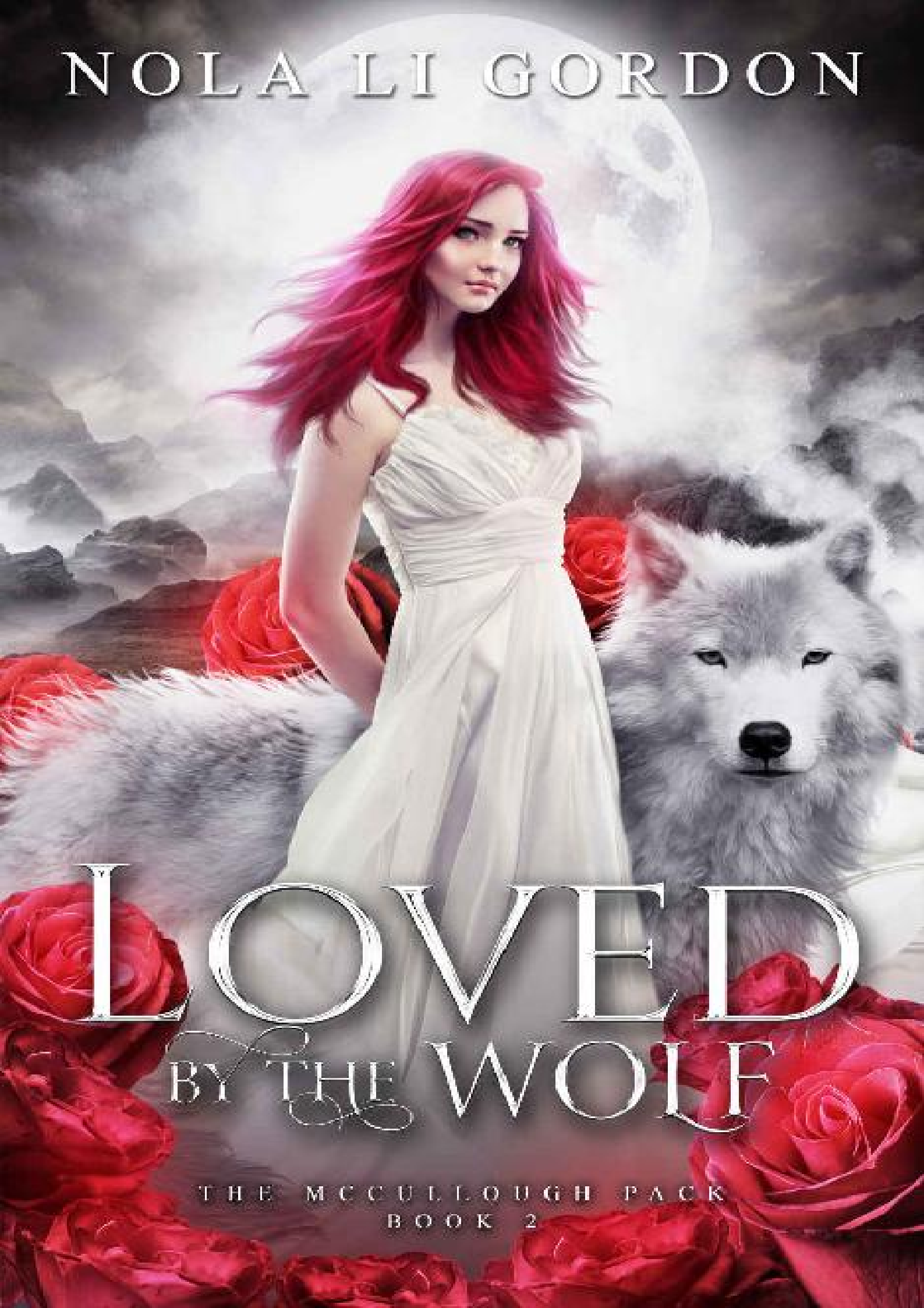


NOLA LI GORDON



I LOVED
BY THE WOLF

THE MCCULLOUGH PACK
BOOK 2

LOVED BY THE WOLF

THE MCCULLOUGH PACK BOOK 2

NOLA LI GORDON



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Becca

After years of working side by side, we finally have a date. I lean in to kiss him, but he shudders back claiming he only loves me like a sister.

I must be a masochist because no matter what I tell myself, I still can't stay away from him.

It doesn't help that he keeps doing nice things for me.

Every logical bone in my body is telling me to leave. Start a new life in a new place with a new person. And my neighbor might just be that person.

Brandon

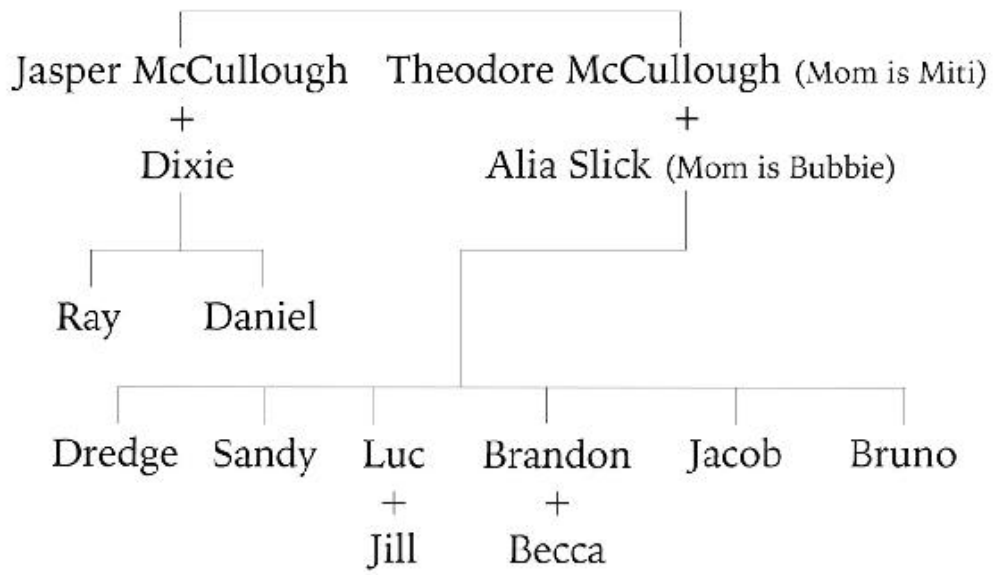
She is my mate. Even my family knows it

Ever since she kissed me, my wolf has gotten more excited. It is becoming harder and harder to control myself.

But my past haunts me to this day and I cannot claim her as my own. The best I can do is be her protector, but I'm not sure I can even do that.

When a letter arrives threatening her life, my wolf goes out of his mind looking for her. But it might be too late when I spot her with someone else.

McCullough Pack



CONTENTS

1. [Becca](#)
2. [Brandon](#)
3. [Becca](#)
4. [Becca](#)
5. [Brandon](#)
6. [Pac](#)
7. [Becca](#)
8. [Becca](#)
9. [Brandon](#)
10. [Brandon](#)
11. [Pac](#)
12. [Becca](#)
13. [Brandon](#)
14. [Becca](#)
15. [Pac](#)
16. [Becca](#)
17. [Becca](#)
18. [Brandon](#)
19. [Becca](#)
20. [Thomas](#)
21. [Becca](#)
22. [Brandon](#)
23. [Brandon](#)
24. [Brandon](#)
25. [Becca](#)
26. [Brandon](#)
27. [Becca](#)
28. [Becca](#)
29. [Brandon](#)
30. [Becca](#)
31. [Pac](#)
32. [Brandon](#)

33. [Becca](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peek](#)

[More From Nola Li Gordon](#)

[About the Author](#)

BECCA

THE SOUND of liquid splattering against the ground had me looking down at my feet. I froze when I saw the bottom of my grocery bag. It had ripped wide open, and a string of raw, runny egg, along with an assortment of fruits, were strewn around the entrance of my condo. To make matters worse, the eggs had spilled all over the white carpet, which Mr. Holloway was going to make me pay a pretty penny for to clean up the sticky gunk. Who put white carpet in a commercial area? Who put white carpet *anywhere* for that matter?! I swore he did it on purpose so he could part us with more money.

Of all days for this to happen, it had to be today. Brandon was coming over to close a case we were working on together. It was already going to be awkward, and now he'd have a good laugh over the clumsy mess that was me.

I leaned my head against my door and slowly banged it against the solid wood. The thumping sound made me think of my recurring nightmare—me, trapped in a room, and banging on the door, where no one could hear me. The never-ending sound of that fruitless banging woke me up in a cold sweat every night. But even awake, I felt trapped in the life I'd created—turning down recruiters for bigger-named firms and stuck in love with a man who didn't reciprocate my feelings.

I was a litigator at a firm that consulted for large companies. The variety of cases we received encompassed minor disputes to full-on warfare. I felt it was inevitable one of my client's enemies would one day come and find me to take their revenge, just like in the movies. Just as Mother had

drilled into me as soon as she found out I was going to be a lawyer. It was my fault her hair was falling out and her stress levels were skyrocketing. Every week it was the same phone call—if only I would quit this crazy journey I’d begun, then followed by how I “would be the death of her,” and she was “worrying about me to no end.”

I hadn’t succumbed to the guilt yet. I lived my life for me, not anyone else. Though, if Brandon would just open up his stinking heart to me, I’d dive right in and change everything to be with him. We were so good for each other. Why couldn’t he see it?

“You need some help?” a deep, rumbly voice said from behind me.

I turned to see strong arms rippling with chiseled muscles peeking out from under a fitted t-shirt. My eyes dropped to take in his butt-hugging jeans, and it was then a sliver of skin at his waist appeared as he lifted a hand to rake it through luscious, thick hair.

Wow, the wafting scent that came from the action smelled just like Brandon. How was that possible? Brandon was unique smelling, a mixture of sandalwood with a hint of citrus. But before I could dwell on that oddity, the stranger moved toward me.

I backed up, only to hit the door behind me.

His brows drew together at my retreat, and he halted his advance, explaining slowly, “I have the oranges that rolled down the hall.”

I looked down at what he was carrying, and my face reddened. He was only trying to help, and here I was, ogling him like some weird fan girl. But clearly, he was enjoying my awkwardness if the smirk on his face was any indication.

In order to hide the blush I was sure was creeping up my neck and cheeks, I turned to unlock the door to my apartment and went inside to put whatever was left in my hand on the kitchen counter.

“Mind if I come in? Just to put the oranges down?” came his voice from the doorway.

“Yes, of course.” My neck wasn’t just turning red at this point, I could feel the heat radiating off my skin. Usually, only Brandon could have this effect on me, but clearly, I was in need of some male company and any good-looking guy would do.

I pointed to the space next to where I had put my ripped grocery bag, and he walked in and deposited his load of oranges on the counter beside it. Giving me a smile that almost melted my insides, he turned and walked back out the door. Thinking that he was going to continue on his way, I took a few deep breaths before following him back into the hallway to pick up the rest of my mess. But I found him bent over at the doorway, picking up what was now a melting container of ice cream and bruised berries strewn across the floor—yet more reasons for Mr. Holloway to fine me.

When he turned the corner into the hallway, I shook myself, then slapped my face a couple of times. What had gotten into me? It was like I had never seen a good-looking guy before and was sixteen all over again.

I grabbed the roll of paper towels and steeled myself to join my visitor in cleaning up the mess I had made. We worked in silence for a bit, both scrubbing at the carpet until I heard him chuckle and say, “Mr. Holloway sure does put the fear in all of us.”

That broke the tension, and I smiled. “He sure does. Say, I haven’t seen you before. Are you new around here?”

“I’m Thomas; just moved in last weekend. I’m down at the end of the hall. You probably don’t see me much as I usually use the back stairs.”

“Well, welcome to Crystal Lake and to our building.”

We both stood at this point. Whereas I had to put one hand on my knee to push myself up, he seemed to unbend gracefully to his full height without any help.

“Are you a dancer?” I asked.

He laughed out loud. “A dancer? That’s something I’ve never been called before.”

“Oh.” I felt my cheeks warm. “Well, thank you for your help. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course. That’s what neighbors do.”

Then he did something that left me frozen to the spot—he leaned forward and gave me a peck on the cheek, smiled, and walked off in the direction of what I assumed was his apartment.

What just happened?

It wasn’t until the elevator door dinged that I shook my head and refocused on my surroundings. Looking over to the sound, I groaned. Of course, Brandon chose this time to arrive! *Wait! Had he seen the other guy?*

Brandon came down the hallway, sporting his disheveled hair—hair I wanted so badly to run my hands through. Spying me, he stopped suddenly and asked, “Why are you standing in the middle of the hallway? And goodness gracious, what happened here?”

“I managed to spill my entire bag of groceries.” Whew, he hadn’t seen my new neighbor—and why was I feeling guilty about that?

He chuckled. “That’s unfortunate. Looks like Mr. Holloway is going to be making some money off you today.”

“I’m hoping some bleach will work.”

“You know the man can tell the difference between shades of white. Goodness, you said so yourself that he picked three different shades of white for this place and drove the contractors crazy.”

I felt my shoulders droop. “You’re right.” I turned to see the damage and realized there was no way I’d ever be able to cover this mess up.

