a rabbit, and my new direction had been to keep my head low. I hadn’t dated, and I hadn’t done any of *this*.

Braxton ground his erection against me, and I shivered with desire. I wanted him inside of me. I wanted him to take me right now.

I also didn’t want that. I was terrified of what that would mean, of what Braxton would do, of what I was and wasn’t ready for.

“Touch me,” I breathed.

Braxton slid his hand under my shirt. He paused there, slowly tracing the curves of my body. His fingers moved lightly over my skin, tracing patterns along my ribs that sent shivers of desire down my spine, and I sighed heavily with need.

I arched my back, aching for him to touch me. The skin on my breasts tingled with anticipation.

When Braxton's hand rose to my breast, he stroked his thumb over my nipple. It was already hard and erect.

Braxton gently caressed it, and he growled. His eyes had turned from the golden color of his lion to a deep honey color that I'd started to associate with need. He dipped his head into my neck, kissing and nibbling the skin, and I whimpered. His beard scraped against my skin, giving me goosebumps, and his lips were hot and wet. He kissed his way up to my ear, tweaking my nipple so that I didn't know which part of the pleasure to focus on, before he gently nipped my earlobe.

I shuddered with pleasure.

His other arm wrapped around my body, holding me tightly while he ground himself against me, sucking my earlobe harder, and I buried my hand in his hair, fingers playing at the nape of his neck. The pleasure spread through my body, a direct line from my nipple to my pussy, and I ached for more.

"I'm getting rid of this," Braxton said, breaking the kiss. His voice was smokey, and he tugged my shirt up.

I'd wanted him to turn around when I'd shifted, shy about getting naked in front of him. Now, I didn't care. I wanted him to see me.

He pulled my shirt up and over my head. The cool air in the forest made my nipples tighten even more, and goosebumps broke out over my skin.

Braxton pulled his shirt off, too, and he pulled me against him so that we were skin to skin. His body heat flooded me, and I didn't feel the cold anymore. He undid my bra and pulled it off before he looked down at me. His eyes turned the color of molasses, and he stared at me as if he'd never seen a naked woman before. With a man as experienced and as *attractive* as Braxton was, I doubted this was even close to his first rodeo, but the way he looked at me made me feel beautiful.

A blush crept onto my cheeks, and I glanced away.

Braxton put his finger on my chin and tilted my head up so I could look at him.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “You have nothing to be shy about.”

He slid a hand down over my breasts and toward my stomach before he curled his fingers around the waistband of my leggings. He paused, a question in his eyes. He was waiting for me to give him the go-ahead, to allow him to undress me.

I nodded.

Slowly, he peeled my leggings down. He kneeled before me and planted kisses on my legs as he exposed my bare skin, and I shivered in the cool forest air.

When he stood, he pushed his hand between my legs and cupped me gently, feeling me. His fingers explored my sex, and he found my wetness. I moaned when he pushed a finger into me.

“Fuck,” he bit out through gritted teeth, and pure hunger flooded his features. “Kinley... fuck.” His fingers stroked the insides of my body.

His touch was gentle, but my body responded with a wild energy. I quivered with anticipation as he stroked the most intimate parts of me, parts no one had touched before but me.

Braxton kissed me again. He brushed his lips against mine, his beard grazing my chin, and took his time exploring every inch of me. He moved so slowly, as if he was waiting for me to tell him to stop, or let me take the time to get used to the idea of him touching me like this. He listened to my breathing, slowly learning what made me feel alive.

Braxton. That was what made me feel alive.

His fingers slid in and eased out of me, and I groaned in pleasure as he explored my folds, probing my depths, and circled and prodded. He teased and tantalized me until I panted with desire.

A powerful need grew inside me. Braxton moved his hand up again, tracing circles around my stomach and my breasts. His fingertips brushed my nipples, sending pleasure radiating through my body, before he moved lower again.

He kneeled in front of me, exploring my body with his hands and his lips. He kissed a line of fire down my stomach, onto my hipbone, and licked a line down my thigh. I ached for him to touch me, to cup my pussy again, but he pressed his lips to my inner thigh instead. My breath caught in my throat as he moved upward, and I shifted my stance, widening my legs.

When he flicked his tongue over my clit, I cried out. My body trembled, and my legs shook as he licked my clit. He wasn't slow and gentle now. I buried my hands in his thick hair, and the feel of his beard on my folds, his wet tongue slick and hot on my clit, overwhelmed me. My body responded to his touch, and I was putty in his hands. He could mold me however he wanted to now, and I would give in. I would give it all.

His hands moved up to my waist, and he held me, pulling me closer together, his face buried in my sex.

The pleasure inside me grew, but before I could topple over into the orgasm I knew was coming, Braxton leaned back on his heels. He stood and spun me around, so that I faced away from him. His naked chest pressed against my bare back, and he dropped kisses on my shoulder. His rough beard tickled, and I smiled and mewled at the same time.

Somehow, having him at my back made me feel more vulnerable, but it was laced with excitement. He pressed himself against me, his erection against the crevice of my ass, and he moved his hands over my breasts, stroking them, cupping them. He kissed the back of my neck, nuzzling the hair away, and slowly moved his lips down my back. He tracked kisses all the way down until he reached the cleft of my ass. His hands were on my hips, and he planted kisses on my ass cheeks.

His hands slid around, and he was touching me again. His fingers glided over my sex, teasing me. I cried out, pushed my hips forward, begging for more.

When he pushed his fingers into me again, it was from behind, his hand between my legs, and he slid his fingers, plowing into me. I was wet with desire. My heart pounded with pleasure, and I panted, my breath coming in erratic gasps. My body responded to his touch. He pushed my legs wider apart, and I complied, and Braxton continued to tease and stroke me until I shook with desire and need for a release.

I didn't know how much longer I could take it.

When Braxton slid his hand up, his fingers playing just above my pubic bone, I turned around so that I faced him. I hummed with pleasure as his fingers found my clit again. Braxton looked up at me with fire and need in his eyes. He stood and kissed me. His lips closed around mine, and I was lost in a whirlwind of need. His tongue moved inside my mouth, exploring me, sending waves of pleasure through my body while his fingers kept drawing circles around my clit.

And they said men couldn't multitask.

When he pulled away, he looked into my eyes. Something happened between us—a connection of some kind. My magic jolted, and so did his. My rabbit and his lion. My heart fluttered in my chest, and I knew he could see my desire for him in my eyes. It matched the look of primal need in his eyes.

Braxton undid his jeans and pulled out his cock. I swallowed hard, my mouth running dry when I looked down at it. His cock was large, thick, smooth skin straining over his impressive erection. Braxton kept his eyes on me when he took my hand and lowered it to his hardness. I touched his cock, and the hot flesh jerked slightly when I pressed my fingers against it. I circled my fingers around him, exploring.

Braxton offered an encouraging growl. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft, and Braxton sucked his breath between his teeth. He covered my hand with his and guided it up and down his shaft. He stiffened under my palm, getting harder in my hand, and Braxton groaned with pleasure.

My lust took over. I pulled my hand back and kneeled in front of him. I wanted to taste him now. I didn't know what I was doing, but all of this was new, and I would figure it out.

When I pressed my lips against the tip of his cock, he let out a low growl. I closed my lips around him, and his cock stiffened against my tongue. I moved it around his tip. He responded, and I moved further down, taking him into my mouth. I wanted to taste him—all of him—and the feel of him in my mouth, knowing I was giving him pleasure, only added to my own desire.

All of this was new, but somehow, it felt natural. I knew what to do without really knowing what to do, and Braxton was so careful and gentle with me, I wasn't scared to explore.

I moved my mouth up and down on him. Braxton gripped my naked shoulders, his body tensing. He was strong and hard, and I slid my lips over him, taking him as deep into my mouth as I could. He became harder and stiffer still.

I pulled back and moved my lips lower, kissing his shaft before moving further down. I kissed around his base and slid my tongue up his shaft again, feeling a shudder run through his body.

He groaned, and his hips started to move. I took him into my mouth deeper again and drew circular patterns with my tongue.

Braxton groaned and growled with pleasure, and his fingers dug into my shoulders. The bursts of pain only added to the pleasure of the moment, and I sighed and whimpered around his cock in my mouth.

He grunted as his desire rose, and it only increased my own need for him. He tensed in my mouth, getting closer when I moved my mouth faster and faster. Magic grew around us, becoming thick in the air like steam. It was like we were in a sauna of power, and I rode the wave of magic that ebbed around us. He gasped and groaned, and his body jerked, but he pulled back, his cock slipping out of my mouth with a plop. He hadn't finished.

He was breathing hard, his eyes wild, the dark honey color laced with pure gold.

“Kinley,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Not yet. I’m here for you, to please *you*.”

I knew he’d stopped me from pushing him over the edge. Had I done something wrong?

He took my hand and pulled me up, kissing me. His hands slid onto my body, his cock hard against my stomach, and his fingers found my clit again. He seemed intent on getting me to orgasm, but he didn’t want that for himself. I wanted to protest, but the pleasure that rocked outward from my core in waves stopped me. I wanted this. I wanted more.

My body trembled, my breath quickening as Braxton picked up where he’d left off. His touch became more insistent, his fingers moving faster, and I reached the peak of pleasure. My body quivered with desire.

He kissed me as he slipped his fingers into me again. My body shook, and my heart pounded as the orgasm crashed into me, sweeping me away in a wave of pleasure. I reached the edge of reason and cried out as I came. Braxton held me close, letting me ride out the wave of ecstasy, and I whimpered until the orgasm took my breath away. Braxton was everywhere. His magic surrounded me, and my power responded, but I was too caught up in my orgasm to think about it.

Slowly, the orgasm faded. Braxton pressed himself against me, still hard. He wanted more, and so did I, but he didn’t press me for more. Instead, he planted kisses over my face, letting me come down from my sexual high and catch my breath. He ran his hands over my body, stroking me lightly, and planted a kiss against my temple.

“We should get back,” he murmured against my temple. “It will be dark soon, and this is no place for a rabbit to be at night.”

I nodded, coming back to reality. I was naked and suddenly felt vulnerable. I’d been swept up by the lust, by the magic.

Questions swirled in my mind. Why hadn't he taken me, gone all the way? I wanted more. I wanted all of him. I wanted him to take me.

A part of me, though—the virgin part—was still scared. Maybe it was best if we stopped now.

My stomach still twisted.

Braxton tucked away his cock and zipped up his jeans before he found my clothes for me. He turned around, as if he hadn't just seen me naked and coming undone at the seams, and I pulled on my clothes.

I trembled, but this time, it was from the cold.

“Are we okay?” I asked in a small voice.

Braxton stopped to look at me.

“Yeah,” he said, his face softening. “Let's just take it slow, okay? I want you. Fuck, I want you so badly... but not now.” He pursed his lips together, his amber eyes a bright gold, and I believed him. I didn't need to know reasons, as long as I knew *I* wasn't one of them.

I nodded. That was all I'd needed him to say.

I shivered again.

I would be happy to get to my room, so I could think about everything that had just happened.

When I was dressed, Braxton turned around fully. He had his shirt back on, and he held out his hand to lead me home. I took it, even though we were still far from Uma's spell. Right now, after what we'd just done, Braxton was an anchor to me. Maybe he understood that. Or maybe he'd just done the chivalrous thing to lead me home.

Maybe he was claiming ownership again.

The truth was, even if he *was* making sure I didn't run off, I wasn't going anywhere. Something about Braxton drew me in, and even if he told me right now I could leave... I wanted more.

KINLEY

Braxton's body reared over mine, his skin slick with sweat, and I trembled and cried out as his thick cock pushed deeper and deeper into me. He roared with pleasure, and I gripped his shoulders, my nails digging into the skin. The magic in the room was so thick, it was hard to breathe, but that was okay—Braxton took my breath away.

“Braxton,” I said.

He lowered his lips to mine.

“Braxton,” I said again, but he didn't answer me.

He pumped into me, harder and harder, and when he let out a roar, releasing... he was gone.

I frowned and sat up.

“Braxton?” I asked.

I was fully dressed. Sounds from outside drew my attention, and I walked to my window. Outside, dark creatures were collected, huddled over, with red eyes and sly smiles.

Braxton and Dagger stood together not too far off, talking as if they didn't know they were there.

“Braxton!” I shouted.

He didn't hear me.

The dark figures had claws, and they crawled closer to Braxton and Dagger, dragging themselves along the ground. They made strange gurgling sounds, as if they were being

strangled, and the more of them appeared, the more the darkness around them grew.

It became so thick, I couldn't see anything.

“Braxton!” I cried out. There were so many dark figures. I couldn't see Braxton at all now.

“Braxton!” I shouted again.

Braxton.

I jerked awake in bed, drenched in sweat and breathing hard. I swallowed hard and looked out the window. The sun was bright outside, the light soft through my white curtains. I strained my ears and heard nothing.

There were no sounds outside, no darkness. No creatures, and no Braxton.

I got out of bed and tiptoed to the window, looking out to be sure.

Nothing.

I let out a breath and jammed the palms of my hands into my eyes. It had just been a nightmare, but I'd never felt any kind of dream be that real. It wasn't the first time I'd had that dream, either.

I'd had some version of this dream every night for the past four nights since we'd been in the forest together.

It wasn't always exactly the same—sometimes we were in different places. Sometimes we weren't having sex, but we were messing around. But it was always the two of us, until he was ripped away, and then the darkness came, and I couldn't reach him no matter what.

Always.

I got into the shower and washed off the sweat. I combed and dried my hair and got dressed and then ventured out of my room. I hadn't seen Braxton since then—he'd been busy with pack business.

Maybe that was why I'd dreamed about him. I missed him. I ached for him. I was still worried that he didn't want me. It

was just a small worry, but it was there, like sand in my shoe—nothing crazy, but just a little uncomfortable.

I needed company.

I needed advice.

I wandered through the large house. Everything was quiet and empty. The staff had done their cleaning, built the fires, and then left to do... I wasn't sure what, until they came back.

The longer I stayed here, the more I got used to the place. It was going on the second week, and I knew the layout of the house and the routines of the staff better.

When I got to the kitchen, Uma stood in front of the stove, making something.

“That smells amazing,” I said.

“Yeah? It’s a new pasta sauce recipe. Do you want to taste it?”

I nodded and walked to the stove. She held out a wooden spoon with red marinara on it, and I blew on it before I tasted it.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s incredible.”

Uma beamed at me, pleased with herself. She pulled the marinara off the stove and mixed the sauce with the pasta. She finished it off with way too much parmesan cheese and took out two bowls.

“Are you always here?” I asked. “It looks like you know the place like the back of your hand.”

Uma shrugged. “I have a home in West Linn. We all have our own homes, but when the alpha needs us, we come. I’m here to help him.”

“With what?” I asked.

Uma glanced at me. “What don’t men need help with, right?”

I giggled, and she passed me a bowl filled with pasta and cheese.

“Come on, let’s sit on the deck,” Uma said.

We walked through the bar area and out onto the deck. The sun was shining, but the air was crisp. It wasn’t hot during the day anymore. The sun lit up the day, but that was all it did.

Uma took two blankets out of a cabinet inside the sliding door and offered me one. We wrapped ourselves up and sat on the loungers, eating our pasta.

“If he doesn’t need you for work, I’m sure he needs you for food, because this is fantastic,” I said around the pasta in my mouth.

Uma laughed. “Braxton has servants for everything. They cook for him. They cook for *all* of us. This is just a hobby.”

“It’s a good hobby,” I said, nodding.

We fell silent as we ate.

“How are you doing?” Uma asked.

“I’m okay,” I said. “It’s better here than I’d thought it would be. I thought...” I let my voice trail off. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but being treated like a guest with my own room and the opportunity to say no wasn’t it.

There were things I didn’t *want* to say no to, but Braxton didn’t let me make that choice. I guess as my owner, that was his prerogative.

Since our day in the forest, I hadn’t seen him.

“Does Braxton date?” I asked.

Uma shook her head firmly. “I haven’t seen him with a female long-term since he came here, and that’s been two centuries.”

I sucked in my breath through rounded lips. “That’s a long time.” I’d been learning about shifters. The books on my shelf were all about shifters. First editions, sure, but written by shifters and about shifters, and there was a lot of information in them to absorb.

“Yeah.”

I fell silent again.

“Why do you ask?” Uma asked.

I shrugged. “I just thought...” I didn’t know how to put it into words. “When he’s with me, he’s so *intense*. He treats me like I’m the only woman there ever will be for him, but then he pushes me away, and it’s like I don’t exist at all.”