Brandon placed a hand on my arm and turned me around to face him. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel

bad. I just don't think the extra effort you want to put in is worth the time and hassle."

"Yeah, you're right." The warmth of his hand was excruciating; I wanted him to wrap his whole arm around me. I shook my head. "Ready to get some work done tonight?" I asked, pointing to my place.

"Of course. I brought dinner," he said, holding up a bag of what smelled like spaghetti and meatballs with his other hand.

"From Luigi's?"

"Only the best."

His hand on my arm had lightened. "That's fantastic." I took the opportunity to walk away so his hand was no longer burning a hole into my arm. He gave a scowl when I pulled away, but I mentally high-fived myself for keeping my cool.

We went into my place and caught up on the day while slurping noodles. It was the best spaghetti and meatballs around, and Luigi always gave us extra meatballs.

Luigi was like a grandfather to the two of us. Brandon and I met at Luigi's when Brandon was a waiter there. We found out we were both studying law at Crystal Lake University. The very next semester, we started taking the same classes together and began hanging out at Luigi's to eat and study. Luigi gave us one of the private rooms to work in, and it was always the highlight of my day when I got to sit back there with Brandon and shut out the rest of the world.

Over the years, I'd wondered if Luigi had left us alone on purpose. I'd definitely taken advantage of the opportunity that private room offered and had tried to get to know Brandon as much as I could. I'd thought the feeling was mutual. Although, as I looked across my small breakfast table and watched the man I loved eating meatballs, my heart ached at knowing the feelings I had for him were all one-sided. The one time we went on a date—at least, I'd thought it was an official date—I'd believed he would kiss me, and that after that first kiss, we would go on more dates and live happily ever after ... until the

dream shattered at the end of the night when he said the words: “I love you like a sister.”

Those words would forever rattle in my brain. It wasn't the first time he'd said them to me, either. In college, I had kissed him on the cheek after a dance, and he had said, “I'm so glad to have you in my life,” to which my heart soared—until he followed it up with: “You're like a sister to me.” Any sane girl would leave him alone after that. Why torture yourself when the guy wasn't interested? But not me. I couldn't get enough of Brandon. I dreamed about a future with him and missed his presence when he wasn't around. Hence, instead of leaving the area after law school and finding a job elsewhere, I went to the same company as he did, just so I had an excuse to be close to him. How pitiful could I get?

We'd been working together now for almost two years. I had to admit I secretly hoped Brandon would have woken up by now and realized how much I meant to him, but no such luck. And yet, there was something about him that still drew me to him. I couldn't explain it, and it drove me crazy. All I wanted was to be done with him and move on, but whatever it was about him that had a hold on me just wouldn't let go.

BRANDON

BECCA REALLY WAS the most beautiful girl, both inside and out. That was cheesy but so true. I'd give her the world if I could have her, but what we had right now—a mutual friendship—was all I could allow.

Her hand grazed mine—for the third time—and each time we touched it felt like a lightning bolt shot right through to my core. I held my breath, hoping it wasn't obvious how much her touch affected me.

“Sorry, I'm looking for Rich's paperwork,” Becca said, shuffling some papers next to me.

A huff came out of her. I looked up from my work, my gaze latching onto her pouty red lips. They matched the red hair cascading down her back. My fingers itched to reach out and touch those fiery strands. I twirled my pen to avoid balling my hand up into a fist.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Becca asked, “Have you finalized the paperwork on Rich yet? I can't find it anywhere.”

“Almost.” Darn, I thought she'd trust me to get it done and not worry about it.

“Almost? It's been a month since Jill left.”

“Yeah, I know. I just need to get Rich himself to sign it.”

“I thought—”

“He's been hard to get ahold of.” Not a complete lie. He'd called a couple of times, and I had ignored them. I was still

fuming from the knowledge that Rich was Pac. I'd now wronged two of the women I loved the most—my sister and Becca. This time, my hands did ball into fists, because the memory of Sandy getting attacked by Pac while she was looking after me as a pup flashed through my mind. That image was soon followed by the remembered sound of my nose breaking when Pac knocked me out. I felt my eyes close, and my head started drooping into my hands.

“Brandon!”

Becca's small, warm hands squeezed my shoulders, immediately erasing the memories, and I looked up into her startling, bright hazel eyes. “I'm okay.” I put on my best smile to wipe the worry off her face. “I'm just tired.”

“Okay.” But she didn't sound sure about that and lingered next to me a minute more.

The smell of the soap she used to wash her hair wafted into my senses, and my wolf reared up to claim her. I pushed him back down, clenching my fists under the table. *No!* I shouted at him through our connection. *Don't scare her!*

“Maybe we should call it a night?” Becca suggested.

“We've barely done anything, though.”

“But you look like a mess. Are you sure you're okay?”

“Yes. Let's just get this brief done.”

She laughed. That laugh could melt the hardest heart. Though, if you asked Becca, my heart was unmeltable. What she didn't know was that she'd melted mine the first day I met her—when she dropped ice cream on my brand new Ferragamo's. We were inseparable since then, but I'd always made a point to not give her any reason to think I wanted to be anything more than friends. Which meant touching her arm tonight in the hallway was a mistake. I could still feel her skin burning into mine, but I squashed it down. It wasn't worth the pain. I couldn't tell Becca how I felt, or how I would fail her just like I failed Sandy—just like I failed my family when they depended on me. I wasn't the man for her. She deserved so much more.

“Something’s going on with you, Brandon,” she said, poking me in the chest, “and I’m going to get to the bottom of it. You”—poke—“just”—poke—“watch”—poke—“me.”

I’d watch you all day long and then some. A deep growl threatened to come out, but I subdued it. My wolf had been extra active lately, especially since Luc claimed Jill for his own. I was next in line to claim my own mate, and my wolf was eager for me to do so.

I pushed my wolf deep down inside me. I would let it out later tonight when it could run for as long as it wanted. I would tire it out until it couldn’t think anymore. It was the only way.

I grabbed Becca’s finger, which was still on my chest, and planted a light kiss on the pad.

Wait! Why in the world did I just kiss her hand? Maybe she didn’t notice? But, on looking into her eyes, I saw her pupils had dilated. Looking for a quick way out, I placed her finger on the paper we were working on. “I need your signature here so we can move on,” I said swiftly.

“Ugh. Way to break the moment.”

I’m the best at that. Just ask anyone. The words remained unspoken; the best way forward was ignorance of what I’d just done.

We worked for a couple more hours until we were both satisfied. I was lucky to have her as a partner. She was the hardest working attorney in the office as far as I was concerned. The best to look at too. I shook my head at that thought. Her brain was what I liked, not her body. Though, her body was perfect. Just the right size for me.

I groaned inwardly. It wasn’t this hard to control my thoughts a month ago. What was happening? Working with Becca had never been an issue. I was satisfied I got to see her almost every day, and on the days I didn’t see her, we kept in touch via text. I was her protector. Nothing else.

Lately, though, my thoughts had started going sideways. It started with that darn ball. She had been so excited when she

learned my family used to throw masquerade balls. So excited that she begged me to get tickets. Luc was still laughing at me for making actual tickets, knowing full well our family were always invited and no one needed tickets.

“Okay, I think we’re done working for the night,” Becca announced with a sigh. She sat back in her chair and stretched her arms over her head.

The action caused her shirt to lift just a smidge, and it was enough for me to see a line of her alabaster skin. It was all I could do to not reach out and run my hands along that strip of skin. I forced my mind back to her comment. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” she said, her chair landing back on all four legs. “We’ve done what we can for tonight. I have to get a couple of signatures, but that’s it.”

“Well then, I guess it’s time for me to go.”

“You could stay a bit longer and we could chat,” she suggested. The look in her eyes was pleading, and I knew I had to leave as soon as possible or I’d fall right into their depths.

“No, we have an early morning tomorrow. You should get some rest.”

“Right.”

I almost changed my mind at the look of disappointment that crossed her face, but knowing I couldn’t lead her on, I stuck to my morals before they fled. “Goodnight, Becca. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow.”

She didn’t look at me as I walked out the door, and when I caught a glimpse of her as I shut it after me, I saw her head going down to the table as a big sigh escaped her mouth.

BECCA

“YOU SAY he looks just like Brandon?” Jill asked.

“And smells like him too.”

“Wowzer! You’re a lucky girl!”

“No, I’m not! I only want Brandon.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. Yes, we are Team Brandon, but that doesn’t mean you can’t looky-look. It’s not like Brandon is giving you any attention besides work.”

I groaned, once again slamming my head into the table. This was where I should stay—and keep hitting my head on the table until all my problems were solved.

“You know I’m super appreciative of what Brandon did for me, right?” Jill continued.

“Mm-hmm,” was all I managed.

“But he can be a dunst in the love department. If he’s never going to ask you out, you are free to date whoever you want.”

I groaned in response. I had nothing to refute what Jill was saying, but I still held out hope that one day Brandon would wake up and realize how important I was to him. This undeniable want was buried so deep inside me it wouldn’t go away.

“Explain to me why no matter what I tell myself, there’s some sort of magnet inside me that pulls me to Brandon. It’s so strong I can’t sleep some nights until I see him. And as

soon as I get even a glimpse of him, it's like all my problems fall away.”

“Oh, Becca.”

“It's not just that, Jill. The boys I thought I loved before—none of them compared to Brandon. Is it because they were boys? I don't think so. I really did love them, but not like this. It's like my whole being is yelling at me to make him see me, to acknowledge our love, to pay attention to me!”

“Becca—”

“He keeps doing the nicest things for me. Did you know he called Mr. Holloway and told him the mess in the hallway was all his fault? He paid for the clean up! What is happening, Jill? Because I have no idea what's going on between us, and I don't know what to think anymore!” I put my face into my hands and cried.

Jill came over to the sofa and pulled me into her arms, rocking me until I calmed. “I don't know what to tell you except that Brandon is an idiot. He doesn't know a good thing when it's right under his nose.”

“Literally.” I sat up and wiped my tears. This was not going to do. “But let's not talk about Brandon anymore.”

“Are you sure? I think another good cry is in order.”

“No, I'm not wasting another second talking about Brandon when I barely get to see you these days. How have you been?”

Jill gave me a squeeze, letting me go and scooting back. “I've been doing really well. Luc dotes on me, and I've had to tell him to give me some personal space. Otherwise, he'd be by my side all the time.”

I laughed. “I'm glad I can be of some use these days.”

“Stop it, Becca! You mean a lot to me. We have to keep seeing each other! I would miss you too much if we didn't catch up at least once a month.”

I reached out to hold her hand and smiled. “I would too. By the way, what was that super loud noise when I called the

other day?”

“Oh, that was Luc and his brothers having fun with electric saws. Now that Luc and I are together, the family has gotten it into their heads that we can’t live in our apartments anymore. They think we need a proper home, so they decided to build us one.”

Build them a home? “But you’re not even engaged, much less married!”

“I tried telling them that, but ...” Jill shrugged and rolled her eyes.

I laughed and, of course, my brain ventured to Brandon, who was most likely working on the house with his brothers right now.

Jill must have seen my face fall because she suddenly blurted, “Hey, why don’t you invite Thomas to the Thanksgiving party at Luigi’s? That should set a fire under Brandon’s—”

“Did you not hear what I said? He told me I’m like a sister to him.” I shook my head. “There would be no point.”

This time it was Jill’s turn to laugh. “Brandon is into you. Trust me.”

I gave her a look. What was she not telling me?

“Someone needs to make Brandon jealous enough to make a move,” Jill announced. “And it’s only fair to you to move on since he’s made it very clear he’s not interested.”

I wrapped the blanket I was holding even tighter around my body and snuggled into the sofa, not wanting to say anything more on the matter.

Jill took my cue and changed the subject. “How’s work going?”

“It’s fine. I’m up for a promotion soon, so they’ve been giving me more cases. I should really be working on one now that I mention it.”

Jill's hand came to hold my arm. "You don't need to do anything tonight. We're going to enjoy our time together before I head home tomorrow, then you can throw yourself into work mode all you want."

I sighed, not having the energy to put up a fight. "Fine."

"Good. Now, what episode of Friends were we on?"



The next morning, I went for a run bright and early. Jill was still snuggled deep in her bed, sleeping away. Running had always been the only way I could let off steam. That and chewing my nails. I'd stopped doing the latter when I met Brandon, but lately, I'd started the habit again. My fingertips rubbed against each other, and I felt the meaty part of the tips of my fingers rather than healthy nails.

What I hadn't told Jill was that a feeling of dread had started to form inside me, and I didn't know what to make of it. It started the night we attended the masquerade ball. Brandon and I had gone off to have dinner together. We were always friendly, and Brandon made me laugh, but that night, something changed. Something inside me made me bold. So bold as to ask if Brandon wanted to see a movie with me. It's not that we hadn't done that before, it's just the way he was looking at me made me all hot and bothered. He'd worn a smoldering look—the one he turned my way when he thought I wasn't looking. The way his hands clenched and the forced shiver I felt from across the table told me he was trying to calm himself down that night.

It was exhilarating, because I'd thought this was it, that we were taking things to the next level. I even ventured to hold his hand during the movie. Albeit, I was scared of the part in the movie at the time, but it felt good to be skin to skin. And when he walked me to my apartment, I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It was like an electric shock to my system, and it felt so right; but only a millisecond later, he stepped back and held me at arm's length. The next thing he said nearly

shattered me. He'd told me I was like a sister to him. His best friend, in fact, and he didn't want to jeopardize what we had.

I'd gone to sleep devastated, but that had all been forgotten the next morning because Jill had been kidnapped. What then followed consumed all my energy. The race to find her had pushed that moment between me and Brandon to the back of my mind.

Until now.

My feet pounded the pavement even faster, and I could feel fresh tears start to form in my eyes. There was no way around it. I was in love with Brandon, but the feeling was not mutual. Now, after seeing Jill find her one and only and observing how in love they were, I wanted that too.

It was with these thoughts that I ended up in front of the supermarket and walked straight to the frozen food section. Looking through the many options, I decided on the most chocolate one of them all—triple chocolate ice cream. This would do the trick, along with a bottle of wine and a good movie. And probably some groceries because I didn't want to come back again.

Walking back home, I made myself think about the case that was coming up. Brandon had taken some time off to help Luc build his house, so this would be one of the few times where I wouldn't have him nearby. It was a good time to reset my head.

“Need any help with that?”

The voice sent shivers through me. I turned around and ran straight into a hard chest.

Thomas laughed, placing a hand on each of my shoulders to keep me steady. “Sorry about that, didn't mean to scare you. You okay?”

“Yes, absolutely. You just startled me.”

“Sorry again.” The smile that crept across his face made me melt, and I couldn't help returning it. He gestured at my hands. “Let me help you with those bags. Don't want you getting fined again.”

“Ha ha ha.” But the bags were kind of heavy, because as usual, I impulse-bought my way through the store. “Thank you, that’s kind of you. Can you take this one?”

“I’d be glad to. Ladies first,” he said, gesturing toward the open door.

I led our two-person parade back to my apartment, hoping Jill was not yet awake.

As soon as we got to my apartment door, I faced Thomas and said, “Well, here we are. Thank you for your help.” I made to take the bag back from him, but he didn’t move.

“I’ll put it on your counter for you given I’m already here.”

On receiving another flash of his smile, I relented and turned to unlock the door, but it swung open before I could finish turning the key.

“Becca, did you get chocolate ice cream?” Jill cried. Then she looked up and noticed Thomas. “Oh, we’ve never met. I’m Jill.”

“Jill, nice to meet you. I’m Thomas; just moved in last weekend.” He looked so hot holding groceries in one arm while shaking Jill’s hand with the other.

“It’s really nice to finally meet you, Thomas,” Jill said, ushering him in while giving me a big ‘oh my goodness, he’s hot’ look.

“Um, you can put the groceries right here,” I said, placing mine on top of the kitchen counter. “Thank you for your help. I can take it from here.”

“No problem. Any time.” He lingered a bit and looked as though he had something to say, but then he turned and began walking back to the door.

Jill, however, was not done. “Wait.”

No! She wouldn’t ask ... would she?

“Thomas, would you like to go to Becca’s Thanksgiving party? It’s invite only.”

She did! “It’s not my—” I rushed to say.

“Luigi hosts it, but Becca does all the work organizing and hosting it,” Jill cut in. “And Becca makes the best pies.”

“You really don’t need to—” I tried again.

“I’d be glad to,” Thomas said, laughing. “It’ll be good to meet some new people. I don’t know many yet.”

Jill clapped her hands together. “Excellent! Give me your number, and Becca will text you the address and time.”

“Wonderful. And I’ve got a family recipe for candied sweet potatoes that I can bring.”

“Even better! Becca, you can cross that one off your list.” Jill beamed at me. I sent daggers her way, hoping she’d get the picture and stop setting me up.

“Here’s my number,” Thomas said, rattling it off.

Jill typed it into her phone, and soon, it was just Jill and me.

“I can’t believe you just did that!” I said when the door closed after him.

“Well, you weren’t going to do it.”

“I don’t have any interest—”

“Bull! I call bull. You were salivating all over him. It was all I could do to not reach out and wipe the drool off your face.”

“I was not!” *Oh my goodness, was I? Please no.* I reached up to check my face, and Jill started laughing.

“You are so done for.”

“Jill!” I groaned. This was not happening.

“Look, it’s not a date. I invited him.” Jill came and pulled me into a hug. “You’ve done so much for me, Becca. He looks like a nice guy. You deserve happiness and fun times with other people besides Brandon and me. Remember what you told me when you took me to the Halloween party? It’s just to have fun, and I’ll be there too, alright?”

I shook my head, still dazed. “I still can’t believe you did that.”

“It’s for your own good.”

I sighed and pushed back to look Jill in the eyes. “How is Brandon? He hasn’t called in a couple of days.”

Jill raised her brows. “I thought you were mad at him?”

“I am! I just ...” I didn’t know what I thought.

“He’s doing just fine. Luc said Brandon has really thrown himself into the building. He’s a man on fire.”

Probably doesn’t even miss me.

“Hey, what’s in the bags?” Jill said, always knowing when to change the subject. “I’m starving.”

“I went a bit crazy at the market so there’s a little of everything.”

“Yum! Donuts!” She brought the box of donut holes to the coffee machine and started munching away while setting up coffee.

I laughed, though what came out was more of a sigh mixed in with a dry laugh. My life was such a mess, but compared to what Jill had gone through, it was going pretty well. I shook my head to clear my thoughts and joined her in the kitchen to plate some other food so she wouldn’t eat all the donuts.

BECCA

THE DINNER WAS ready to go. Tonight, we would have about fifty people at Luigi's. The only thing I was nervous about was Brandon meeting Thomas for the first time. Jill had put me in such a pickle that I kept messing up the list of who was bringing what. At one point, I realized I had half the people bringing pies, and I had to throw that list away and start over.

But now it was go-time, and I didn't have an excuse not to go. Luigi relied on me to pull this dinner off. He had been hosting it for fifty years, and for some reason, I got roped in to help him plan and run it. Brandon always teased me that I secretly loved this role, and as always, he knew me well.

I pulled on the sweater dress I'd bought in the hopes of impressing Brandon tonight. It took me five tries before I was able to catch the clasp on my necklace. Three hosiery later and I was finally out the door, carrying my signature apple and pumpkin pies. During the whole drive to Luigi's I couldn't help but wonder what Brandon was going to think when he met Thomas.

Ringling the back door of Luigi's, I smelled the waft of his wonderful lasagnas. Others would be bringing turkey, casseroles, stuffing, and all sorts of potatoes—twice baked, mashed, sweet—and I'd skipped lunch today to stuff myself silly tonight.

"Becca! My dear. So good to see you." Luigi's wife, Donna, opened the door for me, and I followed my nose to the three lasagnas sitting on the counter.

“Donna, I could eat a whole one by myself right now. They smell so good.”

“You can take one for yourself. There will be plenty of food.”

“I might take you up on that. How’s Luigi?”

“He’s doing better. His arm is healing nicely after only two days.”

“I can’t believe someone would try to steal something.”

“Don’t bother yourself about it. We will have a fun night tonight and that will raise his spirits.”

Donna showed me where to put my pies, and as we finished setting up the food table, people started trickling in. There were three turkeys, two big trays of stuffing, coleslaw, all sorts of potatoes, cranberry sauce, turkey gravy, green bean casserole, green beans with shallots, lasagnas, and three different kinds of rolls. It was all I could do to not take a sample of everything that was set down.

At exactly six o’clock, Donna clinked her glass, and the room slowly settled. Even though I was used to standing in front of a group of people, when it came to the Thanksgiving dinner, I wished Donna would let me melt into the background.

Some people imagined everyone was naked in order to distract themselves from the butterflies, but I always looked for Brandon. I realized then it had become a habit. But I hadn’t seen him come in yet, and his delicious dish of candied apples was always my favorite dessert. Looking around the room, a surge of nervousness swept through me. At the same time I saw Thomas enter the room, holding his bowl of sweet potatoes. He took my breath away, and my brain required a few seconds to catch up to my body. *But he’s not for you; Brandon is. Where is he?*

“Becca, would you like to say something?”

I looked over and saw Donna looking at me. Shoot, I was never this out of it that I didn’t realize it was my turn to talk!

“So glad all of you could make it again to Luigi’s Thanksgiving meal,” I said, trying to refocus back on the event. A horde of clapping began, and I waited for it to subside before continuing. “This year, we have something even more to be thankful for. As you know, our friend, Luigi, was mugged two days ago right here in his own restaurant. Thank goodness he is recovering well and Donna wasn’t there.”

At this moment, Luigi himself stepped into the room. It was the first time I’d laid eyes on him since the mugging. My heart gave a jerk at the number of bruises covering his face. His right arm was also in a sling. But he was all smiles, as usual. That was Luigi. Nothing could bring him down. He always had a friendly face and a kind word for anyone. It hurt that someone would take advantage of him like this.

“Let’s everyone start eating, yeah?” Luigi said.

He wrapped me in a warm hug and hooked my hand through his, guiding me back into the kitchen.

When we were inside the room, he turned to me and said the last thing I thought he’d say at the beginning of his big dinner. “You and Brandon fighting?”

“What?”

“You heard me. You and Brandon fighting?”

“No, I ...” I hung my head. “How come you’re asking?”

“He’s not coming to dinner.” Luigi huffed at this, and I was too dumbfounded to say anything at first.

Brandon wasn’t coming at all? I felt my resolve snap, and I almost fell over.

Luigi caught my arm. “What has happened between you two?”

“We’re not fighting. I just ... I might have been too forward, and he might be awkward around me now.”

“Young love. You two should have been together a long time ago. So much time wasted.”

Tears threatened to fall. “It’s not meant to be, Luigi.”

He lifted my chin to look into my eyes. “It *is* meant to be.” Before I could reply, he turned and gestured for me to follow. “Now, we must be hosts for our extended family.”

I sighed. Everyone was Luigi’s family—families who lived nearby, families who had moved away, lunch workers, teenagers looking for a safe place from home—the list went on, but anyone who needed love and help were welcome. If it was up to Luigi, he would have invited everyone in the world to his Thanksgiving dinner, but the restaurant could only hold so many people, so Donna and I had persuaded him to invite only those he was really close with. It had been first come, first served.

Luigi moved into the crowd while I stood by the kitchen door, watching everyone plate up and chat with old friends; some they only saw at this Thanksgiving dinner. It was a wonderful sight to see. Plates were piled high with sweet and savory aromas, but I couldn’t eat just yet. I felt nauseous, my stomach twisting. Every moment was a reminder of who wasn’t here.

I willed my feet to move and mingled with the crowd, making sure everyone was happy and had found what they needed. I also made sure people who didn’t like each other were not fighting over seats. Speaking of which, I made a beeline straight to Ms. Godrik and very gently peeled her away from the table of other elderly ladies who refused to befriend her. Ms. Godrik could talk anyone’s ear off, not letting anyone else speak, but she was a kind lady, and I gave her some of my time while I sat with her until she found some friends that had arrived late. When she started a conversation with one of her friends, I was able to walk away to focus on the others, making sure people who wanted seconds were able to help themselves.

At one point, someone started singing Luigi’s praises, followed by more speeches on how Luigi had helped them get back on their feet. Soon, the whole room was standing and cheering Luigi, which made me so happy to see.

“They should be praising you as well,” a deep voice said from behind me.

The smell was Brandon. I whirled, ready to give him a big hug and hoping we could go back to the way things were when I realized it was Thomas, and he was holding out a tray of food for me.

“I saw you hadn’t eaten, so I made a plate for you,” he said with his bright smile.

“Oh, that’s so nice of you.” *But if only you were Brandon.*

“You really do run the show, don’t you?”

“I guess so. Luigi and Donna are getting up in age, and I love doing this for them since they’ve taken care of me since college.”

“Wonderful to have people like that in your life.”

“Sure is.”

“Why don’t you sit, and I can keep you company for a bit?”

I glanced around. “I should really keep checking up on people.”

“Everyone’s doing great. You should eat before you miss out,” he encouraged. “And if you want, I can go around and see if anyone needs help?”

“No. No, that’s okay.” That was the last thing I wanted him to do. He shouldn’t be working when he was invited as a guest!

I was so confused. His smell was driving me crazy. How could he smell the same as Brandon? And now that I was slowing down, where was Jill?

“Here, sit,” he suddenly ordered.

I turned my attention back to Thomas and saw he was holding out a chair for me.

“Thanks.” I sat down and slowly dug into the food he’d piled on my plate while looking around to see if everything

was going smoothly. Thomas was sitting quite close, and I felt ashamed at how much I liked his proximity.

Thank goodness a girl I'd never seen before came by and sat down in a huff.

"Parties are not supposed to be stressful," she said.

Thomas and I looked at each other before I ventured to ask, "Why is that?"

"Oh, it's probably just me. My sister dragged me here to have fun, and now she's up and left. I have no idea where she went. Been trying to reach her and nothing. Not even a 'see you later.'"

"That's awful! You can hang out with us," I offered.