“He’s haunted by his demons. Literally,” Uma said. Her expression was strange when she said it. “He doesn’t want to bring anyone into his world.”

“He brought me into it,” I pointed out. “I didn’t ask to be here.”

“I know,” Uma said. “I don’t know why he did it, but he won’t ever let you get hurt. If that means pushing you away...”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

Uma shrugged and took another bite. She thought while she chewed, her brows knitting together.

“I don’t know what I feel when I’m with him,” I admitted.

I didn’t know why I was telling Uma all of this. Maybe it was because she was the only one I could talk to. Maybe it was because she knew Braxton.

Maybe it was because I felt like I could trust her. She was so different.

In this world of magic, everyone was.

“Tell me,” Uma said.

I shook my head. “I feel like I’m drawn to him. Like he’s a magnet, and I’m... metal?” I giggled, feeling silly for how it came out. “I feel like no matter what my mind says, I can’t stay away from him, and when we’re together...” I swallowed and glanced at Uma, not knowing how to say this without giving away what we’d done. “My magic gets weird.”

“Weird how?” Uma asked. She’d lowered her bowl, her food forgotten.

“I don’t know... it gets bigger. More. And my rabbit responds to his lion. Like they’ve known each other for a long time or something.”

Uma’s face had a strange expression on it.

“What do you know of fated mates?” Uma asked.

“Not a lot. Braxton mentioned something about it to me. This can’t be that, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s the alpha,” I said. “He’s big and powerful, and he has this whole world to command, and I’m just... me. This little rabbit who didn’t know about this life until recently, who had to be bought because of how different I am. I’m not *that*.”

Even if a fated mate was something I would have loved to have been to Braxton, a powerful alpha like him deserved a powerful mate.

Uma shook her head, but she didn’t counter my statement.

“I’m having dreams,” I said. “About Braxton. About us *being* together.” When I glanced at Uma, she didn’t look like she was going to laugh at me. She looked serious. “And then it changes.”

“Into what?”

“I don’t know. Darkness. A war or something.”

Uma frowned, concerned. “How often have you had this dream?”

“Often,” I said. “Maybe four times already. Five? Something like that.”

“When did they start?”

“A while ago,” I said, not mentioning that it had been since Braxton and I had been together in the forest a while ago. “I don’t know what it means.”

“You have unique powers that will unlock as you learn about yourself and your rabbit,” Uma said. “Dreams and

visions might be a part of that.”

“It wasn’t a vision,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“It can’t be, with all that darkness. That isn’t even real.”

Uma pursed her lips before she stuffed the food into her mouth.

“Is it?” I asked, suddenly scared. “Uma, is it real?”

“There’s a lot of darkness out there,” Uma said. “More than you should ever have to know about, but you’re tangled up with Braxton, so you might come closer to it than you mean to.”

“Why?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“Yeah, you know the demons I was talking about? They’re not just a saying, like skeletons in a closet. I was serious. Braxton has demons haunting him, and in your dreams, if they’re catching up...”

“It’s not real,” I said, but my body had run cold with fear.

“Let’s hope it isn’t,” Uma said, but her face was serious, and the atmosphere had changed, becoming even more chilly.

Not for the first time, I’d hoped that I was stuck in some kind of dream with all of this. Sometimes, like when I’d been with Braxton, it was a dream I’d hoped I would never wake up from, but most of the time, I was just waiting to wake up.

“Tell me when you have it again, okay?” Uma said.

I nodded. “I will.”

“And reach out to Braxton if he won’t reach out to you. He’s not as untouchable as you think.”

I wasn’t sure she was right, but maybe I would do that. I wanted to talk to him again. I wanted to know what was going on, what he wanted with me, and why I was still here if he wasn’t coming to see me anymore.

Uma was wrong about us being fated mates, though. It just couldn’t be. Everything else, I was sure she was right about,

and when I thought about the darkness again, a cold finger dragged its way down my spine before a feeling of dread settled in my stomach.

BRAXTON

I woke up in the middle of the night. I lay in bed, blinking into the darkness.

Something had woken me up. What was it?

I strained my ears to listen for a sound.

Nothing.

When I sat up in bed, I became aware of magic. It filled the room, hanging against the ceiling like smoke. It wasn't the kind of magic I usually had around the house. The magic in the cabin changed depending on who came to stay for a while. Dagger was always here, and Cal was here most of the time, although I hadn't heard from him for a couple of weeks now.

The asshole was still pouting like a child since the auction.

I tried to figure out if it was Uma's magic I was feeling. The fae didn't usually stay for a long time, but she'd been around longer since Kinley had come to stay with us. The two of them seemed to hit it off, and I was glad Kinley had someone to talk to.

The magic had nothing to do with the fae, either.

I got out of bed and walked to the window. Outside, everything was pitch black. It was a new moon, and in the darkness, all kinds of creatures could hide away.

I hated the new moon. All the others seemed to prefer it because the full moon brought the shifters who couldn't

control themselves too well out to play, but I could deal with those.

The darkness brought foreboding, it brought the echo of my mother's screams.

Movement outside caught my attention. A shadow slipped from the house toward the trees.

Fuck.

I ran through the house, moving quickly without making a sound. Kinley's door was shut when I passed it. Good. She had to stay out of the way if shit was about to hit the fan.

The front door was open, and the icy night air made goosebumps race down my arms and my back. I always slept naked—it was more comfortable and easier to shift on a dime if I had to wake up and fight for some reason.

When I stepped outside, the magic was thick and cloying. It felt like tar, and it was heavy to breathe in. The shadow stood not too far off. My muscles were tense, my body vibrating with magic, ready to shift, ready to fight.

When it looked at me, its eyes glowed a deep blue.

“Alpha.”

It was Dagger. His voice was so low, and he spoke so softly, a human wouldn't have heard him speak at all.

I relaxed, the dread slowly uncoiling in my stomach, and the tension bled out of my muscles.

I crossed the driveway to reach him, and we stood on the edge of the property. He was naked, ready to shift and fight, too.

“What is it?” I asked. My voice was just as low as his had been, my words barely more than a breath.

“I don't know. There's something here.”

“Magic,” I said.

Dagger nodded wordlessly, and we stood together, drinking in the night. We tasted the magic, swirling it around

like fine wine, trying to ascertain the flavors that told us where it would be coming from.

“Something’s wrong,” Dagger said. “It shouldn’t be like this. Not here, inside the perimeter.”

Uma had put up a magical fence for me when I’d first become alpha, and Dagger had become my beta. Her magic should have acted like a trip wire, waking us all when someone trespassed. When Kinley had come to join us, I’d asked her to add another spell to keep Kinley in.

None of that was this. None of what I’d prepared for was here tonight, but something *was* here.

Braxton?

I looked toward Kinley’s window and frowned. I could have sworn I’d heard her voice.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“What?”

I glanced around. We were alone out here. The night was quiet—so quiet that the silence had a sound of its own, and it was deafening. The only thing interrupting the silence was Dagger’s breathing, so quiet it could hardly be heard at all. If something really was out there, I would have heard it. A twig snapping, leaves crunching, *something*.

Braxton.

There it was again. I glanced toward her window, but the cabin was drenched in utter darkness. With the pure lack of light from the moon, and everything else in the mountains wild and without human intervention, I could only make out the outline of the cabin.

I frowned. I was a lion shifter, which meant my eyesight was keener than that of a human, and night vision should have helped me, letting me see more, even if there was nothing to see.

Out here, the darkness was complete, and I could barely see Dagger, who stood only two feet away from me.

“There it is again,” I said softly.

“There’s nothing out there,” Dagger said. “I can’t hear anything. What is it?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

She wasn’t talking to me. I was starting to feel like I was losing my mind. Thinking about her all the time was one thing, but hearing her now was another.

I ran my fingers through my beard, and Dagger swiveled his head at the light scraping sound before he looked away again. He was as hyper-aware of everything around us as I was.

Did I hear her voice because of what was happening between us? I’d touched her, kissed her, *felt* her. I’d wanted to fuck her, but I hadn’t let it go that far. I couldn’t afford to. The bond, the magic Uma had warned me about, had to wait until I knew if that was what I wanted from her. And if that was what she wanted from me.

But what if our time in the forest counted as sex? She did have an orgasm, and thinking about that made my cock grow with desire. With rabbit shifters being such an enigma, there really was no definitive answer about what would awaken Kinley’s magic.

We weren’t mates, though. The feeling would be undeniable, and that hadn’t happened. At least not yet.

Why could I hear her in my mind, then? The night was strange, the magic thick, almost lulling me into a trance of some kind, and I—

Braxton!

I shook my head again, like I could shake off what I was hearing. The voice was inside my head, echoing. Why could I hear her? What was going on? She had anguish in her voice.

The darkness grew thicker. My vision went from being limited to not being able to see anything at all.

Dagger moved next to me, but I couldn’t even see him.

“Braxton?!”

This time, Kinley’s voice was loud and clear, and the next moment, something dark and ugly tackled me to the ground. It was big and black and monstrous, with red eyes and long fangs dripping with menace.

I shifted before I hit the ground.

The monster was on me, snarling, snapping its jaws at me, and I slapped a large, clawed paw to its head. It emanated a scream that made my blood curdle, but fell back.

Blood poured from the slashes my nails had created on its cheek.

Blood.

If it was alive, it could be killed. If it existed in this world, I could take it out of it.

I could suddenly see again. I roared loudly and attacked, throwing myself onto the monster. It was humanoid, but something about it was off. As if it didn’t know exactly what it wanted to be.

I didn’t care. My large lion body writhed on top of the monster and scratched and clawed, biting where I could. I tasted blood, and it was tinged with darkness.

Dark magic.

The monster fought back, biting me, and I growled and snarled as we fought.

I was vaguely aware of Dagger. He had shifted into the bear that he was and fought with the same vigor as me. He had his hands full with another monster, just like the one I was fighting. He was on top, his thick bear body shaking as he mauled the creature’s face.

The monster I was fighting tried to attack while I was distracted, and I gave it my full focus. For a second, it regained control, getting on top of me. I heard a scream that sounded too much like Kinley’s, and my lion froze.

She was here somewhere, buried in the darkness, and she needed help.

My protectiveness came out, and I attacked with renewed vigor. I bit into the monster's arm, whipping it around so that it slammed into the ground, and it let out a grunt that was much closer to human than the screeches and snarls it had been letting out until now. I dove onto the beast, ignoring the claws that dug into my shoulders and tore through my skin, and my teeth found its neck.

When my teeth sank into the blackness, I tasted blood again, hot on my tongue. The beast was filled with darkness, but under all that magic, the life force slowly drained away.

When the beast's body stopped twisting and jerking underneath me, I let go of it and ran.

Dagger was on to the next dark creature. The first was nothing but a bloody, mauled mess. He didn't need my help, and I could focus on Kinley.

When I got to her room, still in my lion form, her window was broken. Blood on the glass made me recoil. It wasn't a monster's blood—it was hers. Fear clutched at my throat, and I jumped through the broken window and into her room.

I watched the chaos as it unfolded in front of me. The furniture in the room was overturned, and a sable rabbit ran back and forth between the furniture. Behind it, the monster followed. It was a lot bigger than she was and not nearly as agile. I watched as Kinley bounced ahead before she backtracked. She got between the monster's legs before the creature knew what was happening and shifted into human form. She had a shard of glass in her hand—I wasn't sure how she'd gotten it so fast—and she jammed it into the monster's back before she shifted into a rabbit and ran again.

The monster couldn't keep up. It tried to get her, but she kept bouncing back and forth, getting closer, shifting, slicing, cutting, and jamming glass into the monster, before she got away again.

I stared at her in awe, frozen in the moment as I watched her pure survival skills take over, this rabbit doing more damage to a creature ten times her size than I'd seen any of my shifters do in fights.

The creature was getting angrier and angrier—I could feel the magic building.

It stood very still, watching Kinley as she moved, and when she ran past, its arm shot out and grabbed her by the ears in mid-air, anticipating where she was going to be.

Her rabbit screeched and squealed, large feet kicking, and she shifted into human form. It only put her in a worse position—the monster had her by the hair now.

I roared.

Mine.

No one touched my fucking female!

I jumped on the creature before it knew what hit him, rode the body of darkness to the ground, and bit into the neck that was exposed. I ripped its throat out, tasting the dark magic, tasting the life force as it slowly slipped away.

Kinley scrambled away with a scream, scrabbling backward until her back hit the wall. Blood dripped from her hands where the glass must have cut her, and from her arms and one leg.

I shifted into human form.

“It’s okay, Kinley,” I said. “He’s dead.”

Kinley’s eyes were wide, filled with fear, and her breathing came too fast.

“Breathe,” I ordered, looking her in the eyes. I cupped her cheeks, so that she had nothing else to focus on. “Just breathe.”

I breathed slowly in and out, letting her copy me, letting her get herself back under control.

Slowly, her breathing evened out, and she calmed down enough to know that the danger was over.

Her lip trembled, and tears streamed over her cheeks.

“I knew they were coming,” she cried. “I knew they were coming.”

The door to her bedroom opened, and Uma stood there, pale, her eyes wide.

“I couldn’t wake up,” she said.

“Uma,” Dagger said, racing in behind her in his human form. He was bloodied and bruised, just like we all were.

“You got ‘em all?” I asked Dagger.

Dagger nodded. “Yeah, I think it’s over. The magic is fading.”

“I’m so sorry,” Uma said, and her voice trembled. “Something kept me under, and I just couldn’t wake up, no matter what I did. Not until now. Oh shit, I thought it was too late.” She sank to her knees at Kinley’s door and looked around.

“What were those things?” Dagger asked.

Uma frowned, pulling herself together, and walked to the dark creature that lay in the middle of the room, close to the bed.

She looked it over.

“It reeks of dark magic.”

“I tasted it, too,” I confirmed.

“Yeah, me too,” Dagger said, nodding. “Tastes like shit.”

I nodded.

“It’s a vampire,” Uma said.

“What?!” Kinley cried out.

“But not *just* a vampire. It looks like a hybrid or something. A vampire demon combo. A monster.” She sighed and straightened. “This interbreeding causes more trouble than it does good.”

“Who would want to fuck one of those?” Dagger asked with a scrunched nose. He glanced at Kinley. “I mean... sorry.”

Kinley only shook her head.

“I’ll be back,” Uma said. “I’m going to check the perimeter.”

“I’ll come with you,” Dagger said. He looked at me. “You just make sure everything is okay here.”

I nodded, and when they were gone, I turned my attention back to Kinley.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said.

She studied her hands. When I turned her palms to me, they were already healed. The blood was from when she’d been bleeding, but her magic as a shifter was doing what it was supposed to do.

“Let’s get you cleaned and dressed,” I said. “It was a rough night.”

I helped her up and led her to the bathroom. She moved with difficulty, her body jerking. She was still not completely fine, but she would get there. Her magic would see to it.

“I knew they were coming,” she said again. Her voice was soft.

“How?” I asked.

“I dreamed about it.”

I studied her face, but she didn’t look at me. I walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower so we could get clean.

KINLEY

Braxton was gentle with me. He led me to the bathroom, leaving all the chaos behind in the bedroom as if it didn't matter, it didn't exist. He turned on the hot water and checked the temperature, adjusting the faucets so that the water wouldn't burn me before he stepped under the spray with me.

He held me against him as the water cascaded over our bodies. He caressed my body, stroking his fingertips over my skin. He started at my shoulders, working out the knots of tension, and slowly worked his way down my back.

I leaned against his broad chest, letting him be the pillar of support for me, letting him stand strong so that I could fall apart.

I hadn't known what had happened when that demon-creature had broken my glass and climbed through my window. I'd had the same dream again, with the darkness outside, the creatures waiting, me calling out to Braxton, and he couldn't hear me.

And then I'd been awake, standing at the window, and it had all been real.

The creature had slammed its charred body against the glass, breaking it, and rushing into my room.

The only thing that had saved me was shifting. It had happened without me even thinking about it.

I'd wanted to get away from the evil creature with its red eyes and long teeth, but the door had been shut, and by the time I'd reached it, the monster had grabbed my hair from behind.

After that, my rabbit had taken over. My magic had pushed me back so that my human was only along for the ride, and I'd done everything I needed to survive.

I flashed on shards of glass, the pain of them slicing into my palms, the cries of the beast when I jammed them into his body. I felt the pulse of magic with every shift rock through my body again, draining me.

I felt the way that dark hand shot out and grabbed my ears, a sharp pain shooting into my brain.