"Yeah," Thomas agreed, though it sounded like he was a little disappointed. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"That's wonderful of you. I'm Millie, by the way."

"I'm Becca, and this is Thomas."

Thomas nodded and shuffled back in his seat, looking uncomfortable.

Millie suddenly paused and looked at us closely. "Why are you two sitting off by yourselves? Oh no! Are you on a date? Am I disturbing you?"

"Oh, goodness no!" I said with a laugh as I looked at Thomas. I noticed his cheeks went a bit red. *Interesting.* "Thomas just moved in, and we live down the hall from each other. Thomas was nice enough to get some food for me."

He found his voice and added, "Becca's been running around taking care of everyone else and hasn't eaten. It was the least I could do."

"Oh! You're *that* Becca! Luigi was talking nonstop about you, and I really wanted to meet you."

"Well, here I am."

"It's very nice to finally meet you."

I smiled in thanks. "How do you know Luigi?"

“My sister and I went to university near here. We’d come here to eat from time to time. Luigi was always so kind and took care of us.”

“That’s Luigi, for sure. He did the same for me and Brandon when we were in college. He doesn’t have any kids of his own, but you’d never know. Everyone is family to him.”

The chair next to me slid out, and a sweaty Jill sat down next to me. “I am so sorry I’m late. Hi, Thomas.” She gave Thomas a quick wave before leaning on my shoulder, trying to catch her breath.

“What happened?” I asked her. I’d been wondering where she was.

“Oh, Luc called to ask about house things, and then Ray called to ask about floral arrangements. I got so wrapped up that I lost track of time. I’m so sorry, Becca. I really meant to be here early to help you set up and greet everyone.”

“It’s fine. Luigi made a special appearance, bruises and all, and has been having the time of his life talking with everyone.”

“Oh, I’m so glad he’s doing better.” Jill looked around the table and saw Millie. “Hi, I’m Jill,” she said, sticking out her hand.

Millie immediately grabbed it and shook hands before sitting back down. “It’s so good to meet you. I’ve been craving new friends, especially since my sister isn’t reliable to hang out with.”

Jill gave me a look before turning back to Millie and asked, “Was she supposed to be here?”

“Yes, but she has a tendency to just leave when things get uncomfortable.”

Before any of us could ask more questions, Millie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Letting it out, a smile spread across her face as she opened her eyes. “Let’s not talk about my sister. She shouldn’t ruin tonight more than she already has.” She looked around at the three of us. “I just know we’re

all going to be best friends. We're a pack; I can feel it. We're meant to be together."

At this, Thomas spewed the water he was drinking across the table. "So sorry, I don't know what came over me."

Millie didn't seem to notice; she was so deep in thought. She had leaned back in her seat and dropped the chair legs down so hard the people around us stopped to look. "I have an idea!" she announced. "We should get together once a week. I don't have any friends here. Why don't we meet up at Dewey's Cafe tomorrow?"

"That sounds like a good plan," I said.

Jill was smiling broadly, and Thomas didn't seem so sure about the situation, but he nodded as well.

I smiled. I needed to start hanging out with others besides Brandon and Jill. This would be good. This would be very good.

BRANDON

COULD I have been any clearer? I was a good friend and that was it. She couldn't possibly know we were fated mates, and yet her nightmares were saying otherwise. It was like her subconsciousness was trying to tell her that her mate was nearby. I groaned, thinking that was impossible.

I could still feel the kiss she gave me after the ball. Her lips had seared themselves into my memory; I would never forget the feel of them—luscious and soft, just like I knew her skin would feel against mine. I shook my head at the thought. Becca deserved someone who was alert, someone who could dote on her, someone who could be there emotionally for her—and keep her safe from Pac.

The run in the woods did me some good, but I was still so mad we couldn't be together that all I wanted to do was tear out a tree and hurl it as far as I could. The letter I'd received had changed everything.

I'd received it while hammering nails into the living room wall structure of Luc and Jill's new house. Apparently, the letter had been stuck under the doormat, and no one had seen who delivered it. On reading the letter, I'd seen red. Luc threw me out of the house as soon as my hammer flew through the wall and almost hit him in the head. But all I had seen after reading the letter was Pac standing in front of me, four times my size, and laughing in my face about me being a pup and useless at saving my sister, Sandy.

I was always the happy-go-lucky brother of the group. Not so happy-go-lucky now. Not after what I just read.

I shifted to human and leaned against the tree, cursing my life. Thank goodness my pants were able to stay on when I transformed. There was something to be said for having a grandmother who was a witch and a shifter. Taking a few deep breaths to calm myself, I pulled the letter from my pocket and reread it.

Brandon,

It's been a while. I would ask if you were good, but I really don't care. The last time we spoke you had found me and threatened to take away one of my biggest clients—and then successfully did so. All for a girl, and not even the one you love. Yes, I know about your Becca. I see how you look at her. You didn't know I've been watching you, did you? No one does. I've gotten very good at covering my scent.

This is a friendly note to let you know that I am coming after you. That client you took away from me has come back to me, crawling on all four legs, because they know I'm the best when it comes to cloaking people's identities, and now he's learned that the hard way. He and everyone else are being sufficiently punished, and now it's your turn.

You have your family's protection, and as you know, I know them well too. But Becca ... well, Becca doesn't have that, does she? She's all alone.

Pac

I crumpled up the note and stuffed it back in my pocket, then began banging my head on the tree. Why was this happening? Becca could do no harm to anyone. She was the epitome of kindness and would protect the wounded and weak with all her being.

Becca ...

My heart bled for her. My wolf was torturing me even more these days to claim her as my own. Which meant I couldn't go to Luigi's party last night. Couldn't watch her in

her element, helping others. Knowing her, she probably forgot to eat dinner, but Donna and Luigi would have been there, and Jill too. Becca would have been okay.

As for work, I planned on lightening my case load and aligning myself with a new lawyer who had joined our company—one I didn't want to jump every second. I would still ensure I was in the same department as Becca, so I could keep an eye on her. I groaned and rubbed my hands through my hair. What was I going to do? Even if I could keep an eye on her for the rest of her life, I was worthless at saving those I loved. My heart hurt just thinking about it.

I released a deep sigh. How things had changed. Ever since I saw her bright red hair in law school, we'd been best friends. She had drawn me to her like a siren, and I'd followed her everywhere. It was a big relief when she decided to work in the same firm I had gotten a job in.

We were allowed to go to college in Crystal Lake, but then we had to come home and work. More years away from the pack made Dad uneasy and upset. Not a great combination. Mom had stood up for me when I said I wanted to attend a law school in Crystal Lake, but she had put her foot down on me leaving the pack for a job. So, with Becca here, I had her and my family. But now I wasn't so sure. After the ball, I'd made a mess of things. How could I have let her kiss me that night? I couldn't provide her with the type of love she deserved. She needed someone stronger than me, someone who wouldn't fail her.

I squeezed my eyes closed and prayed for sleep to overtake me.

The recurring dream began filtering into my mind as soon as I started to let go. Sandy was screaming as Pac took her away. Something hard knocked against my head, and I blacked out until I woke up to Luc shaking me awake. Sandy had gone—taken by Pac. I'd been completely useless; the one brother who was with Sandy. The only one who couldn't keep her safe, even though I'd been right next to her. The memory jarred me awake again.

What use would I be to Becca if I couldn't keep her safe?

But Pac threatening her was sending a surge of anger through me, so strong it left me shaking. I had to find a way to keep her safe. *But what if I failed again?* My wolf was screaming in my head that he would lay waste to Pac if he dared to lay a hand on her. I pushed him back as much as I could, trying to retain my human form. It was the only way to think without the need to kill taking over.

PAC

I WOULDN'T MAKE the same mistake I made with Jill. Becca would be captured and brought straight to my house. I would watch over her personally; she would never be left alone.

Who knew Jill could fight back? She was such a submissive girl I hadn't expected it. I should have never let her go. A void had been created when she left. She belonged here with me, not with Luc! How dare he take her as his own. He would be next on my list

But then again, once I got ahold of Becca, Brandon would come, and when Brandon came for me, the whole family would follow. Then I would have my revenge on them all!

It was Theodore's fault. He should have put me first in line as alpha. I was the oldest, after all. But the wretched bloodline came first. Well, we'd see what he thought when I stripped them of their alpha powers. Then we'd see who was alpha.

Thomas better report in soon because I wanted Becca now!

BECCA

FALLING onto the floor of my room was not the way I liked to wake up. Groaning, I peeled myself off the carpet and climbed back into bed. Laying on my back, I stared at the ceiling, wishing the nightmare would go away once and for all. The sense of claustrophobia was still lingering, and I tried to draw in deep breaths, but to no avail. I closed my eyes and counted to ten while holding my breath, just like Brandon taught me, and tried more deep breaths. This time I was able to take in a couple, and after repeating this a few more times, I could breathe again.

Tears took over then, and I let them fall. No one could ever save me in my nightmare, and I always woke up after I'd exhausted myself banging on the locked door. What did this all mean?

The nightmares had started soon after the ball, and the only person I'd told about them was Brandon. He never told me I was crazy but looked at me like he wanted to tell me something. Then he looked away and told me I could call him if I wanted his help to get back to sleep. I couldn't do that, though. Going to sleep to the sound of his voice while knowing I'd never be with him would be another form of torture.

Seeing that it was four in the morning, I made myself think of a field of green grass and flowers. Slowly, I fell back asleep, hoping this time it would be free of dreams.



The next morning was gruesome, as I hadn't slept a wink. Somehow, I managed to get out of bed and make myself presentable. Why did I agree to this brunch today? I was worn out.

By the time I made it to the café, I'd drunk three cups of coffee. It would get me through the meal before I could go home and crash.

"You look wired," Thomas said.

I wanted to wipe the look of mirth off his face, but if I made contact, the combination of his skin and scent would make me want to lean toward him. Better to just keep my distance.

"Good morning. Are we the first ones here?" I said, looking around for the others.

"We're the only ones here."

"What do you mean?" A sense of foreboding coursed through me.

"Jill just got called home. Something about last-minute decisions that couldn't wait. And Millie's sister called and said she needed her help."

Why would they call Thomas and not me? Millie, that made sense, as she met us at the same time, but Jill?

"And before you think this odd, Jill tried to call you, but she couldn't get ahold of you. So, she called Millie, who then called me."

That did make me feel better. "Guess it's just the two of us, then."

"Yeah, I think it worked out nicely."

I looked at him to make sure I heard correctly and was greeted by a warm smile. My heart fluttered, and I walked into the cafe before I did anything I'd regret.

During the meal, I learned Thomas hadn't seen his family in a while. He'd been traveling alone for two years, and it was out of sheer loneliness that he moved here to Crystal Lake.

He got up at one point to visit the bathroom, and when he came back, he chose to sit in the chair next to me instead of across from me, where he had been eating his brunch.

"I hope you don't mind, but I find it easier to talk to someone when I feel closer to them. It felt so formal when I was sitting across from you, like we were doing an interview," he explained.

"Yes, this is more friendly." I smiled. "Speaking of friends, you have a friend in me. And Millie, and Jill, and ..." I almost said the McCullough brothers, but there was no reason he'd ever meet them unless he visited Sugarville. *How was Brandon doing?* The question popped into my head out of nowhere, and I lost my train of thought.

"And?" Thomas prompted.

"Oh, no one you'd know. Just people who have since moved away."

There was a lull before he asked, "You know, I've never asked you what you do?"

"That's easy; I'm a lawyer fighting for the good guys."

"Very chivalrous of you."

His smile was dazzling, and for a second, I forgot what I was going to say next. Thankfully, having worked in heated court cases, I was able to get my brain screwed on again. "Yeah, I like to think so."

His laugh was boisterous. Nothing like Brandon's. I sighed on the inside, glad there was a difference between them.

"You are very confident in yourself," he observed.

"I am." I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair, giving him my best court face when I knew I had them in the hot seat.

He reacted just like I wanted him to. With both hands held up in front of him, he said, “No offense. It’s just the girls I tend to meet are more timid. I’ve never met someone like you before. I’m glad you’ve broken the stereotype.”

I cocked my head, wondering if that was a compliment. From the corner of my eye, I saw a glimpse of someone who looked like Brandon pacing outside the cafe. When I turned to get a better look, sure enough it was, and he did not look happy. Was he hurt?

Without thinking, I got out of my seat, intending to go to him. I heard Thomas get up, too, but I couldn’t care less about what he did; Brandon was hurting.

I shot out of the entrance and walked straight up to him. Before I could ask him what was wrong, Brandon demanded, “Who is he?” He pointed to someone behind me, and I turned to see Thomas had followed me out.

“Becca, is everything okay?” Thomas said, coming to a halt behind me.

“Everything’s fine.” I turned back to Brandon to ask how he was, but he pushed past me to stand mere inches away from Thomas.

The two of them stood like that, eye to eye, for what seemed like forever but was probably only a few seconds. I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath until Thomas moved back, putting his hands up in a similar reaction to the one he’d given me moments before. A chuckle threatened to come out of my mouth, because that meant Brandon and I were quite the intimidating pair. *A pair that should be together!*

“Brandon—” I began.

“Not now, Becca. I need to know who this man is.”

“I can tell you if you’d just talk to me.”

“Or he can tell me himself.” Brandon’s brow arched upward, and I knew he wasn’t going to bend to anyone’s will but his own.

Sighing, I said, “Thomas, you might as well disclose who you are because Brandon isn’t going anywhere.”

“I will, but only after I know he’s not a threat to you,” Thomas said.

A low growl emanated from Brandon, and I immediately stepped closer and put a hand on his arm. Thomas’s gaze dropped to follow the movement and, did I imagine it, or did Thomas’s hands clench for a second?

In order to dissipate the confrontation, I said, “He’s not. Brandon’s an old friend from law school. We work together.”

“Then no problem,” Thomas said.

Was that a growl that came from Thomas too? What was with men always needing to show their dominance? I wanted to roll my eyes but didn’t dare add fuel to whatever fire was going on here.

Thomas continued, “I’m Becca’s new neighbor down the hall. I moved in last weekend and am looking to make new friends, including you if you’d let me.” He gestured at Brandon in a way that I hoped wouldn’t upset Brandon more.

But Brandon didn’t answer that invitation. Instead, he said bluntly, “I’m going to take Becca home now. Don’t follow.” A deeper and longer growl emanated from Brandon, and I looked at him wondering who this stranger was.

“Yes, sir.” Thomas actually saluted and backed off, leaving us space to walk away.

I didn’t budge. I would have laughed if I wasn’t so mad at Brandon. What game was he playing at? What happened to my happy-go-lucky guy?

“Brandon!” I slapped him on the arm to get his attention. When he turned to face me, I was startled to see that his eyes were glowing, but when they reverted back to normal a split second later, I questioned what I’d seen. “You do not need to take me home,” I said firmly. “I’m more than capable of going by myself, and you’re being really rude.”

“I’m taking you home.” This came out more guttural than before, and once again, I was worried about him.

“Are you coming down with something? Should I be the one taking you home?”

“No.” He stood there shaking his head, both of his hands on my arms while looking at me like he was going to lose me.

“You’re scaring me, Brandon. What is going on?”

“We need to get home.”

Then, as if none of this had happened, he turned and stuck out his hand to Thomas. To Thomas’s credit, he didn’t question the move and simply shook Brandon’s hand. With that done, Brandon turned, holding my arm as he speed-walked me to his car.

“You know I’m more than capable of driving, and my car is here too,” I spluttered.

“You’re riding with me,” he grunted.

And that was the end of it. Brandon didn’t get angry very easily, and I had only ever seen him act this way two other times. The first time it had happened we were in law school, and my phone had died. He wasn’t able to reach me for more than twenty-four hours and had been so frantic he wouldn’t let me out of his sight after he’d found me. The second time was when Jill went missing and I tried to go look for her myself. Minus the fact that my best friend had been kidnapped by her ex and I was out of my mind worried about her, I enjoyed being in Brandon’s arms during that time. He took care of me for a whole week until, once again, I had to tell him to stop suffocating me.

I looked over at the man I loved. Why couldn’t he open up his heart to me? What was holding him back?

He had parked off the main road, and by the time we got to his car, I was fuming and could feel tears trickling down my cheeks. I knew better than to argue with him when he was in this mood, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I wrenched my arm out of his grasp and whirled to face him. “What do you think you’re doing?” I demanded.

“I told you I’m taking you home.”

“No! What is going on between us? Why are you here and not with Luc building his house? Why are you so mad? What was that back there and how you treated my new friend? You’re never like this, not even with your crappy clients. What is going on, Brandon?” I wanted to shake him so badly, but I knew if I touched him, I would be a goner. So, I held my hands by my sides and started counting to a hundred, hoping he’d start talking before then.

Instead, he grabbed my hand and tried to pull me to the car.

“No!” I pushed against him hard, and that seemed to surprise him enough to loosen his hold on me. Wrenching my arm free from his grasp, I stood my ground and crossed my arms over my chest. “Give me an answer now!”

“I just need to make sure you’re safe.”

The look on his face when he said this almost broke my heart. But I steeled myself. “Not good enough. I’m perfectly safe. No one’s out to get me. We joke about clients who would want to take revenge, but they’re just jokes. You and I both know that we work on high-profile cases, but they’re still small compared to others. Plus, everyone we’ve ever put behind bars is still behind bars. I don’t get why you’re acting like this.”

“I need you safe,” he repeated. He ran his hand through his hair, and I so wanted to do the same, but I clenched my fists tight.

“What do you want from me, Brandon? You said it yourself—you see me as a sister when I told you I have more than brotherly feelings for you. I don’t know how I can make it any plainer to you.”

“Becca—”

“No!” I stomped my foot, and it immediately felt ridiculous but so good all at the same time. “Let me talk. We’ve been doing this dance of whatever you want to call our relationship for years. It was so nice to finally meet your

siblings and parents. I thought ... I thought ...” *Get it out. Just do it.* I took a deep breath. “I want to move on, Brandon. It’s time for both of us to move on. Either together or with someone else. It’s not fair to either of us to keep doing what we’ve been doing.”

His eyes had gotten big. “What are you trying to say?”

It took me a second before I realized the growling sound I was hearing was coming from Brandon. What the heck was going on? “I’m saying I don’t think we can be friends anymore, especially if you’re going to be possessive about who I’m with. I want to be your girlfriend, but if I can’t, I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“Wait! You’re breaking up with me?”

“I ... I guess so.”

We stood in silence, staring at each other and not knowing what to do next. We weren’t even dating, but why did I feel like my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces?

“Becca ...”

I waited, watching as he clenched and unclenched his hands. I couldn’t believe I had said all that. My heart was breaking even more just watching him, and part of me wanted to take back every word I just said. But only part of it. I couldn’t keep playing this game. I couldn’t keep pining after him, and I couldn’t keep waiting on him to make a move.

“Becca, I ... I have to keep you safe.”

“From what?”

He looked away, unable to hold my gaze. “I can’t tell you.”

I gaped at him. “That’s a bunch of BS and you know it. You know me well enough that you can tell me anything, and if it portends to my well-being, I definitely should know.”

“It’s not ...” He dragged his gaze back to mine and ran his hands through his hair again.

“There is nobody we’ve represented that I couldn’t protect myself from. I have the chief of police on speed dial, and I

carry pepper spray everywhere I go because you wanted me to. I always lock my doors and windows, and I—” I almost said ‘I have you,’ but that wasn’t true anymore, was it? I couldn’t keep seeing him anymore.

“You have what?” Brandon was looking at me with pleading eyes.

I almost crumpled and ran to him, but I shook my head. “I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for my whole life. I can keep doing it.”

“You have to trust me, Becca.”

“No, I don’t anymore. And I do not want to keep following you around.”

“Follow me around? What is that supposed to mean?”

“I took the job here for you. I stayed here for you.” The way his eyes bugged out closed the deal for me. He really had never seen me as anything more than a sister. The tears really started to flow now. “I’ve turned down job offers in order to stay here with you, hoping you would make a move.”

“Becca—”

“Brandon, I’m going to leave now and go home by myself. I don’t need you to protect me. You couldn’t, even if you wanted to, because you’ve broken me in the worse possible way.” I turned to leave, disgusted at myself because I still held hope that he’d run after me and tell me I was wrong. *Please, Brandon, anything!* But he didn’t. Not even when I got in my car and started the engine. I could see him still standing by his car, simply looking at me. I drove off staring straight ahead and cried hard all the way home.

BECCA

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I got up the nerve to call Jill. As soon as she answered, a loud buzzing noise came firing down the line, and I had to hold the phone away from my ears.

There came a lull moments later, and I quickly said, “Is that the house project? How’s it going?”

“As good as it’s going to get.” She sighed. “I wish I was at your place right now so I could get away. The testosterone levels exuding from all these guys is next level. It could bury me alive.”

I laughed. “You’re always welcome here.” *Better here than there so I didn’t have to see Brandon.*

There was another pause, and I wondered if she was still there. “Jill?”

“Yeah, sorry. You better tell me the reason why you called real quick because I see them going back to sawing again.”

Which meant it was time to drop the bombshell. “I broke up with Brandon,” I blurted out. *Was that the right word? We weren’t even dating.*

“What?” Her scream came in so loud I had to hold the phone away from my ear again. While sticking a finger in my ear to try and wake it back up, she added, “You can’t do that! Brandon—”

“I had to, Jill. He doesn’t want to be with me, and I can’t take it anymore.”

“But he cares about you so much, Becca!”

“How do you know that? Has he said that to you?” *And if he did, why wouldn't he say it to me?*

There was a pause before Jill said, “He took care of you when everyone else was searching for me.”

“It's not enough anymore, Jill.” *What was she not telling me?* “I asked him again ...”

“To be your boyfriend?”

“Yes. He told me he wasn't interested. Jill, he told me no.” I stuffed my hand into my mouth to keep a sob from escaping. “Why am I always in the friend zone? What am I doing wrong?”

The sound of saws starting up covered any response Jill tried to give. When it was silent again, she said, “Becca, we are going to talk about this more. I'll be there as soon as I can. Just don't do anything rash, okay?”

“Jill, there's nothing to talk about. I want what you and Luc have, and Brandon isn't the man to give that to me.”

A groan came over the phone, and I heard Luc come up and ask her what was wrong.

“Becca asked Brandon to be her boyfriend, and he said no again,” Jill said in a rush.

A series of expletives came out of Luc's mouth, and I heard him yelling for Brandon. I panicked. “Jill! Please don't let Luc confront him. I don't want there to be a scene.”

“I'll try, but Brandon is an idiot. He—”

“I'm going to let you go now,” I said quickly, cutting her off.

“Becca—”

“No, I don't want to talk about it anymore.”

I hung up and lay back on the couch and squished a pillow over my face. *I was the idiot.* Brandon had always been clear about his intentions, while I'd wanted more. We were so good

together. I didn't understand his reasoning, but I couldn't keep hanging on, not if I wanted to start a family of my own.

BRANDON

“YOU’RE the biggest flopping idiot I’ve ever known!” Luc said, coming toward me.

“Now what did I do?”

“You said no to Becca!”

Luc’s eyes were shining bright. He looked ready for a fight. And I was ready to give it to him if he was going to ask for it.

“Man, why would you do that?” Jacob cut in; eyebrows raised.

“Yeah! Everyone can see she’s your mate,” Bruno added.

I looked at my brothers and wiped a hand through my hair. Sometimes I wished I was an only child. “You know why I did it.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Luc said.

“Yeah, why don’t you explain it to us, because we all know if another man ever touched Becca you would tear him apart. If that’s not mate worthy then I don’t know what is,” Bruno said.

A flash of jealousy surged through me, and I launched myself at Bruno. I collided with him headfirst, and we both went rolling on the half-built living room floor, me punching wherever I could get a hit in. “Don’t you ever talk about another man with Becca!”

Multiple hands grabbed me and pulled me back.

Bruno laughed on the ground, blood trickling down his face. “You are such a fool.”

Someone turned me around, and I saw Luc’s face right in front of mine. “I’ll share a little something with you seeing how I’m with my mate now.”

“And what would that be?” I seethed.

“You either claim Becca as your own or you’re done for. And I don’t mean you live in self-pity as a bachelor for the rest of your life. I mean your wolf will wither, and you will die a painful death of loneliness knowing you willingly let your mate get away.”

“You’re being over dramatic. Did you know this when you refused to be with Jill?”

“No—”

“So why are you telling me? It might not be true!”

“Because it is true! Miti told me after we found Jill. She said thank goodness me and Jill’s separation was short-lived. I came around eventually to the fact she is my mate. But if I had waited years”—he gave me a pointed look—“and deprived my wolf of her, over time my powers would have waned. If I formally cut her off and had no more contact with her, I would grow old, yes, but my wolf would also stop responding until, eventually, I would not be able to shift anymore. I would turn human and die a painful death knowing I let my wolf wither away because I let my mate get away.”

“You’re telling lies,” I growled.

“Miti never lies, and you know it.”

We stared at each other for a bit, Jacob and Bruno looking on.

I growled, frustration taking hold of every fiber of my being. “Let’s say I can claim her then.”

“You can!”

I held up my hand. “Don’t push me,” I seethed. “Let’s say I can claim her but she doesn’t want me. Becca has great

potential; she's amazing at her work. She'll soon see I don't fit into her life plans and that I've already held her back too much."

Luc's look of pity was the last thing I wanted to see, so I turned away and walked to our parents' house. Just because he had found a mate didn't mean he knew everything. And Miti didn't know everything either. I stomped hard on the steps to my parents' house. *I don't need my grandmother meddling in my love life.*

BRANDON

SITTING ON LUC'S SOFA, I chugged cup after cup of hot tea, relishing the burning sensation pouring down my throat. It mirrored the burn in my heart. *I broke her? Denying Becca a relationship had broken her?*

The news had cut me to the quick. There was one thing I wanted most for Becca and that was to keep her safe. Again, I had failed, and not because someone else got to her, but because *I'd* hurt her. The message had pushed me down into a deep abyss, one I didn't know I would ever be able to come out of.