A shudder ran through me, and I was so cold, even though the water that surrounded us was hot. Braxton closed his arms tighter around me, and his arms were a barrier. With him, right now, I knew I was safe. Nothing would get to me as long as he held onto me.

Braxton's naked body was slick and muscular against me, and when he moved, I felt his erection. He didn't make this about sex. He was here for me, to look after me, protect me, help me.

He wasn't here to claim me in any way, and it meant everything.

When I finally stopped shivering, Braxton took a sponge from the shower caddy and lathered it with soap. Slowly, carefully, he washed me. He washed off all the blood, the aftermath of the attack. He shampooed my hair and rinsed it again. He cupped my face and looked into my eyes, and planted kisses on my temple and my forehead.

Adoration poured from him, so different from the man he'd been since I'd arrived—closed off and pained.

When we were both clean and soap-free, he turned off the water and wrapped a thick, warm towel around me before he wrapped one around his hips, too.

He took my hand and led me out of the bathroom again, away from the carnage in my room. I started trembling again when I saw the blood, the upturned furniture, the beast.

“Jane will bring you clothes,” he said. “Come to my room.”

I nodded and followed him to his room. He had a hairbrush and dryer there, and I went through the motions of combing and drying my hair. I’d finally stopped trembling.

By the time my hair was dry, Jane had brought me something to wear, and I was dressed in leggings and my oversized hoodie that I loved to wear.

Another servant came in with a tray. Sweet tea and cucumber sandwiches.

“I don’t think I can eat,” I said, tugging my sleeves over my hands.

“Drink the tea, at least,” Braxton said. “The sugar will be good for the shock.”

I nodded and took the cup from him when he handed it to me.

We sat together on the bed, sipping tea. Braxton bit into a sandwich, chewing. He’d pulled on tracksuit pants and a t-shirt, but his muscles bulged through it, and he was a sight to behold.

“I’m sorry,” Braxton said before he took another bite.

I frowned. “For what?”

“The attack.”

“It can’t be your fault,” I said. I looked down at the cup I had my fingers wrapped around. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I kept having the same dream. I just didn’t know it would become real.”

“Have you had dreams like that before?” Braxton asked. “Dreams that became real.”

I tugged at my earlobe. “This is the first time.”

“Then you couldn’t have known. It has to be a part of your magic.”

How could it be a part of my magic if I’d never had it before? I wasn’t that special. I was just a shifter, unsure of myself and completely inexperienced in the shifter world. I had all these tools I didn’t know how to use. I was too much of a freak with my shifter magic to fit into the human world, and too human to fit into the shifter world.

“They were here because of me,” Braxton said grimly, not making eye contact.

“Why?”

Braxton hesitated for a long time. “When I was a child, my dad screwed up. He did some shady deals with demons, trying to gain more power, more riches... nothing was ever enough for him. Whenever he got something, he needed more. He couldn’t be happy with what he had.”

I was silent, listening to Braxton. His voice was deep and low, and I could almost taste the pain that came with every word.

“At some point, he made the wrong deal with the wrong demon.” Braxton laughed bitterly. “Not that there are right demons, I guess. They’re always bad news—they belong in the Underworld, and asking them to come up to earth is asking for trouble. I guess that trouble found my dad. And the rest of us.”

“What happened?” I asked softly.

“They killed him,” Braxton said simply.

My stomach twisted, and my heart went out to Braxton. He’d said that so simply, as if it hadn’t hurt at all.

“That must have been tough,” I said.

“Finding out that my dad had finally gotten himself into a corner? Yeah, I guess it was tough. Everyone had always said it was coming. I wasn’t old enough to have known that for myself, but I’d heard what the others had to say. They’d always said, ‘one of these days, it’s going to catch up with

him,' and they were right. He wanted power, and in exchange for the power, he did the demon's bidding."

"I'm so sorry you lost him," I said softly.

"Oh, that wasn't the part that was so bad," Braxton said, his face changing to a scowl. "I mean, it was pretty bad. What was worse was the fact that punishment by death isn't punishment at all, is it? The person who fucked up doesn't know what's going on anymore. No, killing him wasn't enough. They had to go after the rest of my family, too." Braxton closed his eyes, reliving it all. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut. "I can still hear my mom's screams before I fall asleep at night."

"Oh, Braxton," I whispered.

He opened his eyes, and they were the liquid gold of his lion, filled with pain-fueled rage.

"They didn't stop. They killed them all. My brothers and sisters. My aunt. My cousins. I had a whole family, and just like that... I had nothing." He looked at his half-eaten sandwich and put it back on the tray with disgust, his appetite gone.

"They would have taken me out, too, if it hadn't been for Hauser."

"The former alpha?" I asked.

I'd heard Uma use the name a few times before.

Braxton nodded. "I don't know what he was doing there, why he knew it was happening and why he stepped in. I never asked him, and he never volunteered to tell me, but he came in there with his alpha power, and he stopped it all. A handful of his pack ripped up the demon and vampire army they'd brought along. Hauser had told the demon to back the fuck off, but it hadn't been enough. It had been a knock to its ego."

I didn't know anything about demons. Saying they had egos made it seem so human when the creatures I'd seen tonight hadn't had a shred of humanity in them at all.

“The demon promised that he would be back for me. He would finish what he started, he wouldn’t rest until every last one of my dad’s bloodline, his family, was taken out.” He looked at me, and his face had become so incredibly sad, it broke my heart. “That’s what that attack was tonight. They were agents, sent here by the demon himself to wreak havoc.”

“Were they going to kill you?”

“Oh, no,” Braxton said, and laughed bitterly. “That would be too easy, right? Niam won’t be merciful.”

“Niam?” I asked.

“That’s his name, the demon who’s after me. He’s torturing me. He wants to get close to me. He wants to hurt everything and everyone I care about before he finishes the deed.”

“That’s so... *evil*,” I said.

“Yeah, well, he’s a demon. He can’t be anything else.” Braxton took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I told you, death isn’t a punishment. By then, the recipient doesn’t know anything anymore. He’s going to torture me until he’s had his fun before he finally ends it all.”

Braxton’s mouth twisted in bitterness, and he suddenly stood, climbing to his feet. “I can’t let him hurt more people. He’s already gotten to a few of my own over the years. He’d left me alone until I was alpha, and then he started striking again. I can’t protect them all. I try, but I don’t always know where they are and what they’re doing, and if anyone gets hurt on my watch, because of me...” He shook his head. “Fuck.”

I didn’t know what to say. Braxton had been through so much, and his nightmare was never-ending. I thought about what Uma had told me.

He’s haunted by his demons. Literally.

Now I understood what she meant.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” Braxton said tightly. “None of it is okay.”

“Nothing happened tonight, not really. We’re all safe. No one got hurt.”

“It’s just a matter of time,” Braxton said.

“Who else knows?” I asked.

“Dagger and Uma,” Braxton said. “And Cal,” he added darkly.

I was yet to meet the elusive Cal, but from what Uma had dropped about him here and there, I wasn’t in a hurry.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“If the pack finds out that I can’t look after them, that they’re in danger *because* of me, they’ll get rid of me. Or they’ll leave. I can’t have that. I owe it to Hauser to carry on his legacy. After everything he did for me... if I lose them all, or if they decide to leave me...” His voice trailed off.

“I won’t leave you,” I said softly.

Braxton’s eyes locked on mine, and I couldn’t read his expression. His face was fierce, but his eyes were pained.

“No, you won’t,” he said.

I didn’t know if that was a threat, or if it reassured him. Had he said that because he cared for me and wanted me to stay, or because he owned me, and I couldn’t leave?

After opening up and being vulnerable, he shut down again. He was the distant, cold, and unreachable alpha who’d purchased me, and I had no idea who I was and what I meant to him.

I guess I could just add that to the pile of things I didn’t know about Braxton, about myself, and about my existence.

BRAXTON

I stood at the bar, drinking bourbon, because fuck this shit. I'd tried to drink less over the past couple of weeks because alcohol was a crutch. That was what Uma had told me at some point.

Right now, I didn't care that it was a crutch. I damn well needed a crutch for what had happened.

The house had been repaired, as if no attack at even taken place. That was the upside of having money and a shit ton of people always at my beck and call.

I'd put Kinley up in a guest room for a night, and they'd fixed her window, replaced her carpets and whatever had broken, so that the room was as if nothing had happened.

By the time she was back in her room, everything was perfect again, and we could forget the whole thing.

Except, I *couldn't* forget the whole thing. This was going to happen again and again and again until I could figure out a way to stop it all. I *couldn't* figure out a way to stop it all because it was a promise that had been made, and since demons lived for an eternity, the promise didn't have a fucking expiration date.

"I thought I'd find you in here," Dagger said, coming in.

"Have a drink with me," I suggested gruffly.

Dagger nodded, and I grabbed the bottle, pouring him a glass of bourbon, too. He picked it up and took a sip, savoring the taste while he studied the amber liquid.

“I talked to Uma,” Dagger said.

I glanced at him.

“She feels like shit about the attack.”

“Why?”

Dagger shrugged. “Because she couldn’t help. Because they got through her barrier.”

I shook my head. “She was under attack, too. She said they got in through the help of a dark fae, didn’t she?”

Dagger dipped his head. When the teams had been here to fix everything up, Uma had brought in another one of her fae friends she knew from Vegas—Circe, who used to live here—and they’d gone through everything with a fine-tooth comb. They’d discussed magic and spells and all kinds of shit I knew nothing about and concluded that the only way they’d gotten in was because the spell had been countered by one of their own. Even the fae were in danger if half of them were willing to turn to dark magic. It had become a bigger problem over the past while, and it wasn’t going to stop anytime soon, I was pretty damn sure. Fuck everyone who was willing to turn to darkness to get what they wanted rather than to earn it fair and square.

“She has nothing to feel bad about,” I said and threw back the rest of my drink before I poured more into my glass.

“You don’t have anything to feel like shit about, either, you know,” Dagger said, giving me a pointed look.

I snorted. “I’m the one person who *should* feel like shit about what happened. If it wasn’t for me, none of this would ever have happened.”

Dagger shook his head. “I know this is a thing, Brax, but you can’t beat yourself up for your father’s mistakes forever.”

“That piece of shit was never my dad,” I growled. “A real dad doesn’t do that to his family. Hauser was my father.”

Dagger nodded, and we lifted our glasses and clinked them together in silent tribute to the former alpha.

I wished he was still here so that I could ask him for advice. I needed to talk to him about how to handle everything, how to be a good alpha in the face of the adversity I'd brought to the pack.

How to deal with Kinley.

Then again, if he'd still been here, none of this would have happened. It was why I'd never been able to talk to him about it before. There hadn't been anything to talk about until he'd died, and I'd become alpha.

Thank fuck he'd died of old age, and not because of all this bullshit. If my darkness and the promise of my torture and death had taken out Hauser, too, I would never have forgiven myself.

The front door opened, and Dagger and I froze. In the aftermath of the attack, we were still in fight mode.

"I thought I smelled a party," Cal said, walking into the room.

Dagger and I both relaxed, and I groaned. Dagger rolled his eyes.

"Where the fuck have you been?" I asked.

Cal shrugged. "What do you care?" He sat down on the barstool and ran his hand through his long hair. It was slick and oily, like he hadn't showered in days, and the stench of old alcohol clung to him.

"You smell like shit," I said. He'd been out on a bender. A long one.

"Yeah, well, deal with it," Cal said. "I'll shower when I'm ready. Pour me a drink, why don't you? Welcome a brother home."

I clenched my jaw, but I poured him a drink. I wasn't in the mood for his shit, but Cal was the kind of guy who only got worse if he knew that he was a pain. He went out of his way to make everyone's life miserable, and that included mine. He would pick a fight with me just because he knew it wasn't what I wanted.

“So, magic around this place is all fucked up,” Cal said, rocking back on my barstool, sipping his drink. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said flatly.

“An attack, huh?” Cal asked and laughed.

He knew what happened around here sometimes, and he couldn't get enough of the fact that I had a weakness. It was his only retribution since I'd been more powerful than him and I'd become alpha when Hauser had died.

“That's gotta sting. The all-powerful alpha can't even keep the riffraff out of his own backyard.” Cal sneered.

“Watch your mouth,” I warned. “You have no idea what's been going on here while you've been out on your bender, emptying stock in half the town bars and probably fucking their women, too.”

Cal shrugged. “I reserve the right as the former alpha's son.”

“You don't deserve shit,” I scowled.

Dagger glanced at me. I was biting back my temper. I was already on edge after the attack, and Cal was just the right person to tip me over into rage again.

Cal didn't let my words get to him at all. He grinned and drank his drink as if he didn't have a care in the world. That was what pissed me off about him—he *didn't* have a care in the world. He wasn't alpha, but he had a good place to live. He was a dick, but no one was out to kill him, and he lived happily ever after, completely satisfied to stew in his own filth and amount to nothing.

“You won't believe who I came across,” Cal said, still rocking on his chair.

“We don't really care who you came across,” Dagger said.

“You know Lennox? The bear who lives by the creek? Yeah, he showed his face in Owen's Pub when I was there, looking for some honey,” Cal continued, as if we'd both begged him to tell us more.

Dagger glanced at me when Cal talked about Lennox.

“The old bear hasn’t changed one bit. He’s still as fucked in the head as he used to be. Hangs around with this panther, who calls himself Rex. Like a fucking lapdog.” Cal laughed at his joke and took another sip. “Get this, they were talking about their close call one night with a rabbit shifter.”

Dagger and I both stilled and stared at him.

“I thought that would get your attention.” Cal grinned slyly, enjoying the fact that our attention was fully on him now. “So, I know all about you rubbing shoulders and claiming possession of a rabbit shifter, so naturally, I’m interested,” Cal continued. “What with Inigo biting it, succumbing to his prey. Literally.” He snorted with laughter.

“What did they say?” I asked. “About the rabbit.”

“Oh, they were just talking about how they were hunting that night, looking for a way to get off. You know how panthers can get when they’re wired—looking for something to fuck, easy prey. God, panthers are so pathetic.”

I frowned. “What did they do to her?”

“Well, nothing,” Cal said with a shrug. “I mean, Inigo is gone, right? So clearly, their plans didn’t work out.”

“What were they *planning* to do to her?” I asked.

My ears started ringing. I already knew the answer to that question.

“Come on, asshole, you know how it goes. When a guy sees some pussy he wants badly enough, he takes it. Inigo and Rex were always out there, looking for some tail to make their own, and a rabbit shifter is rumored to give you extra power.”

Fuck. They were going to take her against her will.

“I imagine they wanted to do to her what you’ve probably already done,” Cal said smugly.

I saw red. I moved around the bar and kicked the bottom of Cal’s stool before I knew what I was doing. Cal tumbled backward with a yelp—I *hated* it when he rocked on my

chairs, breaking my shit, and he wouldn't stop. Like a stupid teenager.

Cal hit the floor, his alcohol spilling out of his glass and splashing in his face, and he gasped for air.

Before he could move, I was on top of him. I grabbed him by the collar and jerked him up so my face and his were only inches apart.

“Let me get this very clear. No one in my town forces themselves on a woman.”

“Come on, man, it's not like it's a big deal. They just need a little encouragement sometimes. You know what they can be l—”

Before he could say anything else, I clocked him in the face.

“What the fuck, man?” Cal sputtered.

Blood poured out of his nose. His magic rose to meet mine, his anger taking over after his shock that I'd pushed him over.

For a moment, the room was drenched in the magic of the bear and the magic of the lion.

“Back down, Cal,” I ordered. “You don't want this to be a fight to the death.”

“You can't keep acting like you control everything; you're not even family.”

The blood that poured out of his nose bubbled around his lips when he talked.

“I'm alpha, and that means I *can* control everything. As for family—what the fuck would you know about it? All you care about is yourself.”

“Fuck you,” Cal spat at me.

“On second thought,” I growled, “let's fight it out, if that's what you want so badly. Getting rid of you and your fucked up outlook on life once and for all sounds like just what I need right now.”

“Braxton,” Dagger said from the side.

I hesitated, ready to take Cal’s head off, but Dagger was right.

I let my foster brother go, but not before I slammed him into the ground. Cal whined and curled onto his side, pushing his hands against his nose. I heard him click the broken bone back into place so it would heal straight.

“Fuck you, man,” he wailed.

I stormed out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Dagger called after me.

I didn’t answer him. I was fueled by my rage. I’d just heard what I’d expected to be true all along, and it was time to enforce the law in my town. I’d been so serious about making sure I knew *where* everyone was, that they didn’t get in trouble because of the bullshit that followed me. I’d grown lax when it came to the other rules. It was time to remind my people what was right and wrong around here.

I stripped off my clothes and shifted, running into the forest. I made my way down the mountain. I was too fucking angry to take the car—that was how people wrote themselves off—and I had all this magic I needed to do something with.

When I reached the edge of town, I headed toward Owen’s Pub. I knew they would be there—it was Lennox’s watering hole.

I could hear them talking and laughing and drinking in the shifter bar when I approached. There were no humans around these parts of town. I wasn’t in danger of being seen. Even if I was, right now, I didn’t give a shit. I had business to take care of.

When my lion walked into the bar, filled with shifters, the conversation stopped, and someone shut the music off.

I shifted into human form. My skin still trembled with magic and fury, and when I made eye contact with every shifter around me, they turned their eyes down in respect and deference to my authority.

I walked to Lennox where he sat at the bar with his buddy.

“Alpha,” Lennox said, bowing his head. “What can I do for you today?”

“I hear you’ve been talking about your close call with a rabbit shifter,” I said, my voice so deep, it was a growl.

“What?” Lennox asked. “I thought you already knew about Inigo.”

“I knew about Inigo,” I said. “I didn’t know you were bragging about taking what you wanted without getting consent.”

“Excuse me?” Lennox asked. He frowned as if confused, but his eyes were large with fear, rolling around to Rex.

“We were just having some fun, Alpha,” Rex spoke up. “You ever come across a dame you just wanted?”

I saw red. It wasn’t just about the fact that they were going to take a woman against her will. This was *Kinley* they were talking about. She was *mine*.

“We don’t disrespect and dominate females in my town,” I growled. “It looks like some of you have forgotten how to be decent. We’re not fucking *animals*.”

Rex spoke up. “Technically, we are.”

I moved so fast, he didn’t see me coming. I grabbed him, slammed him against the bar, and ripped his throat out. His expression of shock stayed frozen on his face when his lifeless body fell to the ground, gushing blood onto the floor.

“Fuck,” Lennox said and jumped.

For a moment, we were stuck in a dance. He tried to decide if he was going to shift and fight or run for his life. I felt his magic, trying to decide, and saw the thought process. Either he was going to die in a fight against the alpha, or he was going to be hunted forever. The odds were pretty bad for him.

He chose the latter.

For a bear shifter, he moved faster than he should have, and he reached the door before anyone could stop him.

I shifted and launched forward, tackling him to the ground.

“Alpha, please, let me go,” he begged.

Was that what Kinley had begged for when she’d been chased down?

I grabbed Lennox by the neck, locked my jaw, and shook. His spine broke, his throat turned into mush, and there was no way he could fight me or survive the attack.

When I finally let go of him, shaking his body like a ragdoll long after he was dead, I backed up. I shifted into human form. Blood dripped from my chin onto my chest, and the metallic aftertaste of the kill sat at the back of my throat.

I looked at my shifters again, but none of them made eye contact now. Their heads were all bowed.

The news would travel. They would know what happened when they fucked up in my town. I didn’t need to say anything.

I left the bar, my body pumped with adrenaline, my muscles bulging, and the taste of blood still in my mouth.

It was done.

KINLEY

I lay on my bed reading one of the first-edition books Braxton had on my bookshelves. I was engrossed in the story—a love story about a hero and heroine who were meant to be together from the start, and it was just a matter of time before they figured it out and ended up together.

I loved stories with happy endings. I loved stories where both characters finally found themselves and found each other, and there was nothing ugly in the world that could stop them from being what they were meant to be.

The real world wasn't like that. There was so much darkness and uncertainty and pain.

Even here, things weren't as I'd thought they would be. It wasn't as *bad* as I'd thought it would be, having said that.

I'd thought being owned by someone would have been horrible, stuck in a cage without any choices, without a say over what would happen to me.

That wasn't the case. I was treated as a guest, and not as a possession. Not really. Sometimes, I still wasn't sure what was going on with Braxton or where we stood. There were times when I thought we were in a good spot, that something was happening between us. I felt such a strong pull toward him, and I couldn't resist him.

But then there were times when it felt like he shut down on me completely, and the affection that came from him was non-existent.

Whatever the case was, this wasn't the worst home away from home. It could have been so much worse. I lived in the lap of luxury, and despite the few hiccups—attacks and monsters and nightmares that came true—I could almost say that I was happy.

Almost.

My door opened, and I looked up. Magic filled the room, and I smiled. But when my visitor stepped in, I realized it wasn't Braxton at the same time I tasted the magic and felt that it was different.

I frowned when a man with long hair and a shaggy beard walked in.

Cal.

It couldn't be anyone else.

He leaned against my wall and folded his arms over his chest, giving me a sly grin.

“So, you're the one everyone is getting all worked up about, huh?”

“Don't you knock?” I asked.

Cal raised his eyebrows. “You've got quite an attitude for someone who's a prisoner.”

“I'm not a prisoner.”

“You're not free,” Cal said and smirked.

He moved away from the wall and came toward the bed. His body language was casual, relaxed, but his light eyes were sharp, trained on me all the time, and I had a feeling that I was being stalked. Cal was a predator, and I was very aware that I was his prey.

“I'm going to have to ask you to leave,” I said. My voice was strained, magic already trembled under my skin. My rabbit was ready to run—when it came to fight-or-flight mode, I usually chose flight. It was in my genes. I was a rabbit, and rabbits could run.

Cal sat down on the mattress. I moved away from him and got off the bed, standing with my back to the closet.

“Don’t be so scared, little rabbit,” Cal said. He got up and walked around to me.

I wanted to climb over the bed and get away from him, but he moved quickly, suddenly on top of me, and I stepped back so that my back was against the wall. My breath came in jagged gasps, shallow and terrified.

I was frozen, and I could taste my heart in my throat.

Cal lifted his hand and dragged a finger down my cheek. He looked at me with hunger in his eyes, and I knew what he wanted from me.

It was what the panthers had wanted, too.

It was what they *all* seemed to want from me.

I was ready to shift, but Cal grabbed my wrist and slammed it against the wall, his body so close to mine, his breath on my face. He smelled of stale alcohol, and it made me gag.

“Don’t even think about shifting. I’m bigger than you and stronger than you. If you shift, I’ll kill you. You just play along, and no one needs to get hurt.”

“I’m not yours to control,” I said. My voice was small.

“No, you’re not. You belong to Braxton. He thinks he can do whatever he wants, but I’ll show him. He doesn’t get to be a dick and not feel the consequences.”

Cal tried to kiss me, his disgusting face right up against mine, and I twisted my face to try to get away from him. When I tried to scream, he clamped his hand over my mouth.

“Fine, if you want to do this the hard way, we can—”

Before he could finish his sentence, something yanked his large body away from me, and Braxton stood in the room, naked and covered in blood on his mouth, chest, and his hands.

Magic rolled off him something fierce, and his eyes were the color of his lion—golden, his pupils black little pinpricks. The anger in the room burned hot on my skin, but it was all directed at Cal.

Cal scrambled backward, and where he'd been menacing before, he was shitting himself now. I hadn't seen someone that scared in a long time.

“If you so much as look at her again, I'll kill you,” Braxton said calmly. It wasn't a threat, it was a promise. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

“This isn't your—”

“If you set foot in this house again, you're done.”

Cal opened his mouth to argue, but he didn't go that far. The magic in the room and Braxton's calm, quiet rage was enough to tell Cal that it was time to do what was asked of him rather than to argue.

Cal got up. He balled his fists as if he was going to fight, but his eyes said something else. He was scared.

“You'll be sorry,” he said. “You think you can fuck with me, but you have no idea who I am.”

“I know exactly who you are, and you're dead to me,” Braxton said.

Cal's face changed, rage and shock flickering over his features before he turned and marched out of the room.

Braxton turned to me.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “You got here in time.” I turned my eyes to the blood on his chest and frowned. “What happened to you?”

“I killed them,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Who?” I asked.

“The panther and the bear who hunted you to make you theirs.” His voice was hard, but his face softened. “I won't let

anyone touch you. No one is ever touching you again. Do you hear me?" He came two steps closer. "Not even me, if that's not what you want."

I swallowed and looked up into his eyes. I lifted my hand and touched him, tracing my fingers over his lips.

"I want you to touch me," I said in a whisper. "Only you."

His eyes changed, becoming darker. They turned into his human eyes and became the color of honey. He cupped my cheek and looked into my eyes, and the rage-filled magic faded. A change in the atmosphere replaced it, heat growing between us, stretching thin, filled with anticipation and need. I was very aware of how naked he was, of the fact that he had an erection now when he hadn't had one when he'd taken Cal on.

Braxton leaned forward, but he caught himself.

"Wait," he said.

He turned away from me and walked to my bathroom. I heard the shower water running, and I sank into the bed, sitting on the edge.

When Braxton came back, the blood had been rinsed off his body, and he smelled like soap and lust.

He growled softly at the back of his throat and took my hand. He pulled me up so that I was standing and cupped my cheek. His eyes locked on mine, and his magic wrapped around me.

He'd avenged me. He'd protected me. And now he was taking care of me.

I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anything. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to touch me.

I wanted him to make me his.

Braxton closed the short distance between us and pressed his lips against mine. I sighed and melted against him, leaning into his warmth and the magic that wrapped tightly around me.

He tangled his fingers in my hair, and his kisses became more urgent. Lust overwhelmed me, and I whimpered softly. His desire radiated off him, and it mirrored my own.

He kissed me harder, his tongue slipping into my mouth, tasting, probing.

His fingers found the hem of my shirt, and he slowly worked it up my body. His hand was large and rough on my skin, but his touch was gentle. While he worked my shirt up with his one hand, he slowly moved his free hand down my body. He moved his head to my neck, nibbling and kissing the skin there while he unwrapped me like a gift.

He curled his large body, leaning down, and kissed his way onto my chest, pulling off my shirt before he continued to kiss all the skin he exposed.

I whimpered as his hot mouth left a trail of fire in its wake, turning me into a puddle of need.

He kissed his way down my body, unclasping my bra and pulling it off so that I was topless, too. He kissed a line between my breasts, his hands large over my ribs. He sank to his knees in front of me and hooked his fingers into the waistband of my jeans. They were stretch jeans, and he didn't bother unzipping them before he pulled them down.

He pulled down my panties next, and I stepped out of the bunched material around my ankles. I was completely exposed and naked before him, and I shivered with anticipation. I wasn't cold. I was hot, my skin on fire, and the magic that swirled around us added to the heat in the room.

Braxton held my hips and planted kisses on my pubic mound. I shivered when he licked a line along my hipbone, up against my side, and he cupped my breasts in his hands. He kissed each nipple and gently sucked on them, and I whimpered. The feel of his mouth on my erect nipples sent a current of electricity coursing through my body, and my stomach tightened. I became wetter than wet, ready for him to take me.

I ran my fingers through his thick hair and played with it at the base of his neck, feeling the way his muscles were hard and contracted as he moved his head from my breast to the other. He kneaded and massaged my breasts, his strong fingers digging into the soft tissue, and I tilted my head back and quivered with anticipation.

Braxton moved his way up my body and nudged me backward, so I sat down on the bed. He kissed me again, crawling onto the bed with me. I sighed when he kissed me on the mouth again, and his hands explored me once more. His hand traveled down my body, and he grabbed my leg, pulling it up. I lay back, and Braxton pushed his body against mine. His hand rested on the back of my thigh while he kissed my neck, my chest, my breasts, my stomach.

Slowly, he worked his way down my body toward my hips. His mouth lowered down still, until he closed it over my sex.

I was breathless with longing at the sensation of his hot, wet mouth over my pussy, and I trembled.

Every touch was electric, sending shivers through my body. I licked my lips, my stomach twisting deliciously at every touch as I felt sensations I'd never felt before. It consumed me, and I felt I could drown in the pleasure that erupted at my core when Braxton lifted my legs and laid them over his shoulders to open my sex to his mouth.

He flicked his tongue over my clit, glancing up at me. I shivered and jerked, my body responding involuntarily at the bouts of pleasure. Braxton's eyes were a deep, rich amber and filled with lust as he looked at me.

I moaned louder. My voice rose as he licked and sucked my clit, pushing me closer to the edge.

Braxton slid his tongue into me, and I pushed one hand into his hair, gasping. With the other, I grabbed the sheets and rolled my head to the side, my breathing coming in heavier gasps. Slowly, an orgasm built inside of me as Braxton's tongue continued to work my center. The orgasm grew larger, and I cried out. I focused all my attention on the feeling of his

tongue inside of me, the incredible hunger that grew at my core. I flushed as the orgasm crept closer.

I wanted this to last forever. I wanted to escape into it and be lost to Braxton, to the pleasure that grew inside of me, to the world.

I was so close when Braxton stopped. The orgasm slipped away, and I felt like I was falling. I cried out sharply and looked up at him, breathing hard. It had been so close. Was I doing something wrong?

Braxton shifted his body, pushing up on his arms, and his rock-hard cock was thick, the tip oozing lust.

“Braxton, please,” I begged.

“Slowly, baby,” he said. “We have all the time in the world.” He growled at the back of his throat when he kissed me again. He ground his body against mine, his cock thick against my thigh. He was teasing me, drawing it out.

Time slowed down, and the world fell away around us. All I could focus on was Braxton and his touch, the intensity of the power between us. It felt as if we were locked in this moment for an eternity, suspended in time. Nothing that had happened before mattered—it was just us and what we were to each other.

Braxton continued to explore my body. His touch was electric, sending waves of pleasure through my veins. The sensation was intoxicating.

When he positioned himself between my legs, I trembled in anticipation. His cock pressed up against my entrance. A shiver ran over my body.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “I want this.” I wanted it more than anything I’d ever wanted before. When I was with Braxton, it was *right*.

Braxton’s eyes were locked on mine. He pushed me further and further, his cock sliding into me, and my insides shifted. For a moment, fear clenched my muscles. Braxton moved slowly, never breaking eye contact, and it was reassuring. I

relaxed, focusing on not tensing up, and my body opened to him.

When he slid into me, my breath caught in my throat.

The sensation was *incredible*. Slowly, Braxton slid in deeper and deeper, and I was filled with a combination of pleasure and pain. I cried out and squeezed my eyes shut, letting the feeling take over. My body trembled as Braxton moved inside me.

Braxton grabbed my thigh and pushed his cock all the way in until he reached the end of me. He held still for a moment, neither of us moving, and I panted and trembled around him. I was too overwhelmed to think about anything other than the feeling of how full I was, how he stretched me and my body accommodated him.

Slowly, Braxton pulled out, and my breath hitched when he slid back into me.

His body was pressed up against mine, and he let go of my leg, planting his elbows on either side of my head. He held me close to him and rocked his hips against me, fucking me.

Braxton pushed his cock deeper into me with every thrust. The first few were still painful, but the pleasure drowned out the pain as he rocked harder and harder. He groaned, and the sound vibrated through my body as he pulled out and pushed back in. He pounded into me now, pushing my body into the bed as he fucked me.

The orgasm that had slipped away earlier came back with renewed vigor, and this time, I knew I was going to orgasm.

Braxton kept fucking me, and magic spilled out of him. My body was on fire, and I was getting more and more aroused by his movements. I bucked my hips, meeting his thrusts, and we cried out in pleasure, our breaths mingling and the sounds of our sex filling the room.

When I toppled over the edge, pleasure finally erupted at my core. I cried out, and the feeling of pure pleasure washed over me. I shivered as my muscles contracted, my body convulsing involuntarily. My breathing was ragged until the

peak of my orgasm took my breath away. I grabbed onto Braxton's shoulders, my nails digging into his skin, and he growled.

After the pleasure subsided, I opened my eyes. Braxton's eyes were on mine, and he smiled at me. He lowered his lips to mine and kissed me, slowly penetrating and withdrawing. I trembled and shivered as Braxton drew out the sensation, stretching out the pleasure.

When Braxton had let me recover for a while, he moved his hips faster and faster again. We didn't change positions—he kept me right there, tucked underneath him. With each thrust, he pushed me into the bed, his fucking becoming more erratic. He pushed into me with everything he had, his balls slapping against my ass, and his cries and my grunts filled the room. He pushed me toward a second orgasm—or maybe this was an extension of the first—and I let go, letting the sensation take over.

I knew he was close, and a moment later, his cock throbbed. Braxton groaned and pushed into me once more, burying himself in my core. His cock twitched and jerked inside me, and I felt his orgasm as his body tensed, his muscles bulging, and he dropped his head into my shoulder. He bit me, his teeth on my skin, and the burst of pain pushed me into my next orgasm.