It'd been a few days since Becca had broken up with me, and the irony was we weren't even dating! I slammed my hand into the coffee table, leaving a dent. *Crap, Luc isn't going to like that.* I had made such a scene these last two days at the job site, and now that Luc knew Becca had broken up with me, he didn't think it wise that I stayed by myself. He'd dragged me to his place and planted me on his sofa, and this was where I had stayed for the last twenty-four hours.

Work didn't even matter to me anymore. I had tried calling, had driven to her place to talk to her in person, had even stopped by the office to find her, but she had disappeared. Right out of my life. The only evidence that she hadn't been a dream I'd made up was a text message I'd received from her, reiterating that she wanted to be left alone. I really was crap at taking care of the women I loved the most.

My fingers dug into my scalp, trying to tear out the hurt, but it just kept burying deeper. For a change, my wolf was

smug. Mad, but smug. He wouldn't let me change, and that was a new one. I had never heard of a wolf who couldn't change whenever they wanted to. It reminded me of Luc's story, but I wasn't old yet, and the whole thing about me perishing because I didn't claim her was bogus. Just another story to scare me into doing what was wrong. It just added to the frustration.

"Feeling sorry for yourself?" Luc said, slamming the door shut as he entered the apartment.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Really? Me who didn't want a mate and then ended up with one, no matter how hard I fought it? No, I wouldn't get what you're going through. What I don't get is why you're putting yourself through this torture when your girl is literally waiting for you to come and proclaim your love for her."

"Well, she's not anymore."

"Due to your own stupid fault. But you can still win her back. You know she's your mate, and I can see you're dying to claim her."

He said this last part close to my ears, and I jumped across the back of the sofa and tackled him. We rolled around on the floor, throwing punches wherever we could get one in. It all ended when Luc put me in a headlock.

"All you have to do is tell her you're sorry and that you actually do want to be with her."

"It's not that easy," I said.

"What is it going to take to knock some sense into you?"

"You getting off my neck for one."

Luc immediately let go, stood up, and walked into the kitchen. "So, what are you going to do then?"

"Think of a way I can track her. She's not going to let me be nearby anymore."

"You are crap, you know that?"

"And you weren't?"

“Touché.” Luc opened and closed a couple of cupboards before saying, “Don’t be like me, Brandon. Your love is within arm’s reach. Go get her.”

“I need to get rid of the threat first, though,” I said under my breath, forgetting for a split second that Luc could hear me even if I whispered. I’d been hanging around humans a lot more than I thought.

“What did you say?” This time he growled.

“Nothing. I’m going to take care of it myself.”

“No.” Luc was in front of me in an instant, anger rolling off his shoulders. “What threat are you talking about?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“You’re going to tell me, or you won’t be able to leave this apartment.”

I looked at him and, knowing my brother, he would keep his promise. Maybe I could bring him in and he could help me. Even if I *was* the one who caused the problem in the first place. But then again, if I hadn’t made a move on Pac, Luc wouldn’t have Jill now, so he owed me. *Ugh!* Luc didn’t owe me anything. I was in a mess, and now Becca didn’t want to see me. I needed his help.

Sighing, I said slowly, “Pac wrote me a letter.”

Luc just stared at me with his arms crossed, waiting for more. I told him what was in the letter, and his stance and face never changed. It was unnerving how much like Dad he was sometimes.

“And you never knew the guy you were dealing with was Pac?” He said it more as a statement, but it still made my blood boil.

“Of course, I didn’t know! If I’d known it was Pac that Jill was with, I would have taken a different route.”

“Brandon—”

“I don’t need you to lecture me.”

“I wasn’t going to lecture you. I was going to say thank you for saving Jill. I don’t think I’ve said it enough to you. Of all our siblings, I think you know I understand you very well. I know what you’re going through not claiming your mate. Let me help you.”

I hung my head, knowing what he said was true, but I had a hard time asking anyone for help.

“You can let Dad—”

My head snapped up. “No! Do not tell the rest of the family. I don’t want anyone else involved. Pac is dangerous.”

“We can take him down with the whole pack.”

“We don’t even know where he is. You heard what I said—he’s gotten really good at masking his scent. Plus, there’s more.”

“More?” This time, Luc growled even lower.

“Donna called the same day I got the letter from Pac. Told me the guy who broke Luigi’s arm wasn’t just a burglar; he was looking for someone, and he wanted Luigi to tell him the person’s whereabouts.”

“Who was he looking for?”

I looked at Luc, trying to hold back tears. “Becca.”

Luc slammed his fists into the kitchen counter, making the plates and utensils sitting on the surface clatter to the floor. “I can’t believe you’ve been keeping this all to yourself. Did Luigi describe who the person was?”

I shook my head. “Donna said it was too dark for Luigi to see. The guy had a flashlight and shone it into his face so he couldn’t see him.”

“But it was a man?”

“Yes.”

His mouth tightened. “I bet it was Pac.”

“I think so too.”

“We really should—”

“No, Luc. There is no telling the rest of the family. We need to find out where Pac is first.”

“Brandon, I doubt Pac will stop at just threatening you. You’re putting the family in danger by not telling them.”

“Not yet! I need to figure things out on my own first.”

“With my help.” Luc’s voice was firm.

“Fine, but only you.”

I knew what Luc said was true, but I really needed to prove to myself that I was capable of protecting my loved ones on my own.

PAC

I COULDN'T HELP LAUGHING. They had no idea how many steps ahead of them I was.

Thomas had been good at keeping me updated; slow but on time. He even believed the lie I told him that Becca and I were once lovers.

What was even better was no one knew where or who I was. It was absolutely fantastic.

Everything was going like clockwork.

BECCA

I WAS A MESS, sitting in my robe with a bucket of homemade ice cream all to myself while belting out “All by Myself” right along with Bridget Jones playing on the television.

I did it. I really did it. I did what my mother couldn’t do all those years ago—I said no to the man I love instead of enduring heartache for the rest of my life ... and I felt like the most miserable person to exist on this earth.

Looking down into the ice cream tub, I saw there was a small puddle of tears in it. *Makes it saltier*, I thought as I took another bite. I wished Mom was still around so I could talk to her. She always said she never regretted marrying my dad because she had me, but she was so sad through life. Aside from me, there had been no one else to take care of her.

Was I greedy in wanting more? Wanting someone who could take care of me *and* be there for me?

Maybe I was being too picky. But I’d always taken care of myself. Didn’t have a choice, really. Mom had three jobs, and it was all she could do to catch some sleep before she was off to the next one. I’d made sure she was fed before I did my homework and cleaned the house. It would have been nice to have someone to do all of that with, or someone to cook for me every once in a while. Had that been too much to ask?

Yet, the more I tried to justify breaking up with Brandon, the more confused I got, because the ache inside was getting worse, not better. How did I make it stop?

My phone rang, and I turned off the sound on the TV before answering. “Hello?”

“Becca!” a voice boomed across the line.

It was my boss! I sat up on the sofa, kicking myself. I should have checked the caller ID before picking up. “Yes, sir. What can I do for you?” I hoped I didn’t sound like I was half asleep.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No. No, sir. This is a fantastic time.” *Hopefully, he bought that.*

“Good,” he boomed again. “Because I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes, sir?”

“What do you think about moving to San Francisco and being our top lawyer in that office? We just had a group of partners retire, and we’re looking for new blood.”

Is he offering me a position as a partner?

But as soon as the thought had formed, he added, “This doesn’t mean you’re getting partner, but who knows down the road.”

“Thank you, sir! I’d love to take the opportunity.”

“Good, good. But don’t thank me. It’s a fast turnaround; you’ll be starting next week.”

I didn’t even hesitate. “That’s not a problem.”

I hung up the phone soon after, thinking this was the change I needed. Right now, though, I had a tub of ice cream to finish.



The next evening after coming back from work, I found a package on the table in the mailroom. It had in big letters ‘FOR BECCA THORNGOOD’ written across it. It was hand-

wrapped, with a bow tied around it. I looked around to see if anyone was waiting for me, but the mailroom was empty.

Taking the box with me back to my apartment, I set it on the kitchen counter and went to take a soak in the tub. Although, I didn't last long in there; the itch to open the package wouldn't let me settle.

Wrapping myself in a towel, I went back into the kitchen and tore open the package, revealing a jewelry box about five inches long and one inch wide. I undid the clasp and opened it to reveal a necklace with a note.

Becca,

I'm sorry I hurt you. It was never my intention. You are my best friend, and I can't imagine my life without you, but trust me, you don't want to be with me romantically. You deserve so much better.

This is a necklace I've been hanging onto for a while now. My grandmother made these for us to give to those we care about, and I know you might not believe me, but I do care about you. I hope you wear it. It's like a dreamcatcher. It'll help with your nightmares.

I won't bother you anymore. I've hurt you enough, but I wanted to make sure you got this.

Brandon

I collapsed on the floor, bawling. How could he do this to me? Why did he have to be so kind and thoughtful but couldn't go the extra step to be with me? Because he thought he didn't deserve me?

The thought of him writing that made my blood boil so hot I threw the necklace across the room. It bounced off the living room carpet and settled on the ground. I immediately went to pick it up, hoping I hadn't broken it. As mad as I was at Brandon, this was the last thing he'd given me.

Blinking back my tears, I looked at the necklace for the first time. It held a circular charm with a gold backing and had blue and silver stars running up the chain—three on each side. Twisting the necklace back and forth, the image on the front changed from a wolf to a girl and then back to a wolf.

The image brought back a memory of us at the zoo. We'd been looking at the wolves in their enclosure. I had made a joke about wanting to be one of them, because they looked so fierce and capable. Brandon had given me an odd look before saying I already was one when in court.

I twirled the charm in my hand back and forth. It was utterly beautiful. Of course, he would send me something like this after I told him to go away. *What are you doing to me, Brandon?*

I needed to get away. That was final. The move couldn't have come at a better time. In the meantime, I needed to get through these next few days and not be alone.



“I’m so glad you called!” Millie said, unlocking the car door for me.

She was waiting out front in her white Escalade, dressed in jeans and a white puffy jacket. I had called Millie in hopes she’d want to come over to share ice cream and watch a movie, just like Jill would have done. But she immediately latched on that I needed outside time and to get away from my house. She wouldn’t take no for an answer until I had agreed to go out with her tonight.

I stepped up into the passenger seat. “This is a huge car!”

She reached over the center console to give me a hug and laughed. “Largest one I could persuade Dad to get for me. Need a big vehicle to haul all his artwork around.”

“Have I seen his art?”

“Probably not. He only sells to private collectors. Most of his work is commission, though he also does a lot of artworks

that are ‘whatever comes to him in the moment,’” she said with air quotes.

“So why are you looking for an art gallery?”

“Mom finally persuaded him to get rid of ninety percent of his whatever-comes-to-him-in-the-moment paintings. They were taking up one of the master closets, and she was getting tired of looking at them. Though, between you and me, Mom’s just going to fill up the closet with couture dresses.”

Catching the incredulous look on my face, Millie added, “She collects them.”

That still didn’t compute in my head.

She laughed again. “My family is well-off. Does that help?”

“Sure.” No wonder she had an Escalade as a commuter car.

“Anyway, enough about my family. Did you have anywhere you particularly want to go tonight?”

“Not really. Like I said, I was happy to stay home.”

“And as I will reiterate, that’s not an option. I have the perfect place for us to go then.”

“I don’t want to get drunk or go to a club, if that’s what you’re thinking,” I said quickly.

“No. No. None of that. This will be funner. Just sit back, we’ll be there in no time.”

Sure enough, about fifteen minutes later we were parked in front of a bowling alley. But it wasn’t just a bowling alley. I could hear music, and there looked like arcades at the entrance.

“Lira and I found this place our first night here,” Millie said, hooking my arm and leading me into the building. “I’ve got the record on the Pac Man game. Have you ever beat any of the games here?”

“No, I’ve never been here.”

Millie stopped and turned to look at me. “What do you mean you’ve never been here? You’ve lived here for how many years?”

“Many. Law school plus two years.”

Her face was a kaleidoscope of emotions—amazement, confusion, and then ending on pure joy with a smile that split her face. “I am *so* glad you called! We’re going to have so much fun.” She turned to the girl behind the front desk and said, “Two for bowling.” Turning back to me, I saw her eyes were ablaze. “We’re going to start with bowling and then we’re going to play every arcade game we can get our hands on. Tonight, your goal will be to forget about everything else in your life. Pretend you’re in the court room and that you have to win every single game in order to leave.”

Her energy was starting to rub off on me. “I can do that.” I smiled. This was the distraction I needed. I was so happy I called Millie tonight.

“Good. We’re in lane two. Let’s go!”

We spent the next hour bowling, laughing, eating pizza and mozzarella sticks, and learning that the two of us were the worse bowlers this place had ever seen. And we didn’t care one bit.

True to her word, Millie and I played every game in the arcade section, and I even beat her in skeeball. I squealed like a three-year-old who had just won the biggest birthday cake in the world. We both jumped up and down, not caring that others were staring at us.

“I haven’t had this much fun in such a long time,” I confessed.

Millie gave me a big squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re having fun. I have one last thing for us to do tonight.”

“And what’s that?”

“We’re going to go sit under the stars.”