With our collective orgasm came a wave of magic. It washed over me, so powerful that I drowned in it. His lion and my rabbit were one, pressed up against each other. My power burst out of me, pouring from my very core, filling up the room. Braxton's power rose to meet it, the alpha lion and the rabbit equals.

Mates.

Bound.

I wasn't sure how I knew—I just did.

“Kinley,” Braxton gasped.

“Where is all the magic coming from?” I asked.

“It's coming from you,” he said. “And me. The bond.”

It was as if we were one, our souls merging. The magic radiated from our skins, powerful and demanding. Braxton lifted his head and looked into my eyes, and I knew something extraordinary had happened between us. The intensity of the moment was overwhelming. I felt like I would spontaneously combust or drift away, but my connection to Braxton and the awe and affection in his eyes grounded me.

The intensity of our bond was palpable. Braxton stopped moving inside me, holding me close, our bodies still pretzeled together.

Slowly, our breathing returned to normal, our heart rates slowing down.

When Braxton slid out of me, I felt his absence acutely.

He lay down next to me, pulling me closer to him. He wrapped an arm around me, his large hand on my opposite shoulder. I stroked his arm with my fingers and listened to the sound of his breathing, relishing in the warmth of his body against mine.

“I don’t want you to be here as a prisoner or something I own,” Braxton said into the dimming light in the room. “You’re free to go.”

I stilled against him. *Go?*

“But Kinley,” he added. “I want you to say.”

I turned against him and kissed him. “Okay,” I said.

“Tomorrow, I’ll talk to Uma to get rid of that stupid barrier spell that keeps you in, and you can come and go as you please. I’d like you to move into my room, too.”

“Those are a lot of changes,” I said with a smile.

“Yeah,” he said. “But everything has been the same for too long around here.”

I closed my eyes and sighed contentedly. Who would have thought that I’d end up here in the home of the alpha, as happy as this? I would never have guessed that I could find a place where I truly belonged.

Braxton nuzzled my hair before dropping a kiss on it. I reveled in the warmth that radiated from him, drinking in not only his affection but the power that clung to my skin, too.

BRAXTON

Kinley and I were tangled together, and I was aware of her warmth even as we slept.

When I blinked my eyes open, it was somewhere in the middle of the night. I frowned and lifted my head, listening.

Something had woken me up.

The room should have been brighter with the moonlight falling through the light curtains, but the room was drenched in darkness.

I carefully untangled myself from Kinley. She sighed when I moved her, but stayed sleeping. I slid out of bed and padded across the room and to the window.

When I looked out, the half-moon was bright in the sky. The trees stood tall, like dark sentries against the mountainside, and nothing on the property—from what I could see—looked out of place.

I walked to the door and carefully opened it. The lock barely clicked, and the door swung silently open on its hinges. I moved down the hallway. A sound came from the kitchen, and I followed it.

The fridge door was open, and a figure stood hunched behind it. Uma always got up for a midnight snack.

“Oh, it’s you,” I said. “I’m a wreck since the attack.”

She didn’t answer me. I heard her chewing something.

“While you’re here, I want to talk to you about something.”

She still didn’t respond. I frowned.

“Uma?”

She straightened out, and I realized it wasn’t Uma at all. It wasn’t the petite, elegant figure of the blonde fae who practically lived in my house. It was a tall, charred monster, that same demon-hybrid creature that had attacked us a couple of days ago.

It turned to me and gurgled, food falling from its mouth.

I snapped into fight mode right away. My magic was at the surface, and I was ready to shift. Before I could attack, I became aware of more movement around me.

Three of them stood in the living room around the fireplace, as if warming themselves in front of a fire that wasn’t there. Another came from the bar area, accompanied by a stiff wind—it had come in through the sliding door, no doubt.

From the front door, two more walked in.

I spun around to head back down the hallway from where I’d come to get to Kinley, but a large one stood in front of me, blocking the way.

“Dagger!” I shouted, and then I shifted.

All hell broke loose. Dagger crashed out of his room, already in bear form, fighting a creature that slashed its claws and gnashed its teeth. So, he already knew.

I attacked the one right in front of me that stopped me from getting to Kinley, but it was so much bigger than the last one, and it tackled me to the ground. My magic was powerful, and I could hold my own in a fight, but the creature was so big, and it wasn’t slow because of it. It moved fast—too fast, almost—and I had to throw everything I had into the fight.

I heard a scream, and my blood ran cold.

Kinley.

I attacked the monster with renewed vigor and did enough damage to slow it down. It bled all over my floors.

The bleeding made it weaker, slower, and the dark magic had a hole in it. I sensed the break in the magic and used it to my advantage, attacking the beast and killing it by breaking its neck with my strong jaws from behind.

The large body fell to the ground like a fallen tree, and I rode it down.

A few night staff were on duty, and they were fighting, too. Everywhere, shifters were either in their animal form or naked in human form, fighting off a beast of some kind.

Dagger had his hands full with another one. He'd mauled the first, but it wasn't dead yet, and Dagger was struggling with them both. Or rather, one and a half.

Kinley screamed again, but the sound of a monster's screech told me she was fighting back.

I made it down the hallway and to her room. The door had been shattered. The window was broken, the light curtains ripped and blowing in the wind.

I watched as Kinley fought, and she was a sight to behold.

She shifted with lightning speed, moving faster as a rabbit, becoming human faster than anything I'd ever seen her do before. Her magic crackled around her, holding a warning, and when the beast attacked her, she grabbed onto it with both hands, cupping its giant, ugly face.

As soon as she did, it was as if the creature almost shrunk. It hunched over and became weak, darkness bleeding out of it like tar. I could feel the magic as it drained away, making the creature nothing more than a vampire—no, nothing more than a *human*.

She turned the head so fast, the neck snapped, and the creature fell to the ground, nothing more than a small, weak body still bleeding its tar-like magic onto the floor, running dry.

“What did you do?” I asked, shifting into human form so I could talk to her. I stared at the dead body on the ground.

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “I just... I don’t know.”

Another beast came at us from the window. How many were there?!

“Whatever it was, keep doing it,” I ordered, and I shifted into lion form again and attacked.

We fought side by side, and it was incredible. Whenever she got a hold of a creature, no matter how she did, its power seemed to fade away. It was easier to attack when they were weaker, and we made quick work of the one, and then the next that came in through the window.

Dagger’s bear crashed into the room, a creature riding it on its back, claws jammed into Dagger’s shoulder, and he made yelping sounds.

At the same time, Uma’s voice drifted to us.

“Help her!” Kinley cried out. “I’ve got this.”

I had to trust that she was okay. I’d seen her fight; she could do it again. Before I left the room, Kinley jumped onto Dagger’s back and wrapped her arms around the monster that rode him. I didn’t see the aftermath, but I could guess.

More beasts were in the house than I’d anticipated. I had to fight my way to Uma’s room and barely got there.

When I did, she was on the ground, and another fae stood over her. It blasted dark magic at Uma that held her down, and there was nothing she could do.

The dark fae had bright red hair and green eyes that burned so brightly, it almost hurt to look at them. Her face was twisted, and her cheeks were sallow, her eyes sunken. It looked like I was looking at a skull.

I roared loudly and stormed toward the fae.

Before I could attack, she turned her dark magic toward me, and it slammed me into the wall. I writhed, trying to fight it, but her magic was like a vice.

She could only keep her attention on one person at a time, it seemed, because when she grabbed onto me and held me in place, Uma got up from the floor.

“No!” she shouted, her voice deeper and filled with rage. “This is *my* turf.”

She threw magic at the fae, and the dark fae turned around. It was suddenly a fair fight, with magic flying back and forth.

“More of them are coming, Braxton!” Uma shouted above the roar of the magic the two fae threw at each other. “You have to get out of here. We can’t beat them!”

I didn’t want to give in. It wasn’t what I did.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Uma said. “But if we don’t get out and regroup somewhere, we’re going to lose everyone. I’m *serious*!” She slammed her magic into the dark fae at the same time.

I watched as the dark fae countered the magic with ease, throwing it back, and it slammed into Uma so that she flew backward and hit the wall. She gasped for air, struggling to breathe.

Another creature came into the room, and I attacked. I managed to kill it, but it wasn’t easy—I was getting tired.

When I stepped into the hallway, I saw more of them streaming through the front door. A whole army was on its way, and we couldn’t do it. Uma was right; we had to get out of here.

“Come on!” Dagger shouted ahead of us.

“Where’s Kinley?”

“She’s already outside! We’ll meet her there. Just come! Bring Uma!”

Uma stumbled out of the room, but the dark fae yanked her back.

“Go!” she screamed.

When I ran through the living room, a wall of dark creatures lined up. Behind them, fire burned. I stilled as flames

licked up the wooden walls of my cabin.

No!

“Braxton!” Dagger shouted, and I knew he was right. I had to go.

More flames came from the kitchen.

When we ran outside, I headed for the perimeter, running after Dagger. The creatures chased us, a wall of darkness following us. They were catching up, the blackness and dark magic nipping at our heels.

When I was between the trees, I spun around.

“Where’s Kinley?” I asked.

“She must be here somewhere. She got out before us,” Dagger breathed.

He was limping. I hadn’t realized that until now. He stopped to lean his hands on his knees and catch his breath.

Uma skidded to a halt right behind us.

“I put a spell around the place to keep them in, rather than out. They can get out, but not until the dark fae figures it out, and they have to get her conscious, first.” She looked proud of herself. “I clocked her over the head with a lamp. If magic doesn’t work, good ol’ physics will do the trick.”

“Where the fuck is Kinley?!” I shouted, panic gripping my heart.

Uma paled. “Shit.”

We spun around, and I scanned the house. It was up in flames now, the fire roaring into the night, casting a bright orange glow. Everything I’d ever known since I’d come here went up in flames. Everything Hauser had built. My heart shattered as I watched it all burn.

“Braxton!” Kinley screamed, and my blood turned to ice. She was far from us and slamming up against a magical barrier that kept throwing her back.

“Shit!” Uma cried out. “The spell!”

“Do something!” I shouted.

Uma raised her hands and muttered words. Tears squeezed out of her eyes.

“It’s not my magic holding her in,” she cried, trying again and again. “That bitch hijacked my spell, and it’s keeping her in.”

“Get her to undo it!” I shouted, but I knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Braxton, help me!” Kinley shouted again, and the bond between us twisted and yanked with her pain and fear.

I ran toward her. I would not let her get hurt.

Dagger tackled me to the ground.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I growled and punched him in the face.

“You’ll die if you go in there now,” Dagger said, rubbing his jaw where I’d clocked him. “Look.”

I spun around and watched as hundreds of dark creatures streamed onto the property, seemingly coming from nowhere. They flooded my property like a wave, the fire doing nothing to them.

I watched in horror as they grabbed Kinley and dragged her away. She tried to shift, but they already had her, and no matter what she did, they held on tight.

“Kinley!” I shouted.

Dagger was next to me, ready to pull me back if I tried to run, but I wouldn’t. I was no good to her dead. I had to find her and bring her back, and for that, I needed to be alive.

“Let’s regroup,” Dagger said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get the pack together, we’ll find out what the fuck is going on, and we’ll go after her.”

“I know what’s going on,” I said grimly, watching as they took my mate away. “This is Niam. He’s going to hurt her to get to me. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not over until it’s over,” Dagger said.

I nodded. He was right. I just hoped that we weren’t there yet... that it wasn’t over.

KINLEY

I tried to calm my breathing. If I didn't slow it down, I was going to hyperventilate, and I had a whole other problem on my hands.

I forced myself to breathe in through my nose, hold it a couple of counts, and breathe out through my mouth.

The room was drenched in darkness, and I couldn't see anything at all. I shivered. I was still naked, with dry blood caked on my hands and legs. It was itchy and uncomfortable on my skin.

At least I wasn't bound—that counted for something, right?

I crawled across the cold stone floor, feeling with my hands in front of me until I reached a wall.

Magic coursed through the stone wall, and I jerked my hand back.

My captors had hexed the wall. I was being held in a prison of magic.

I curled into a ball and closed my eyes, since I couldn't see anything, anyway. It was disconcerting to see the darkness; it was better when my eyes were shut.

I flashed on the images of last night. Was it last night? I didn't think too much time had passed since the monsters had taken me.

The cabin had caught fire, the attack too severe to beat, and we'd made a run for it. Dagger had fought by my side in my room when he'd told me to get out, and he'd run deeper into the house to find Braxton and Uma, to get the hell out of dodge.

I'd gotten out without a problem. As a tiny rabbit, shifting and crawling through the window where the monsters couldn't see me had worked just fine, and I'd shifted again when I'd gotten close to the perimeter of the property... only to slam up against the magic wall that had kept me inside as a prisoner from the moment I'd arrived at the cabin.

Except, the magic was different. It hadn't felt like the magic I'd encountered before. It hadn't been Uma's magic—the moment I'd slammed up against it and the power had flowed through my body, I'd tasted the darkness. The spell around the property had been different, and I'd known instinctively that I was trapped.

Panic had taken over, and I'd tried and tried and tried to get out, to get to Braxton and Dagger, who I'd seen make it out alive and well.

I hadn't been able to go to them, and then a monster had grabbed me from behind and dragged me away.

Something had stopped me from shifting. Dark magic had wrapped itself around me, and then everything had gone black.

Now, I was caught in this room, drenched in darkness, waiting to find out what my fate would be. A creak from the door opening intruded my thoughts, and I sat up, my eyes flying open. Light suddenly flooded in from the door, and I squinted, shielding my eyes with my hand for a moment.

Someone walked in, and when I lowered my hand, Cal stood in front of me, his arms folded over his chest, a smirk on his face.

What was he doing here? I'd thought he and Braxton were brothers, on the same side.

“Well, if it isn't the little rabbit,” he said.

Fear clutched at my throat, and I flashed on the last time Cal and I had been together. If Braxton hadn't arrived when he had... I shivered, not wanting to think about what the alternative would have been.

"What do you want?" I asked. My voice didn't sound as small and scared as I felt.

Good.

Cal laughed. "Revenge."

"What?" I asked.

Cal squatted down in front of me, his elbows on his knees.

"Braxton thinks he's the gods' gift to the world, and someone has to knock him down a peg. It's pretty simple, really. I'm not going to stand here monologuing like a little bitch. I'm just telling you, you're nothing more than a means to an end."

I stared at him.

"Here are the facts," he said, walking away from me.

The moment he turned his back, I shifted and made a run for the open door.

Instead of getting out through the door and on my way to freedom, I slammed up against a wall of dark magic, and it threw me back into the room.

I lay on the floor, dazed. Slowly, I shifted back into human form, and I tried to shake off the stars I saw.

Cal's laughter wrapped around me.

"Did you think I was fucking stupid? I know what you can do—how you can fight. I wasn't going to take any chances. You're not getting out of here. The room is hexed, and the magic is stronger than yours. If you'd just waited for me to tell you, like I was going to, you would have saved yourself the trouble." He laughed. "That was amusing, though."

I groaned and turned my head away, composing myself.

“You’re here so that Braxton will come after you,” Cal continued. “I know you’re bound to him—I can feel his magic all over you—so it’s simple. You’re bait, and when he’s here, you’re both going to die.”

Fear made my heart beat faster, but I didn’t let it show on my face.

Cal laughed. “I can hear your heart beating faster and faster. You put up a good fight, little rabbit, but it’s not going to help you.” He came to me again, and I stood up quickly before he could reach me so that I could fight him off if I had to. I didn’t want to have a disadvantage, being on the ground when he came at me to do something.

Cal looked me up and down, and there was hunger in his eyes. If he did something to me...

“It’s a pity you’ll have to die,” he said. “Power like yours... you could really be an asset.”

“Then why kill me?” I asked. Could I try to win him over?

“Because if I’m going to be alpha, I don’t need something that can take out my men the way you took out the panther shifter, and the way you fought my beasts last night.”

“You can’t be alpha,” I blurted out. “You’re not nearly as powerful as Braxton.”

Cal’s smile slipped from his lips, and he was suddenly angry.

“Fuck you,” he spat. He took a deep breath, reeling in his anger. “You’re right, though. I’m not strong enough to take him down alone, which is why I got some help. I went to Niam himself and cut a deal.”

Blood drained from my face. Niam, the demon who’d hunted Braxton since the moment his former alpha had saved him and taken him away.

“You cut a deal with the devil?”

Cal laughed. “Such a nice way of putting it. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?”

My heart sank. That was what had happened last night. It wasn't just Cal who'd attacked Braxton, it was Cal who'd led the demon to Braxton so that he could finish the job and fulfill his promise. Cal had just intercepted an age-old promise, a threat, and now it was all coming to a head. I turned my eyes to Cal.

"How can you do this?" I asked. "How can you turn on your own brother?"

Cal scowled. "Braxton was *never* my brother. My dad took in that pathetic cretin when he couldn't fend for himself and pushed me aside, passing on the mantle to him rather than me. Hauser was always a bleeding heart, and it put his pack in jeopardy. But all that ends now."

I bit my cheek. Cal had a lot of hatred and no mercy. It made him dangerous.

"The last thing you should know," Cal continued his speech, "is that if you do get out of here somehow, you won't get far. My fae put a tracker spell on you, so wherever you go, we'll find you. Do you hear me? You can run, little rabbit, but you can't hide."

He turned around and walked to the door, leaving me in the cold, empty room alone.

"Is this really how you want to become the alpha of this territory?" I blurted out. "Do you really think that's the way you'll gain respect?"

Cal looked surprised before he burst out laughing.

"Why do people think it's about respect? Fuck respect. I can rule with fear, and that works just fine with me. That's what's wrong with the world—people actually give a shit what other people think about them, and that cuts them at the knees. If people think I'm a dick, it's because I probably am, and if they won't respect me, then fuck them. I'll give them a reason to fear me, and that's just as good. In fact, in a lot of cases, it's better. That's what Dad never understood. Respect is hard to earn and gets you nothing in the end, but fear makes them all

jump when you snap your fingers, and I'm just getting warmed up."

He turned around, leaving the room, and he slammed the door shut with a bang that felt like it rocked through my whole body. I jerked before I sank down into the darkness.

I wasn't going to get out of here. I couldn't—the whole place had been hexed. Even if I did, I couldn't go back home.

Home.

That was how I'd started seeing Braxton and the cabin—the cabin that had burned down. My heart ached for what Braxton had lost, and what he would have to lose now that I couldn't go back. If I went back there, it would lead them right to him. As if the monsters and demon hunting Braxton wasn't enough, his own brother had betrayed him, too.

Not that it mattered if I didn't go back to him. Braxton would come after me to save me, and then Cal was going to kill us both.

I tried to reach for him. We had a bond, didn't we? Couldn't I find him, warn him somehow?

I didn't know how the bond worked. I didn't know what was possible and what wasn't. All I knew was that Cal was banking on the fact that Braxton would come for me, and after what we'd shared, come for me, he would.

BRAXTON

The mansion in Portland was ready for me to walk into when we left the mountainside. My staff had maintained it for me, although I rarely stayed there.

“How many did we lose?” I asked grimly when we stood in the living room after getting clean and putting on clothes.

“Six members of your staff,” Dagger said grimly. “The others that made it out alive are at the clinic now. The wounds they sustained are riddled with dark magic, so they are taking longer to heal.”

I nodded. Our wounds were taking longer to heal as well, but it would just take some time.

“I’m sorry,” Uma said softly from where she’d curled up on the couch.

She sat with her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms locked around them. Her eyes were large and shimmered with unshed tears.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said.

“It’s all my fault. It was my spell that was hijacked so that Kinley couldn’t get out, and now—” Her voice cracked, and tears rolled over her cheeks. “I should have known better.” She added the last words in a whisper.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said again, more fiercely. “This wasn’t your fault. This was Niam. He’s been leaving us alone for too long. I should have known that he was planning something.”

“What if she’s dead?” Uma asked, her voice wobbly.

“She’s not,” I said firmly. “I’m bound to her, and I can still feel her. She’s alive.”

“You’re bound to her?” Uma asked, blinking at me.

“It’s all over him,” Dagger said. “Her scent, her magic... the bond was created. They’ve been mated.”

“Oh, Braxton,” Uma breathed. “I knew it. I knew she was meant to be with you.”

“And we have to get her back,” I said and balled my fists.

Dagger shook his head. “You can’t just go after her and get her back with no repercussions.”

“I’m not leaving her,” I said hotly.

“No one suggested you should, but this is a trap.”

I glared at Dagger, but he kept talking. The bear shifter was level-headed when I couldn’t be—it was one of the many reasons he was my beta.

“If she’s still alive, it’s because Niam wants it that way, and if you’re bound, then he’s using her to draw you out, to get you to come to him. You know what that means, don’t you?”

I gritted my teeth and pulled back my lips from my teeth in a snarl, but I couldn’t deny that he was right. They were using Kinley to get to me.

Fuck!

I turned around and paced to the window, then to the far wall and back again.

“This is why I shouldn’t have let her get close. This is why I always keep people at arm’s length. I can’t afford for them to get hurt. I can’t afford for people to go down because of me, and now it’s happened to the one woman I care about. I was such an idiot.”

Neither of them said anything.

“If this is anyone’s fault, it’s mine.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to contain myself.

“Then we have to do what we can to get her back,” Uma said, standing.

I looked at her. “I can’t let her get hurt.”

“We’ll have to figure something out,” Uma said. “But you don’t deserve this, and neither does she.”

I nodded. If ever the fae was right, it was now.

“We need to rest,” I said. As much as I hated waiting, we had to regain our strength, to eat and sleep and get ready for a fight. Because it was going to happen. I would fight to the death for Kinley.

I assigned rooms to Uma and Dagger, keeping them close to me. The few staff members who had come in the middle of the night to help out were in the next rooms. I wanted to keep them close. Hell, I wanted to keep every pack member and staff member in the city close so that I wouldn’t lose anyone else, but that wasn’t possible.

When I was sure everyone was taken care of, I went to my room, but I couldn’t sleep.

Every time I closed my eyes, I heard Kinley’s screams, begging me to help her, and I felt the magic again that held her back. The fire that crackled as it ate up my house, the sound of the monsters and the darkness that had taken over. All of it rushed back at me and hit me in the face over and over again.

Finally, I got up and walked to the window, looking out over the immaculate garden. My city house had neighbors—other affluent shifters who lived around me. I was in the middle of the city, and I felt claustrophobic when I wasn’t in the mountains.

“Alpha,” Dagger said softly behind me, and when I turned to look at him, he stood in the door to my room. He wore pajama pants and nothing else, his dark hair messy.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my back up immediately.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said. “I just couldn’t sleep.”

“Me either,” I said.

Dagger silently crossed the room, so we stood at the window together.

“It’s all gone,” I said.

“We can rebuild.”

“It’s everything Hauser left behind.”

“It’s not,” Dagger said and glanced at me. “*You’re* everything he left behind. You’re a good alpha, Braxton.”

I shook my head slowly. “With a demon hunting me and killing off my people to get to me? I have the reverse Midas touch, Dagger. Instead of gold, everything I touch turns to rust.”

“That’s not true.”

“This has to end,” I said grimly. “Once and for all. I have to get her back, and we have to finish this.”

“You know what it means, don’t you?” Dagger asked.

I nodded. “I’m going to have to face my demons, face my past. I’ve been running my whole life, but I can’t keep running. It just means I end up alone, and I can’t do that. Since Kinley came along... I’ve always wanted what my parents had. I’ve always wanted that fated bond. I used to look up to my dad, until he fucked it up and got my mom killed. I can’t let that happen. If I let Niam win, I’m the one who fucks up, and if Kinley suffers, then it’s on me.”

“I’ll be at your side every step of the way, no matter which way this goes,” Dagger said. “And if we all die in the end, then so be it.”

“You’re so loyal,” I said to Dagger. “You’ve been there for me from the beginning, even though I shouldn’t have been alpha by blood.”

“You earned it fair and square,” Dagger said. “I don’t follow you because I was with Hauser and that’s what he wanted me to do, Braxton,” Dagger said softly. “I follow you because you are the rightful alpha. You lay down your life over and over again for every fucking pack member we have.”

I frowned at him. “I haven’t done that.”

“Yes, you have. You’ve cut yourself down, isolated yourself, pushed everyone away for as long as you’ve been alive so that they wouldn’t get hurt. If that isn’t laying yourself down, then I don’t know what is.”

I looked out of the window again. A new determination filled me. I’d always thought it was pathetic that I kept running and hiding, but Dagger was putting it in a different light. I was sick and tired of this life, of the continuous panic that someone would get hurt, that something would go wrong. It was time to end this.

I couldn’t let anyone else get hurt, and the last thing I would allow was that the darkness became filled with Kinley’s screams instead.

It was time to get rid of the darkness once and for all, to fight for the light, to fight for what was right.

KINLEY

I wasn't awake, but I wasn't asleep. I lay in the darkness, and because there was nothing to look at, my mind took over. I saw the cabin in my mind's eye, the way the walls succumbed to the flames that consumed it. I heard the crackle and roar of the fire and the screech of the monsters as the shifters all around me fought.

I gritted my teeth. Covering my ears didn't stop the sounds—it was all in my mind. Getting away from a nightmare when it wasn't a dream—but instead a reality—was impossible.

I rolled onto my back and saw again how the dark creature climbed through my window. I shifted into rabbit form, my body responding in reality to what I saw in my mind's eye, and the creature came up to me. I'd bounded around it, jumping back and forth, staying out of reach. I'd shifted every time I was behind it, fighting, stabbing, doing whatever I could before shifting again.

I shifted into human form when I saw the way I'd grabbed the monster's face.

The magic had drained right out of the creature, the demon hybrid screaming as it died, and only the vampire part was left. It had stared at me with fear in its eyes, and it hadn't even been a vampire anymore. It had just been human.

Killing the human had been easy with my power as a shifter, even though I'd been human.

The sickening crack of his spine when it had snapped still echoed in my mind, and I hated it, but killing was becoming

easier. Was that something I should have been worried about? I'd hated killing the panther, but he'd tried to kill me. I'd hated killing all those monsters, but if I hadn't killed them, they would have killed me. It had always been self-defense.

That was how it was in the shifter world. I'd seen the others kill, too.

It wasn't something I would ever get used to, and I hoped this wouldn't be my life if I ever got out of my current situation.

I frowned and sat up, staring into the darkness around me.

Something had changed since Braxton and I formed a mate bond. I hadn't been able to kill a monster on my own before the bond. The first time I'd fought a monster, it hadn't been easy, and the creature had kept its power. Braxton had been the one to jump in and kill it for me. I'd only injured it, and looking back now, I didn't know if I would have been able to kill the monster had Braxton not come along.

When I'd killed the monster who'd become human, that had been all me. There hadn't been help from Braxton.

I'd taken the monster's powers away, and I'd done it all on my own.

How was that possible? It was an ability I hadn't had before, but that had definitely happened.

Power like yours could be an asset, I heard Cal's voice in my head.

Did he know what I could do? He'd only heard from those who'd survived what I could do, and no creature had seen me do that.

It was an ace up my sleeve. As long as I had a secret weapon, maybe I could use it.

I was suddenly hit by a vision. It happened so fast, I fell backward so that I was on the cold concrete again.

Instead of the darkness in the room I was in, I was in a room filled with light. Plush furniture, carpets, and a

beautifully decorated interior. Sun streamed in through the windows.

“Harold, I don’t know how to deal with her,” a woman said. She had brown hair and blue eyes and a face that looked a lot like mine... but also not at all like mine. “She’s in danger, and we can’t protect her.”

“I know,” Harold said to her, wrapping her in her arms. “She’s in danger as long as she’s with *us*.”

“Maybe we should tell the alpha.”

“No,” the man said, shaking his head. “We can’t tell him. Who knows what he’ll do? He’s already so paranoid.” When she started crying, Harold’s face softened, and he pulled the woman into his arms. “It’s going to be okay, Marina.”

Marina buried her face against Harold’s shoulder and cried.

“How can you say that? There hasn’t been a rabbit shifter in centuries, and her magic is so unpredictable. Who knows what she will be able to do? How can we protect her if we don’t even know what her power holds?”

“We’ll just have to take her to the human world.”

“What?!” Marina cried out. “You mean...”

“Yeah. Giving her up is the only way we can save her.”

“I can’t do that,” Marina said and broke out of Harold’s arms. “I can’t give away my baby.”

“Think about it,” Harold said. “If she’s in the human world, she’ll have a human life and find a human husband, and her curse will never be triggered. She’ll never sleep with a shifter, and she’ll be okay. She’ll just be *normal*.”

“It’s not a curse!” Marina cried out.

Harold sighed. “That’s not how I meant it, but you know it’s not a gift. Being a rabbit shifter, as magical and powerful as they can be, without the right guidance... it’s a curse. I’m dying, Marina.”

“Don’t say that,” Marina said, and she started crying again.

“I’m not going to pretend it’s not true. I’m dying, and I can’t leave you with a little girl with more power than anyone understands. The alpha already thinks that everyone is out to kill him. If he sees you as a threat because of Kinley’s magic, then he’ll kill you and her. The only way to keep her safe is if we do this.”

Marina cried harder, covering her face with her hands as she sobbed.

“I wish we didn’t have to do this,” she said through her fingers.

“I know,” Harold said. “But, my darling, I wish a lot of things that we just can’t change.”

He took Marina in his arms again and pulled her tightly against him.

“I’ll find out what we can do to get the process going. The sooner she’s away from shifters, the sooner her magic will calm. When we leave town, and she’s with the humans, everything will be all right, and we can rest easy knowing that she’s safe.”

“I wish we could take her with us.”

“I know,” Harold said.

“I wish none of this was real. She’s the only thing I’ll have left of you, and now I have to give her up, too.”

“You’re going to be okay,” Harold said, but there was uncertainty in his voice, too.

In another room, a baby cried, and Marina untangled herself from her husband before she swallowed her tears. She wiped her cheeks and took a deep breath and left the room. I could still hear her voice floating toward Harold.

“I’m coming, sweet child,” Marina’s voice sounded. “I’m coming, my darling Kinley.”

I was suddenly alone in the dark room again.

My parents. The vision had been about my parents and what had happened when I’d been a baby. They’d given me up

to save me; they'd thought it was the right thing to do.

I covered my face—just as my mom had—and cried.

For years, I'd wondered what I'd done wrong, if they'd given me up because of what I was. For years, I'd thought that there was something wrong with me. I hadn't fit in, I hadn't known what was real, and I'd thought I was forgotten.

Now, I knew that they'd given me up to keep me safe. Uma had suggested that at one time, and I scoffed at that idea. But it was true. I had been loved.

It hadn't worked out that way, but I hadn't been a problem.

I sat up. They'd thought Braxton would kill me if he found out about me, but that wasn't true. Braxton was only misunderstood.

I knew something about that.

I had to get out of here and help him. I had to let him know what was happening, that Cal had betrayed him. I couldn't let him get hurt because of me, the same way he hadn't wanted me to get hurt because of him.

I looked at my hands, although I couldn't see them.

My magic was different from any other shifter's magic. Not because I had more power than everyone else, but because I could take their power away so that they had nothing.

If that was real, then maybe it could work on hexed rooms, too.

I crawled toward the edge of the room, feeling around in the darkness for the wall until I found it.

The magic pulsed up my arms when I pressed my hands flat against the wall.

I wasn't sure what I'd done to the monster when I'd been attacked—I hadn't thought about it then—but I found my rabbit and brought her to the surface. I let my own magic flow through my fingers and into the wall.

At first, nothing happened. I was about to give up, when slowly, the darkness in the room started to change. The

darkness drained out of the room so that I could see again. The room came into view like a fog was lifting. It was just a plain room—more like a cell—with concrete floors and stone walls, a wooden door to the side. A small window behind me let sunlight into the room, and it fell in a bright square on the floor.

The darkness had been because of the magic of a spell that had kept me in here.

That spell was broken now. The magic was gone.

I stood and walked to the door, trying the handle. It opened with ease, just like any door without a lock would, and the sunlight from outside poured in.

When I poked my head through the door, I realized I was in a garden shed. The garden around me was unkempt and an eyesore, with tall grass and weeds all over. The house on the other side of the property looked rundown and neglected. Maybe even abandoned, but my shifter ears picked up laughter and chatter from inside.

Behind me stood a fence. The garden wasn't even walled in. On the other side of the fence was a washing line with clothes on it.

Women's clothes.

Well, wasn't that convenient?

I shifted into rabbit form and slipped through the fence, hopping toward the next house. I listened for a sound, but the house was empty.

Perfect.

I shifted into human form, took a pair of pants and a t-shirt from the line, and found a man's jacket, too. It wasn't great, but it was better than running around the streets of Portland naked.