“Oh.”

“Come on.” Millie pulled me to the entrance.

We drove twenty minutes out of town until we found a patch of land that was in pitch black darkness. Millie got a towel out of the trunk and laid it on the hood of the car. Using the wheel as a stepladder, we climbed onto the hood and laid back.

I gasped as I looked up at the sky. "I've never seen so many stars."

"Isn't it beautiful?"

We were silent for some time before Millie said, "My parents used to take us out like this. We'd just sit and stare at the stars until one of us got too cold."

"Your parents sound wonderful."

"Yeah, they are." She sighed. "When they're around."

I turned to look at her, but it was so dark I could barely make out that she was next to me. "I'm sorry to hear."

"It's no big deal. Some people work less as they get older, but my parents are the opposite. It's like they've realized that now they're getting older, they have to work even more in order to fund everything they've ever wanted to do."

"That sounds horrible." *And it also sounds like the direction I'm headed in.* "But your Dad loves what he does, right?"

"Yeah, he does, but I've always wondered when they will stop and just lay back and watch the stars again. I'm not going to be like them. I'm going to save up now so I have enough for retirement."

I didn't say anything. Work was all I knew; putting criminals behind bars, reaching for my next promotion, and eventually getting partner. This was the life I knew and understood, but here was Millie showing me an alternate way to live with different goals to aim for.

As if reading my mind, she said, "You work too much if you've never been bowling or just goofed off for the sake of goofing off."

"Yeah ..."

“Hey, I’m glad we could come out tonight,” she said, giving my arm a squeeze. “We should do this again.”

“Me too. Thank you for taking me out. I needed tonight.”

She didn’t say anything more on the drive home, and I was thankful because I had a lot to think about.

BRANDON

“I THINK you’ve had enough, Brandon.”

I looked up to see the bartender about to take my empty glass away from me. I reached out to grab it, but everything was moving slowly.

That’s when a hand slapped me on the back, and I felt more than saw someone sit down next to me.

“I’ll take whatever he’s having,” said another voice.

It’s a girl, my muddled brain told me. With a heavy head, I made myself turn to see who it was. “Jill!” I almost toppled off my seat, but she caught me in time. Maybe the bartender was right and I’d had enough.

“You are a mess, Brandon.”

“Well, I’m not trying to impress anyone.”

“Ugh, and you stink. When’s the last time you took a bath?”

“None of your business.” I growled to let her know I didn’t want her here. Knowing Jill was comfortable with our family being shifters sent a twinge through me. Becca would never accept this.

“You know—” she began.

“Jill, you need to leave,” I said bluntly. “I have nothing to talk about.”

“I think you do.”

I looked at her this time and shifted my eyes to golden.

She scoffed. “You don’t scare me. Luc has pulled this on me already. And Luc would kill you if you did anything to me.”

I grunted and swiveled back to my drink. She was *too* comfortable with us. I waved for the bartender, but he ignored me. Disgruntled, I got out of my seat, only for the room to tilt. Jill was by my side in an instant.

Somehow, we made it outside and to her car, and I let her slide me into the passenger seat. Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes and slept until I awoke to someone shaking me.

“Brandon! Wake up! We’re home!” Jill cried.

I peeled my eyes open. Sure enough, we were in front of Luc’s apartment. “I don’t want to go there. Take me to my home,” I said, closing my eyes again and leaning back against the headrest.

“We’re already here, and Luc wants you to stay here.”

“Then why didn’t he come get me himself?”

“Because he doesn’t know I came to see you.”

I popped one eye open to see if she was serious. “You thought you’d be able to persuade me to come home?”

“My plan wasn’t to bring you home. My plan was to find you and yell at you.”

My second eye opened at this, and we stared at each other for a bit. “You’re crazy.”

“Like I said, I’m not scared of you.”

“You should be.”

I saw her shake her head before I closed my eyes again. After a moment, I asked, “What were you going to yell at me about?”

“I think you know.”

“Why don’t you spell it out for me? Might do me some good to hear it from someone else.”

She sighed before saying, “You and Becca are fated mates. Just like Luc and me.”

“That’s very astute of you.”

I heard her shuffle and lean closer. “So, you don’t refute it?”

“Why should I? I know she’s my mate; I just can’t be with her.” My wolf snarled at me, but I ignored him. “Even my wolf is mad at me right now.”

“He’s mad at you?”

I heard the car door behind me open and smelled Luc as he slid into the back seat. “Wanted to join the party.”

I grunted. *Great.*

Luc said, “I heard you say your wolf is mad at you?”

I sighed. Here went nothing. “I’m not able to shift.”

I could feel Luc’s confusion as if I was standing right in front of him and watching his face. The aroma of fear wafted over first, soon replaced by anger.

“Luc, I’m not deteriorating like you said I would,” I rushed to explain. “Plus, there’s nothing you can do about it. So just chill. You’re going to scare Jill.”

“I told you I’m not afraid of either of you, and Luc is working on his anger management.”

Before Jill could finish, Luc was out of the car. I opened my eyes to see him pacing. Then he came back in and slammed the door shut.

“Doesn’t look like he’s controlling it very well right now,” I pointed out.

“Your wolf is not letting you change?” Luc asked in a huff.

“That’s what I said.” I was a lot calmer than I thought I would be. Maybe Luc was holding enough anger for both of us. I smirked, thinking I should hang out with Luc more so I

could stay calmer. “Mind if I crash at your place for a little longer?”

“Yeah, of course. You don’t have to ask.” He seemed distracted, and I was about to ask him a question when he spoke again. “We should ask Miti what’s going on. Maybe she has an anecdote.”

I laughed. “I highly doubt that.”

“All the same, I’d like to ask Miti. She just came home today.”

“I’m going to go up and leave you two boys to talk,” Jill said, giving Luc a kiss.

I looked away, feeling like my heart was getting squeezed.

Before she got out, Jill said, “Brandon, just remember what Luc said. The call to mate will tear you apart, and Becca will not wait for you forever. She deserves better than that.”

We both watched Jill walk away.

“She didn’t have to say that,” I growled. “And you told her?”

“Yeah, she did,” Luc said, swatting me across the head. “And I tell her everything. She’s my mate.”

I reached back to attack him, but he had me pinned to the seat before I could move. Still holding me, he said, “Brandon, I sent Becca the necklace with your note.”

“What? I wasn’t ready to send it! I told her it was like a dreamcatcher!”

“What? Why?” His hold faltered, and I leaned forward, trying to escape, but Luc was fast and pinned me down even harder.

“I couldn’t figure out any other way to make sure she wore it. She’s having nightmares, so I thought it would work.” I slammed my head against the headrest, closing my eyes at the damage done. “It’s why I was waiting to send it to her. I realized I didn’t want to lie to her. Now I have.”

Luc grunted and released me from his hold. “You’re way too hard on yourself, Brandon. We can sort out what you told her later, but if she wears it, we’ll know if she’s safe, at least until we get rid of Pac.”

And there was nothing I could do about it now. I sighed. “Do you know if she got the package?”

“Yes, she did, and you can detect her movement with this ring.” Luc reached into his back pocket and handed me a gold ring with a solitaire gemstone. “The gemstone is showing red because you’re not near her. If you were near her, it’d turn green. Here’s the app you need on your phone.” He turned on his phone to show me.

I couldn’t help laughing. “Miti is now working in the twenty-first century with apps and all?”

“Yeah.” Luc chuckled. “Apparently she’s really into modern technology and is now mixing it in with her spells.”

“That might be dangerous for all of us.”

Luc shook his head. “Miti knows her limits. I trust her.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust her,” I said quickly. “It’s just—”

“You don’t trust her.”

I threw my hands up in exasperation. “She doesn’t always get her spells right, you know that.”

Luc hid a smile. “Don’t tell that to her face,” he advised.

“Definitely not.” I laughed. “I’d never live to see another day. You were saying about the app?”

He opened his phone again and showed me a map of the town. I could see a dot pacing back and forth in what looked like Becca’s apartment block.

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s pretty accurate.”

“And creepy that you’re following Becca,” I said, looking at Luc.

“I have not been tracking her,” Luc said, holding my gaze. “I only checked it once to see if it was working. You’ll be pleased to know that once you install the app and assign the tracker to your phone, I won’t be able to see her anymore. Only one person at a time can track her.”

“Okay, that I can deal with.” I slumped in my seat. At least I’d be able to know where she was at all times.

Luc continued, “I don’t understand why you don’t just see her for yourself.”

I swatted him away and got out of the car. He followed suit until we were both standing in front of the car, staring at the apartment.

“Are you ever going to buy the place from Dad?” I asked Luc.

“Eventually. I want to get the house built first.”

“I’m the same. Everything has an order, and I want to find Pac before I see Becca again.” *If I ever do.*

BECCA

I WAS EXHAUSTED and felt like crap. I leaned against my apartment wall, afraid if I stepped away I would fall to the floor. I had packed up all my things, but you wouldn't have known it unless you opened the kitchen cabinets or closet doors. The furniture would remain and was here when I moved in two years ago. It was only supposed to be temporary because I'd planned that Brandon and I would be living together by now. How had I read the situation so wrong?

Something ached inside me. I had never felt like this after a boy had rejected me. I had really thought Brandon was the one. We would make such a good team. Every fiber of my being agreed. My body actually hummed when I was near him, like a tuning bar that was right on key.

I slid down the wall and hugged my knees close to my chest. This honeymoon of ours was over. We were not meant to be. I pushed my forehead into my knees and allowed myself to cry.

After the tears had been spent, I found myself staring at the one lone plant sitting by the window. It would stay here for the next occupant. I couldn't bear to take it with me. When we first met, Brandon noticed my place was devoid of life. There was no fish, no cat, not even a succulent, just the bare bones and a lot of books, mostly about law. He had gone to the hardware store and picked up a tiny bamboo plant. One that was so tiny I could wrap my whole hand around the pot. It had lived on my desk for the last few years, and for someone who

couldn't keep basil alive, I couldn't believe it was at least four feet tall now.

A knock on my door jolted me from my speculation of the plant, and I unraveled myself and wiped the tears away. It was probably Jill coming to see if I was ready to go. But when I opened the door, Thomas was standing there with his fist raised, as if he was about to knock again.

I did the most silly thing and closed the door on him while desperately wiping the leftover tears from my face, hoping they weren't too puffy.

"Everything okay?" he said through the door.

"Yes, sorry! Just a second!"

I ran to the bathroom and groaned at the sight of my puffy eyes. There was no way around it. I would have to see Thomas while I looked like a red marshmallow. Either that, or I let him keep standing out there until he realized I wasn't coming back. But that would be rude, and I couldn't stay here forever. Jill had only gone to the store to get us snacks for the road while we drove to my new place in San Francisco. She'd be back any minute; I wouldn't need to be alone with him for long.

I trudged back to the front door, took a deep breath, and turned the knob. Taking another deep breath, I opened the door to see a worried Thomas staring back at me.

"Are you okay?" he asked again.

I swung the door fully open, giving him my best smile. It must have come out skewed, because the look he gave was between a grimace and the beginning of a held-back laugh.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought you were Jill, and I just reacted. I promise I don't usually close doors on people."

"It's not a big deal. I just wanted to come by to check on how you were doing."

"That's nice of you."

He shrugged. "That's what neighbors do, right?"

“Right.” Then, as if I needed to justify myself standing here in a sweatshirt and sweatpants while looking as though I’d obviously been crying, I said in a hurry, “I’m leaving today. Have a job relocation.”

“Oh.”

Was it just me or did he look disappointed?

“So the rumors are true,” he said.

“What rumors?”

“That the big-time lawyer on this floor got a promotion and is moving to a bigger office.”

“Oh!” I praised myself on having my wits back enough to respond in coherent words. “Yeah, I guess the rumors are true.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, because I was going to ask if you wanted to go to dinner with me this week. I had just built up the courage to ask you.”

“Oh!” For a big-time lawyer, I was really at a loss for words right now. I also didn’t fail to realize I’d said ‘oh’ three times in a row. “I would have loved that.”

“Yeah?” A big grin spread across his face.

“But can we take a raincheck? I’ll still be coming back every once in a while for work. I can let you know when I’m next in town.”

“And I go down to San Francisco from time to time. Can I call on you there?”

“Of course.”

Was it bad that a minute ago I was crying over Brandon and now my heart was beating just a tad faster at being asked out by a really hot guy? One that was courteous and thoughtful too. *And*—I took another big whiff—*smelled like Brandon*.

“Great.” He leaned in and gave me a kiss on my cheek.

I felt my skin warm at his touch and blushed at the way he was looking at me.

“Do you need any help?”

“No, I’m already done,” I said in a rush. “Jill went to get snacks.”

“Well, good luck moving.” He flashed me another one of his wonderful smiles and ambled down the hall toward his place. As his door closed, Jill returned, walking down the other end of the hallway.

“What are you staring at?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

Her eyes followed where I had been staring, and the corners of her mouth started rising.

“Don’t even start,” I said, going back into my unit to grab my purse and the last box.

“You’re the one saying it out loud.”

“I am done with boys. They are all a nuisance.”

“Not all—”

I shoved the box into her hands to keep her from talking more. “Yes, all. Just let me have this one, Jill.”