I dressed quickly before I crossed the garden and climbed over the next wall. I didn't have shoes, and my feet were freezing cold, but it was fine. I would figure it out.

From the next garden, I walked to a small garden gate and let myself into the road before I made a break for it, running along the grass next to the road as fast as I could.

The first order of business was to put distance between me and the house before they realized I was gone and used spells to track me.

The second was to find Braxton and tell him what was going on.

Except... the moment I found him, they would find him, too.

Shit.

I had to warn him some other way. I just had no idea how.

While I ran along the road, covering ground as quickly as my bare feet would allow, my mind spun.

What was I going to do?

BRAXTON

The house was in a shitty part of town. I guess it could be expected of demons and monsters to hole up in this dump after what they'd done to my cabin.

I growled low at the back of my throat.

Fuck them.

“Easy,” Dagger said next to me. “They’re almost here.”

I nodded. Dagger had sent out word to get some of my pack members together this morning, and more of them had arrived than I'd thought. After my stunt at the bar where I'd killed Lenox and Rex, I hadn't been sure what they thought of me.

Apparently, that had gotten respect.

“They look up to someone who will protect their own,” Dagger had said when at least twenty shifters had arrived at my door.

“Alpha,” a fox shifter said, coming to us where we stood on a side road. “They’re here.”

When I turned around and looked in the direction he pointed, another group of shifters had pulled together.

I cleared my throat and walked to them.

“Thank you for being here,” I said. This was the third group of shifters who'd arrived, and I was going to give them the same speech I'd given the others.

They all nodded, looking at me with jeweled eyes, their animals already close to the surface. I knew each and every one of them, but I'd kept them all at arm's length for so long, they were like strangers to me. I wished I could change that.

After today, if I made it out alive, maybe I could.

"I'm not asking you to lay down your lives for me. Hell, that's what I've been trying to avoid."

"Dagger told us," someone said.

"You should have mentioned it before," another answered.

I shrugged. "I didn't want to drag you into my mess." They only looked at me, so I kept talking. "It's going to get messy in there. The creatures are a mix of demons, monsters, and vampires with dark magic. They can be killed—except for the demon—but wounds don't heal the way they should. If you get injured and you think it's going to end, get the hell out. I don't care if you have to run. If you want to leave *now*, you can without hard feelings."

No one moved. In fact, they all nodded.

"We're here until the end," someone said. "We did it for Hauser. We're doing it for you."

That made my heart constrict. "I'm not Hauser."

"You're not Cal," someone called from the back, and I chuckled despite myself. I guess there was a silver lining to everything.

"Right," I said. "She's in there, somewhere. If you find her, just make sure she can fight, and she'll take care of herself. You'll know it's her when you come across her; there's no guessing."

"She's the alpha's bonded mate," Dagger said.

A murmur traveled through the crowd, and I wondered what they thought, what they would say about the mating.

Still, no one left.

"Let's get this show on the road," I finally said. "We don't have time to waste."

The group dispersed.

“None of them are leaving,” I said to Dagger.

“They *want* to be there for you, Brax,” Dagger said. “You know they do. They were there for Hauser. They want someone to look up to the same way.”

It made me feel all kinds of emotions when I thought about it. I’d thought I didn’t deserve to be respected and followed the way Hauser did. I was tainted, after all, a shifter walking around with the promise of death on my head, and everyone who got involved could suffer.

I’d never thought they’d *want* to suffer if it meant being there for me.

“The fight is going to be brutal,” I said.

“They’re all choosing to stand by your side. Even if they die.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I turned back to the house and looked at the neglected piece of shit property.

“There are always casualties,” Dagger said.

I nodded. He was right, but the sooner we could get this over and done with, the better. I just had to find Kinley.

Since the moment she’d been taken, I hadn’t been able to feel her magic. The bond was still there, so I knew she was alive, but finding her had been harder. It was as if she’d been shrouded in darkness.

I’d managed to track her to this place, but where she was on the property was—

“Dagger,” I said and nudged him. “Look.”

I watched as she opened the door to a garden shed and crept out into the sunlight. She looked around, and my heart swelled. She was an incredible beauty. Her milky skin was blemish free in the sunlight.

In no time, she shifted into a rabbit, hopped to the fence, and wriggled into the next yard. She found clothes and made it

through the yard and into yet the next one before she hit the road and started running.

“Fucking resourceful,” Dagger said, shaking his head.

I chuckled. “I’m going after her. As soon as I get her, we’ll attack. Wait for my signal.”

“You want to attack even though she’s free?” Dagger asked.

I nodded. “We’re ending this once and for all. They took my mate, Dagger. I’m not doing what my dad did. I refuse to roll over and die.”

Dagger nodded, his face grim. “Then we’ll finish this today.”

I nodded and shifted into my lion form. I ran down the road, following Kinley, who ran on foot, and caught up to her easily. When I jumped in front of her, she skidded to a halt, breathing hard. She blinked.

“Braxton?”

I shifted. “Kinley.”

She threw her arms around my body. I held onto her tightly, breathing in her scent, feeling her magic pulse.

“How did you get out?”

“I neutralized the power that kept me captive,” she said.

I frowned. “What?”

She shook her head. “There’s no time, Braxton. We have to get out of here. Cal and Niam are working together. Cal wants to kill you and become alpha. He was using me to lead you here so that he could kill you—kill us both. If we get out now, we’ll be okay. We just—”

“We’re not running,” I said firmly. Something snapped inside of me. “If Cal is behind this, then it’s time to finish what I started with him. I’m tired of running.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Kinley cried out. “He wants to kill you! I can’t lose you, Braxton. Not now that I finally

found where I belong.”

I cupped her cheeks and kissed her.

“You won’t lose me. I’m not running anymore. I’m going to fight for what’s mine. Come.” I took her hand and led her toward the car parked a block away. “Uma is waiting, she’ll take you away—”

“I’m not leaving without you,” Kinley said, her hand slipping out of mine.

I turned to face her. “Kinley...”

“If we fight, then we fight together.”

I wanted to argue, but Kinley’s power rose around me, brushing up against my skin like fur. It was more powerful than ever. I knew she could fight. I’d seen her do it more than once, and this time, we had the pack at our backs. This wasn’t an unexpected attack that would catch us off guard, and she knew what she could do. She was so powerful now.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll fight together.”

A steely determination settled in her eyes, and she started undressing, stripping until she was naked. I stared at her perfect body.

Now wasn’t the time, but fuck, I wanted her. When all this was said and done, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

“Ready?” she asked.

I looked into her eyes. “Ready.”

We turned and walked back to where Dagger stood. My eyes locked with his, and he grinned. Before I could say anything, all hell broke loose.

Someone had seen us, picked up on us, or *something*.

“They’re onto us,” I said and spun to face the house.

“The moment you two got together, your collective power rocked outward in a wave no one could miss,” Dagger said. “I felt it all the way over here, and no doubt, they felt it, too.”

The house looked like an ant's nest had been interrupted, and creatures poured out of it. They crawled up the walls and onto the roof, they swarmed toward us, they climbed into the fence and onto the garden shed. They were *everywhere*.

I shifted and roared loudly, my power behind the battle cry. My pack members around us shifted into their animal forms.

Suddenly, the fight was on. I hadn't meant to have it out here in the middle of the street where the rest of the world could see us. I'd meant to attack inside the house.

I looked over my shoulder toward the car where Uma got out. She had the other fae—Circe—with her and two more that I vaguely recognized.

"We've got this," Uma said. She didn't shout—I could hear her with my shifter hearing.

I nodded and ran toward the house. Uma and her fae friends were going to wrap the fight up, shrouding it from the rest of the world. She was here, not to fight alongside us, but to contain it. We'd decided it this morning, so that no matter how big this got, it wouldn't end ugly for the humans who were innocent and didn't need this mess in their lives.

Kinley was right behind me as I ran.

All around me, vampires and monsters attacked, but I didn't face off against them. As far as we ran, shifters attacked the creatures who tried to attack us, taking care of them to keep us open and leave a clear path to the house. I was going for the center, to be in the middle of it all.

We burst in through the front door and immediately came face to face with more monsters.

I attacked, and Kinley was behind me, her familiar wave of magic brushing up against me, and I wasn't worried about her. She could hold her own in a fight more than any shifter I'd seen.

She attacked, drained magic, killed. She made quick work of the first three.

I focused on the monster that attacked me. I knew how they fought now that we'd come up against them a couple of times. I ripped off limbs and chewed up throats, taking out one, two, three, and then two more.

Cal was in the room, and my eyes locked on his.

He swallowed hard when I stalked closer to him and looked at Kinley, who was making quick work of yet another creature. I'd lost count of how many she'd killed, a trail of very *human* bodies littered in her wake.

Her power was truly one-of-a-kind, and my heart swelled with pride that this female had chosen me. She was mine.

I faced Cal again.

"How did you get out?" Cal shouted, his voice shrill.

Piece of shit traitor.

A monster attacked me from the side, and I had to defend myself again.

While I did, Cal took the distraction and high-tailed it out of the room.

Pussy.

The monster tackled me to the ground, claws digging into my skin, and I roared, twisting out from underneath the giant body. A second monster joined in, and I was outnumbered... until Kinley grabbed one from behind. I watched as the dark magic faded. The vampire that remained turned human, its eyes filling with confusion and fear. Killing the human was easy, and the other monster scrambled away, screeching in fear.

He spun around and headed toward the door.

Good, my pack members were outside waiting. Someone would get a hold of that one. He wouldn't get away.

The sound of war came from outside, growls and snarls and screeches as shifters of all shapes and sizes took on the vampires and monsters that had haunted me for a lifetime.

I looked at Kinley.

“Through there!” she shouted and pointed.

Another creature attacked her, and she shifted and bounced away faster than I could keep track of.

I got up and ran through the door where Cal had disappeared.

Cal was on the far side of the room, close to a double bed that looked like the mattress might have rotted. There were piss stains on the floor, and the ceiling had a huge hole where water damage had never been fixed and the roof had kept leaking for what must have been years.

“How dare you come in here and challenge me!” Cal shouted.

I growled low at the back of my throat and slowly stalked him.

“You’re such a dick, you know that?” Cal carried on. His voice was a little too high-pitched. He was scared; I could taste his fear on my tongue. “You’ll never win. You’ll never get what you really want. You lost your family, and you’re a dick for taking mine. Dad didn’t love you. He just pitied you!”

I roared and launched toward Cal, tackled him onto the bed. He shifted, becoming a bear, and the fight changed. His magic joined mine in the room, and we fought with teeth and claws out, snarling and growling and scratching and clawing. It was the fight of the ages that should have happened years ago.

We bit chunks of flesh and yanked them out of each other. We slashed with sharp claws and drew blood. We tumbled through the room and crashed into furniture. Cal’s large body shattered a wooden rocking chair in the corner into splinters. When he tossed me across the room a moment later, I landed against a mirror, and it broke into a million shards of glass that rained to the ground.

The fight was brutal, filled not only with our respective magic but with the anger and resentment that had built over the years.

It felt like the fight lasted forever, and it drained us both of energy. We got tired as we fought. Outside, the battle raged on, and inside, it was the same.

I finally managed to pin Cal down. His bear growled, and Cal tried to push me off him, but he was bleeding out and getting weaker. He would never be as strong as I was, never be alpha material.

Cal shifted underneath me. His body was bruised, his eyes were red, and he was bleeding from his mouth. He gasped for air.

Piece of shit.

“Don’t do this,” Cal pleaded. “Braxton, this isn’t you.”

“Oh, I don’t think you know anything about who I am at all,” I growled when I shifted into human form, too.

“You can’t kill me. I’m your brother.”

“You burned down my house.”

“That was an accident!” Cal cried out.

“You kidnapped my mate.”

“You don’t ever get close to anyone. I didn’t know you felt that way about her.”

“Bullshit,” I growled at him. “You knew exactly how I felt about her. You *knew*.”

“I’m sorry, okay?!” Cal said. “You can’t kill me. What would Dad say?”

“I think he would give me his blessing after what you did.”

“What did I do?!” Cal cried. He was literally *crying*. “What did I do?”

“You betrayed me,” I snarled. “You tried to take my mate, and you made a deal with a demon that murdered my family! Like I said, Hauser would have given me his blessing.”

Darkness crept into the room as if the sun had suddenly been turned down. Black fog curled in the corners, and then a demon appeared in front of me.

It was tall and dark, darkness personified, with eyes that glowed red and a mouth that split his face all the way to the back. The red eyes glowed with an ever-burning fire, and he hissed when he saw me.

I was suddenly a child again, hiding under the bed, my mom being murdered. I could still hear her screams.

Niam.

“What took you so fucking long?” Cal demanded.

Traitor.

I turned my hand into a claw and ripped Cal’s throat out.

His eyes widened in surprise, and he stared at me with horror on his face.

His mouth moved, sawing, looking for words, but then life drained out of his eyes, and he was nothing but an empty shell. It wasn’t any more of a waste of space than he’d been when he was still alive.

Good fucking riddance.

“That was interesting,” Niam said, his eyes on Cal. His voice sounded like many demons were talking at the same time, surrounding me. I shivered. The hair on my neck stood on end and tried to crawl down my spine. “He was disposable, anyway.”

“This ends now,” I said to Niam.

Niam laughed, but it sounded more like someone skinning a cat.

“Either you’re an idiot and you don’t understand how promises work, or you’re an idiot and you think I have it in me to let a promise like that go. This is all about paying debts, Braxton. Your father owes me.”

“He doesn’t owe you anything,” I said. “He’s dead.”

“Yes, but in you, I see him.”

“He sacrificed his family for power,” I said flatly.

“Did you keep your family, your pack, close?”

Guilt flooded me, but I shoved it away. Niam was a dick. He was trying to get to me. Demons played dirty.

“He lives on in you,” Niam said when I didn’t respond.

“He doesn’t,” I said, shaking my head. “That man wasn’t my father. Hauser was.”

Niam laughed again, and I wished he just fucking *wouldn’t*.

“Look, I don’t make the rules,” Niam said. “Okay, actually, I do, but that’s not the point. I’m not letting you off the hook. I promised that I would kill off your father’s bloodline, and that’s what I’m planning to do.”

Niam suddenly had his hands wrapped around my throat. I didn’t know how he’d done it. He’d moved so fast, I hadn’t seen it coming. He pulled me closer, and I gasped for air as he squeezed the life out of me.

With my mouth open, Niam curled his large body over my mine and poured his dark magic into me. I couldn’t help it—the magic filled me up more and more. Every inch of me touched by the dark magic started to shrivel and die. I felt my insides turn to ash and then start to rot, and it hurt like a bitch.

I would have screamed in pain if I’d been able to breathe.

Kinley crashed into the room, human and bleeding.

“Braxton!” she shouted and ran to me. She grabbed the demon’s arm, and I felt her power surround her. She tried to do with Niam what she’d done to everyone else.

He only laughed, and the sound only hurt me more now that every inch of me felt raw.

“You can’t do that to me, rabbit,” Niam said. “You’re powerful, but even you have limitations. I’m stronger than you’ll ever be.”

“No!” she shouted and hammered her fists against Niam.

Her attack had no effect on him.

She looked at me, her eyes a bright blue and filled with tears. I saw her mind working, and then she grabbed me. She

wrapped herself around me as best as he could while the demon still held onto me, and she pulsed her magic into me instead.

She did to me what she'd done to every other monster that had attacked—she drained the darkness. For everyone else, it had taken away what they were, but for me, it saved me.

I felt her magic like a soothing salve. I couldn't sigh with relief, but my insides warmed, and life pulsed back into me as Kinley's power fought the darkness, holding it at bay.

Niam's anger was hot and palpable in the room, and he made an awful screeching sound, almost like nails on a blackboard.

"That's not how this is going to go down," he said, and he grabbed Kinley's throat, letting me go. "I won't die. Don't you get it? You don't get to win this game."

She cried out and clawed at his hands before she looked at me. Her eyes locked on mine.

"Take me," she said and turned her face to Niam. It yanked me right back from my rage, and I stared at her, horrified. "Take my life instead of his; but let that be the end of it."

Niam frowned, pausing in his attempt to kill her.

"What?"

"You can have me," she said.

"No!" I cried out.

Niam held up a hand, the other still wrapped around her throat, silencing me. He narrowed his eyes.

"You'll sacrifice your life for him?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Why?" Niam looked truly confused.

"I love him," she cried out.

My stomach twisted, and my throat swelled shut.

"I love you, too." Tears stung my eyes. "Kinley, I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. You're everything."

“Just let me say goodbye,” Kinley whispered.

Niam paused for a moment longer before he let go of Kinley, and she fell to the ground. He stepped back, disgust on his face.

I ran to her and pulled her into my lap, cradling her. She shivered and trembled, gasping for air. She reached up and cupped my cheek.

“I wouldn’t change any of it,” she said in a raspy voice. “All I want is you. I didn’t know it before, but I know now—all I’ve *ever* wanted is you.”

I stroked her hair, looking at this amazing being who was my other half.

“You changed me,” I said. “You changed everything. I was the one who bought you at that auction, but Kinley, you were the one who set me free.”

I held her tightly and squeezed my eyes shut, and tears rolled down my cheeks. She cried against my chest, and I couldn’t bear to let her go. I couldn’t imagine a life without her.

“You’re lucky,” Niam said, his voice subdued enough so that he only sounded like a single person, standing in front of me. “No one has ever been willing to trade their life for another.”

We both looked at him.

He twisted his face, irritated.

“I might be a demon, made up of darkness and death, but let it not be said I don’t have a twisted heart in here somewhere. Get out of my sight,” he sneered.

I blinked at him.

“Does that mean...” Kinley started.

“Yeah, you bartered for his life and won. Get out of here before I fucking gag. I’m going to have to find someone else to hunt now.”

We stared at him.

“I’m going to change my mind, asshole,” Niam said in a deep, hissing voice.

I scrambled to my feet and pulled Kinley up with me. She stumbled, but then she stood on her own two feet, strength already returning now that the demon didn’t touch her anymore.

“Come,” I said. I took her hand and led her out of the room. When I looked over my shoulder at Niam, he was gone.

Could it be? Was it all over?

I turned to Kinley and wrapped my arms around her.

“You were willing to give it all up for me.”

She nodded against me. “Of course. My life would be nothing without you, anyway.”

I grabbed her and kissed her.

When we stepped outside, the shifters stood around, looking confused. Every monster, every creature, every bit of darkness, had disappeared.

“Is it over?” Dagger asked, coming to me.

I nodded. “It is.”

“Is he dead?”

I shook my head. “No, but it’s over. He won’t come after us anymore. Kinley said something that melted his *heart*.”

Dagger whistled through his teeth. “A demon with a heart?”

“Go fucking figure,” I said.

“You’re okay?”

I pulled Kinley closer and kissed her temple. “More than okay.”

Kinley beamed at me, love shining from her eyes.

We turned to face the pack, who’d come to us, surrounding us. We’d lost a few—I could see the bodies lying around, and

my heart ached for the loss. But all the ones who'd survived stood here in front of me.

“This is Kinley,” I said. “She saved my life today.”

“Hi,” Kinley said, looking self-conscious. “I—”

Before she could say anything else, every shifter in my pack dropped to one knee and bowed their heads.

Kinley's breath caught in her throat, and she looked around.

“What are they doing?” she whispered.

“They're paying tribute to you, their alpha's mate,” Dagger said, and he took a knee, too. “Welcome to the pack.”

KINLEY

The house in the city was just as spectacular as the cabin had been, with every luxury I could think of. Braxton hadn't given me a room—or a suite—of my own. I was going to stay in Braxton's room. *Our* room.

We would stay here for the time being. There were no other plans yet. Since the attack that had burned down the cabin, the only plan had been to get me back and to end the darkness once and for all, and we'd succeeded. Now, the future was open to anything.

We would make plans for our future in due time. Right now, we just wanted to be together. I wanted to strengthen our bond. I wanted Braxton, and judging by the way his eyes glowed with need, he wanted me, too.

He kissed me, pulling me tighter against his body. His tongue danced around mine in my mouth, and I sighed. His cock was already hard in his pants, and the taste of his lust mirrored my own.

I wanted him.

I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted him, and Braxton made me feel alive. He made me feel like there was a future for us, like my life had a purpose, when my whole existence since I'd been on my own had been merely to survive.

He slid his hands down my back and cupped my ass, pulling me against him. He ground his erection against my core, and I whimpered into his mouth. He pushed his hand

under my shirt, cupping my breasts, and his fingers played over my erect nipples.

He pulled up my shirt, and I lifted my arms. When he pulled my shirt over my head, the cool air of the room washed over my skin as his hand slid over my bare stomach.

“Braxton, I want you,” I whispered huskily.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he growled. He buried his face in my neck and kissed a line along my collarbone.

I reached behind me and unclasped my bra. With his free hand, Braxton slid the bra strap down my shoulder, and I pulled it off, tossing it aside. It landed on the floor as he sucked on my neck.

Braxton led me to the bed. It was large, and the mattress dipped when we collapsed onto it in a tangle of limbs. Braxton ground himself against me, and I arched my back and whimpered into his mouth as he tasted me, his muscular body pinning me down.

I spread my legs and ground my hips into his. I could feel his cock against my core, and heat washed through my body. I shivered with need.

“Touch me, Braxton,” I begged.

He broke the kiss and grinned at me. He kissed my neck, my chest, flicked his tongue over my nipple, and moved down my body. When he got to my jeans, he pulled them down, peeling them off my legs. He ran his hand over the front of my panties.

“Like this?” He slipped his fingers into them and ran his finger along my slit. His eyes were a bright amber, filled with hunger, and his gaze locked on mine.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” I moaned. My head fell back as the heat spread to every nerve ending, setting me on fire. His fingers were like magic against my clit, and I shivered against his hand. He held me with one hand as he slid my panties down my legs, cupping my sex, and I writhed on the bed, aching for more.

His fingers slipped back into me.

Goosebumps rose on my skin. “Fuck me,” I whispered.

He chuckled, a deep sound that echoed through his chest.

“Not yet,” he said and kissed me once before making his way down my body. My legs fell open for him, and he dove between them. He closed his mouth over my center, and I let out a cry as pleasure spread over my body. The heat of his mouth against my core sent shockwaves through me, and I quivered under his mouth, drowning in the feel of him.

My skin was on fire, and I whimpered as he flicked his tongue over my clit, pushing me toward the edge.

He worked me with his tongue, licking every inch of my sex. His tongue was soft yet firm as he slid it over my clit, and I pushed my hands into his hair. His beard tickled against my skin, and it only added to the ecstasy of the moment.

The pressure built in my core, and my toes curled. I bucked my hips against his mouth, moaning louder and louder.

While he sucked on me, Braxton pushed two fingers inside of me, and my moans turned into whimpers. Slowly, teasing, entering and retreating while he sucked on my clit, and I cried out, tugging at his hair.

The orgasm that had been building grew stronger, taking over, and it crashed into me a moment later. I fell apart against his mouth and his hand and shivered as the pleasure racked my body.

Every muscle in my body tensed and spasmed as the orgasm rolled through me while he slid his fingers in and out of me.

When I came back to reality, trembling and gasping, Braxton lifted his head. His mouth was slick with my sex, and he was hot as fuck. I sat up, my breathing still shallow, and I slid my panties all the way off and tossed them to the side.

Braxton stepped off the mattress. He undid his pants, and I knew what he wanted.

I wanted it, too.

I shifted forward, my legs hanging over the edge, and his cock was thick and hard, straining toward me. I opened my mouth, and he slid his hand into my hair, pulling my head closer. When I closed my mouth around his cock, Braxton groaned, sucking his breath through his teeth. I loved giving him pleasure, and his moans and groans turned me on.

We were doing it all, tasting, probing, feeling, licking, sucking, learning every inch of each other's bodies. We'd been so close to losing each other. I wanted to reacquaint myself with him and give him every inch of me all over again.

My tongue slid up and down his shaft, and he groaned, his fingers tightening in my hair. I bobbed my head back and forth, stroking his cock with my mouth as his hand tightened in my hair. I could feel his cock swell in my mouth, and I sucked harder. My fingers slid down to his balls, and I rolled them in my hand, massaging him carefully.

"Kinley, fuck," Braxton bit out.

I pulled back, stopping before he could finish.

He groaned and let go of my hair.

"I want to be inside of you," he said as he bent down and kissed me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he pulled me onto the mattress so that my head was on the pillows. He lay down on me, his tongue still in my mouth, and he pressed his cock against my entrance. I shivered, wrapping my legs around his thighs.

I moaned and ran my nails down his back. When he groaned and pushed into me with one quick thrust, I cried out.

Braxton fit inside me perfectly. His girth, his length, everything was just where it was supposed to be. I'd never had sex until Braxton, but he was made for me, and I for him, and it was perfect.

He pulled out of me and shoved back in, filling me completely. He pumped into me over and over, and my pulse quickened, my breathing becoming shallower, and I became lightheaded with need. His hand slid under my back, and I felt

him tense. He pressed his hand under my back, pulling me closer so he could go deeper at that angle, and I spread my legs as far apart as they would go. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him deeper inside of me.

Braxton thrust into me over and over again. His eyes were on fire, and my body shivered as another orgasm grew inside of me.

My whimpers turned into cries.

When the pleasure erupted and poured over me, I curled my body around Braxton's, digging my fingers into his back. I trembled and shivered as the pleasure racked my body.

Braxton groaned and bit my shoulder. He bucked his hips faster and faster again. He let go of my shoulder, and his lips crashed down on mine, and our tongues danced together. He was getting closer—I could tell by the way his strokes shortened and his breathing became erratic, and I wanted to come with him.

“Braxton,” I whimpered, and he slowed. “Turn around and lie down.”

He hesitated only a moment to catch his breath before he pulled out of me and lay on his back. I clambered on top of him and straddled his hips. I stroked my fingers down his cheek and lowered my head to plant a kiss on his lips before I sank down on his cock, shivering as he entered me again. My body accommodated his size, and I bit my lower lip.

I supported myself on my hands and moved my hips against his, slowly rocking back and forth. I let out a sigh as I rocked harder and faster, fucking him, and Braxton let out a low growl. He gripped my hips and helped me, rocking me back and forth. My clit rubbed against his pubic bone, pushing me closer to another orgasm, and Braxton's breath was as ragged as mine was.

My orgasm built inside of me, and I didn't want it to stop. The ache in my clit grew, and his cock moved inside of me, hitting just the right spot. Braxton groaned underneath me, and I knew he was close. I slid my hand between us and pressed

my fingers against my clit. My body shuddered, and I rode him harder and faster. The pressure in my body grew, and I was coming undone at the seams, the world falling away as only our pleasure and our connection to each other existed.

Our bodies moved as one. “Come for me, Kinley,” he coaxed.

His words pushed me over the edge, and the orgasm tore through me. My body tensed, and every muscle clenched, contracting and convulsing as the orgasm took over. I let out a strangled cry and dropped my head to his chest.

His cock twitched inside of me, and his arms tightened around my waist. Braxton thrust into me hard and quick as his orgasm took over, and a moment later, he buried his cock inside of me as deep as he could go.

We orgasmed together, our bodies on fire, skins slick with sweat. His breath was hot in my ear, and his moans and groans were erotic.

Along with the orgasm came a wave of magic that filled the room. It was the magic of the rabbit and the lion combined, and the power that rocked through my body and poured into his, and the other way around, only strengthened the connection between us.

When the orgasms faded, I collapsed against Braxton, breathing hard. I tried to catch my breath. Braxton stroked his hand up and down my back, and his heart beat against my chest, our hearts beating together as one.

We lay like that for a few minutes, just enjoying the feeling of being together. I drank in his warmth, his magic, the purity of his love for me that pulsed through our bond.

Finally, I pushed up and rolled off Braxton.

He pulled me against him and kissed me, and the magic between us was beautiful. It was light and bright and promised the kind of future that I’d always dreamed of—the kind of future I’d never thought I would have.

“Marry me,” he said into the dark room as he traced his fingers over my cheek.

I blinked at him. “What?”

“You heard me. I want you to be mine. Forever.”

Warmth filled me until I felt like I would spontaneously combust. I squealed, trying to contain the thrill that rushed over me, and I wriggled in bed, pushing my face into the pillow for just a second before I turned back to him with a grin.

“Okay.”

Braxton laughed. He pulled me closer to him and tugged a blanket over us. He curled his body around mine, my back to his chest, and he nuzzled my hair.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

Eighteen Months Later

The mountainside was a bright green, plants coming back to life, leaves growing again after a long, cold winter.

I parked the car, and Braxton frowned.

“Where are we?”

“You’ll see,” I said and got out of the car.

I tugged my coat a little tighter around my white dress.

Braxton followed me, glancing over his shoulder. It was still cold enough to have to wear coats, and he tugged at his collar that squashed his bow tie a little.

“I miss it up here,” he said softly.

“I know.”

Since the cabin had burned down, we’d stayed in Braxton’s house in the city. I knew he hated being in the city, but it had been good for him in other ways. He’d connected with the pack again, getting closer to them because he was around them.

Since Niam was gone, and the promise was finally broken, Braxton’s rule over his pack had changed. He was still the kind of alpha who wanted more control over his pack and preferred to know exactly what was going on in his town—old habits died hard—but he was a lot laxer than he used to be.

He cared about his pack, and he worked hard to become more connected to them now that there was no chance of him accidentally having them killed off because he cared.

Niam had haunted him his whole life, and he was finally free of the chains of darkness that had held him back.

I slipped my hand into his, and we walked down the path that led away from the lookout point where I'd parked. We moved through the trees, and I breathed in deeply.

The smell of pine and fir filled the air, and the scent was laced with a hint of rain. A storm was brewing, and I couldn't wait for the thunder and lightning.

I was attracted to power, and up here, it promised to be a beautiful summer.

"We should get back," Braxton said. "We're going to be late for—"

When we turned the corner, Braxton stopped talking, taking in the sight before us.

Against the mountainside, a whole bunch of people were working, building a giant wooden mansion. It wasn't completed yet—they still had to do a couple of things—but the structure was unmistakable.

"Kinley, what is this?"

I giggled, excited.

"Dagger found the plans for it in a box of Hauser's stuff, and I commissioned it. It's not built by Hauser, but when they're done, it will be pretty much exactly the same. I wanted to wait until it's done, but I thought I'd give it to you now. As a wedding present."

Braxton turned to me, his lips parted, his eyes filled with emotion.

"You gave me back my house."

"You gave me my freedom."

Braxton laughed. "Kinley, you gave me back my *life*."

He pulled me closer and kissed me.

“I love you,” I said.

“I can’t believe you did this,” he answered. “You’re... *everything*.”

He picked me up and spun me around, and my laughter danced through the trees.

“Let’s get back down there,” I said when Braxton put me down again. “We have a ceremony to get to.”

We walked back, hand in hand.

When we pulled up in front of the venue, Dagger ran up to us. He wore his suit.

“You’re not supposed to see the bride before the wedding!” he cried out. “It’s bad luck, or something.”

Braxton took my hand and kissed my knuckles.

“Everything about Kinley is good luck.”

“The lucky rabbit’s foot, eh?” Dagger said and laughed.

We shook our heads at the stupid joke.

“I’ll see you up there,” I said and kissed Braxton on the mouth before I hurried around the side of the venue.

Uma was in the dressing room, waiting for me.

“Where were you?” she asked. “You need hair and makeup done.” She led me to a chair, and two shifters worked their magic, one painting my face and the other pinning flowers into my hair.

“I took him to the house,” I said and glanced at Uma. “I had to.”

Uma’s eyes sparkled. “And?”

“It was the right thing to do,” I said, beaming.

They didn’t take long to do my hair and makeup; I preferred to go with a more natural look.

When I was ready, Uma led me to the venue door.

My biological father, Harold, met me at the door, and my mother, Marina, stood by him. I still couldn't believe they were back in my life.

After the dust had settled from the attack, Uma had worked her magic and found my missing parents.

It had been decades since our separation, and when I met them for the first time, it felt like our souls had been reunited. I recognized them immediately. They looked exactly the same as they had in my vision. Although they had missed my childhood, we still had centuries before us to reconnect.

We closed the gap that time had stretched between us, and now they were an active part of my life, and a part of our pack. Braxton loved them just as much as I did, and we were all grateful to finally have the family we always wanted.

I never blamed them for giving me up. They had done the right thing that had led me to the exact place I was always meant to be.

“Ready?” my father asked. It was time for my parents to walk me down the aisle.

I nodded. I was readier than ever to be Braxton's wife, to be the alpha's mate, and to have a home.

Braxton had bought me, but he'd saved me from a life of fear.

I'd saved him from a nightmare that had haunted him for centuries.

Now, in front of our pack, we would be united as a fated mate pair, and we would walk hand in hand into the rest of our lives.

And our freedom.



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