She pinched her forefinger and thumb together and swiped it across her lips. But she couldn’t hide her grin from me. I sighed as I watched her go back down the hallway to the elevator.

Closing my door, I locked it for the last time. Looking down the hallway to where Thomas had gone, I let myself indulge in the feeling of being wanted for just a second. Then, steeling myself, I turned and followed Jill.



The office had put me up in temporary housing, but Millie had done one better. She and her sister owned a house that

overlooked Golden Gate Park, and since Millie was in Crystal Lake scouting out places to open an art gallery and her sister was traveling for the foreseeable future, they offered me their place to house sit while I searched for a new apartment to rent.

As I looked around the place, I was happy to see this was definitely a change in scenery. Jill had squealed as soon as we pulled up to the house. And I had to agree with her reaction; it was quaint and cozy. Nestled between multiple other houses, it looked like all the pictures I'd seen of San Francisco neighborhoods.

Painted a soft shade of pink with black shutters, it had a one-foot by three-foot garden next to the entry steps. The front door opened onto a small foyer. There were stairs to the left, a hallway directly in front, and rooms to the right. A set of hooks hung on the left wall by the staircase, and the whole place was wallpapered in a soft white background featuring light pink flowers.

I followed the bright red carpet past the sitting room, then what looked like an office space before entering a back room that opened out into the backyard. Across from the backdoor was an elevator with painted gold doors. Jill was standing inside it with her finger on a button.

“Going up?” she asked.

“Don't mind if I do.”

We rode the short ride to the second floor, which opened into a modern-day kitchen. A large dining table that could sit sixteen people was situated close to a balcony that had a view of the bay, and if I looked to the left, I could see the Golden Gate Bridge.

“This is something else,” Jill said.

“You're telling me. I feel like we've walked into a fairytale where life just started looking better.”

“As it should.” Jill put an arm around me, and I leaned into her with my head on her shoulder. “You were there for me when I needed you, and I'm here for you now.”

I put my arm around her and sobbed. Jill held me, simply letting me get all my tears out before she silently walked me back downstairs so we could start bringing all my belongings into the house.

PAC

I'VE GOT her right where I want her. Away from Brandon. And yet, I'm still close enough to my old family that I can keep an eye on everyone.

Just the other day, I heard Luc talking to Brandon about how Brandon needed to get Becca back. Miti had given them one of her tracking necklaces, and apparently, they still worked. This put a damper on my plans, but it was just a small bump, nothing I couldn't bulldoze down.

I smiled. I just had to move my timeline up. Becca wouldn't have the luxury of settling into her new home, because Thomas was going to visit her this weekend, and he was going to surprise her. I'd given him a stronger dose of potion than normal today, but he didn't know that. No need to tell him everything. But one thing was certain—he'd make Becca swoon with the smell of her lover and then he would bring her to me.

I laughed and threw back another glass of bourbon. First Becca, then Brandon, then the whole McCullough Pack. I would get my revenge.

BECCA

“MILLIE, THE HOUSE IS BEAUTIFUL!”

“I thought you’d like it,” she said smugly, and I could hear her smiling through the phone. “It belonged to my grandmother, and now it’s my parents’. But they are in Europe somewhere, so Lira and I live in it for now. I hope it wasn’t too dusty, though. We haven’t been there in a while, and the cleaner only occasionally turns up.”

“It’s super clean,” I assured her, “and the furniture is exquisite. I’m afraid to sit on the chairs or use the tables.”

“Please use everything. The house is like a museum with all the artifacts my grandmother collected, but the one motto in our family was to always use things as they were intended. I know you’ll take care of everything, so don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Millie.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Feeling more assured, I asked the next question weighing on my mind as it would dictate the time I had to look for a new apartment. “When do you think you or Lira will be moving back?”

“I don’t know. I like living here where it’s small and quiet. It appeals to me. If I could, I would move to someplace even smaller. Lira ... well, let’s just say you could never hold her back. She’s got the travel bug from my parents and has never looked back. I never really know where any of them are. But don’t worry, I talked to her, and she said you can stay there as

long as you want. Even if she has to come back for a day or two, there's plenty of room for everyone."

"Thank you again. This is so generous of you and your family."

"No need to thank us. Really. Just enjoy it."

"I will."

"And make sure you walk to Union Square and treat yourself to something nice. Along the way, there's a great place to get boba tea. I'll text you the address. And on a nice day I like to walk to the park and just sit on a blanket soaking up the sun. The breeze from the bay can be chilly, and the wind can pick up quite a bit, but it's so nice to just be away from people for a short break."

I laughed. "That sounds glorious."

"Well worth it. Oh! I almost forgot. My good friend from high school is back in town. She wants to get everyone together for a night out. Would you like to meet them? I only just learned about it but plan on coming down to see her. It might be a good chance for you to meet some new people. They're nice too."

After the night out under the stars with Millie, I had been thinking about living life outside of work. This was a good chance to start. "Sure, I don't know anyone here, so that sounds fun."

"Fantastic! I will send you the date and time for that as well."



Jill and I went to the nearest beauty store and bought some dye kits. We spent the night dying my hair an even brighter red and added blue highlights to hers. Then we did each other's nails and watched reruns of Friends.

"I gave Brandon a good talking to the other day," Jill announced.

“You mean you spoke to him in a gentle tone with chosen words?”

“That.” Jill laughed.

“Thanks, Jill.”

“I wish I could stay here to help you get back on your feet, but I’m glad you have the party to go to this weekend. Hopefully it’s the start of new friendships and new loves.” She gave my hand a squeeze.

“I still wish you could come with me.”

“I know. I don’t know why, but Luc is being very insistent that I have to be back by Friday. I can’t dilly dally here. I’m a bit peeved because he knows what a hard time you’re going through.”

“He needs you, Jill. You deserve to enjoy your happiness, not dawdle in my troubles.”

“Nonsense!” she insisted. “You mean a lot to me, and your happiness is very important.” She suddenly giggled. “Listen to us! We’re like two old people sitting around reminiscing about what once was.” Jill held up her glass. “To our new lives!”

I joined her. “To our new lives!”

BECCA

WITH A NEW POSITION in the firm and a new office to get used to, I was kept busy for the rest of the week. A good thing, too, as I didn't have time to think of Brandon once. By the time I got home, I was so tired most nights that I sometimes skipped dinner and fell asleep fully dressed on my bed. Saturday came around before I knew it.

At eleven o'clock, a knock sounded on the door when I had just come back from my morning run. I had started the tub running for a leisurely bath before lunch, because I was in the mood to relax and pamper myself before going out to the party tonight.

Turning off the tap, I marched to the door, frustrated at the interruption. If it was a salesperson, they could move right along. This was my day to chill after a grueling week, and with thoughts of Brandon bombarding me all morning while out on my run, I desperately needed a soak in the tub.

Opening the door, I was about to say how disinterested I was in their product when I realized it was someone I didn't expect to see. "Thomas?"

"Hi, hope this is okay? I remembered us discussing that we'd see each other if we were in town."

"Of course." My body was feeling very warm at the sight of him in his business outfit. The waft of Brandon's scent caught me by surprise, and I greedily inhaled it as if I hadn't eaten all week. "Why are you in town?"

“I have a work trip next week, but I came early because Millie invited me to meet some new friends at a party. She mentioned you were going, and I thought it’d be a good chance to hang out.”

“Oh.” He was going to the same party I was? What did I say to that?

“I should have called first, but I was excited to see you.”

“Yeah.” I seemed to have lost all means of talking.

He didn’t seem to mind, though. “You’ll be at the party tonight, right?”

“Yes. Yes, I will.”

“Can I pick you up then?”

“Yes, of course.” I couldn’t think straight. Everything happening right now was what I wished Brandon would have done, but it wasn’t, even though his unique smell was confusing me by overriding every thought in my mind. It was bizarre. “Millie said to meet at Le Pont at seven. Want to pick me up at six-thirty?”

“Sounds like a date. I’ll see you later tonight.”

I watched as he walked away. All of a sudden, I was filled with excitement and hurried to the bathroom to have my soak. I had some thinking to do before Thomas picked me up tonight.

BRANDON

I'D TRACKED Becca all week. She'd gone from home to work and back again every single day. Her boss had been praising her all week, telling anyone who would listen that she was putting in the time and effort of three people. Remembering that boast, I slammed the hammer into the nail harder than I needed to. The thought of her working herself like this was driving me crazy. She needed to go out and have fun. She needed to be doted on. Luc had been hounding me all week to go down and see her, but I had told her I wouldn't bug her anymore. And that was one thing I did—I kept my word. Besides, after how I'd hurt her, the last person she wanted to see was me.

“You're going to break my table if you keep going on like that,” Luc growled.

I gave him a look before going back to putting nails in the dining room table Jacob, Bruno, and I had built for him.

“Why don't you take the weekend off and go say hi to her?”

“I told you already,” I growled.

“That's a bunch of BS, and you know it. She's pining for you. The two of you are stubborn as mules.”

“I just need to know she's safe and that's it. Plus, she told me I already broke her. Why would I want to go and do more damage?”

Luc just shook his head, grabbed a hammer, and started helping me. But I pushed him away. “This is a gift for you. Go do something else.”

“No thanks,” he said and continued hammering.

I pushed him again. “I said go do something else.”

This time, Luc growled and gave me a look.

“What’s going on here?” Jacob said, walking up to us with Bruno trailing behind.

“None of your business,” I said, seeing Luc wave them off. That wave irritated me more than it probably should have, but that was all it took for me to pounce on him. Next thing I knew, I was pounding him into the ground. Every hit was the release of a frustration that had been lingering in me for so long that it felt like I was sending off an old friend with each punch. And for every hit I gave, Luc gave one right back.

I tried to shift to get the upper hand, but my wolf was still mad at me. My canines came out, though, and I was able to sink my teeth into Luc’s arm right when he did the same to me. The taste of blood stopped us both, and that moment was all it took for Jacob to sit on top of me and for Bruno to do the same to Luc. Next thing I knew, Dad was in our faces, yelling at us both.

“You’re twenty-five and twenty-six years old and still fighting like pups!”

“It’s what you and your brother would still do today if he was here,” we heard Mom say from behind him.

A low growl came from Dad at Mom’s teasing, and I wanted to chuckle, but my arm hurt too much. Jacob’s weight was also making it difficult to breathe.

“Alia!” Dad growled. “Go find Julian so he can look at the boys’ arms.”

“I’ll try to find him,” Mom said, turning in the direction of the doctor’s house.

“What do you mean?” Dad growled.

“I mean he disappeared again this morning. A couple of sentries were also hurt. I’m worried something might have happened to him.”

Dad’s chest rumbled. “Find Rocco first before you head over to Julian’s then. Don’t go looking for him by yourself,” he said, giving Mom a pointed look.

I heard Mom huff and mumble under her breath about being able to take care of herself, but as she walked away, I wished she hadn’t. We were all under Dad’s wrath now.

Dad pulled me to my feet, dislodging Jacob in one move. Doing the same to Luc, he dragged the two of us by our injured arms to his house, where he plunked us down at the kitchen table.

“Start talking,” he growled. “Brandon, you have been acting out of sorts all week. I heeded Luc’s warning to leave you alone. He told me he was dealing with you, but it’s clear that’s not working.” He gave Luc a hard stare. Luc, to his credit, did not back down, though I could feel the bristle of anger wafting off him.

“There’s nothing to say,” I said.

Dad slammed the table with his hand so hard we all jumped. “Don’t you give me that nonsense. You are all my sons,” he said, pointing at Luc and I, then Jacob and Bruno, who wouldn’t miss out on their older brothers getting disciplined even if they got caught in the crosshairs. “I know everything about the lot of you. Don’t you dare try to wriggle yourself out of whatever is going on here. I will not tolerate secrets that result in fights in my pack.”

“It’s about Becca, Dad,” Jacob supplied.

I turned to give Jacob a glare, but he just shrugged. Turning my attention back to Dad, I said, “Becca got a promotion and transferred to San Francisco.”

“Then why are you not with her?”

His question threw me for a loop. He was the reason I almost didn’t go to law school. It took Mom and me some time to convince him that the pack could use a lawyer that was one

of their own. The suggestion that I chase after a girl and leave the pack again was not something I expected him to say.

He continued, “Don’t give me that look. I know she’s your mate. We all know,” he said, waving his hand at all of us. “You’re the only one dumb enough to not accept it.”

Luc chuckled, and I threw him a punch, which he promptly returned, and we would have started up again if not for Dad sending his alpha power crashing over us.

Dad rarely used his powers to take control. The feel of it was uncomfortable. It felt like I was being suppressed against my will, and I wanted to fight back, but instead I calmed down, feeling my wolf acquiesce and cower. I noticed Luc slump down in his chair more too.

“Brandon, I don’t know what is going on in your head—” Dad began.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. It doesn’t affect the pack.”

“Everything you do affects the pack because it affects me!” Dad exclaimed.

I stared at him, dumbfounded. A chuckle came over from Luc before I heard him say, “You can get a feel of what it’s like being the first born for once.”

I shot him a scowl before looking back at Dad. “There’s nothing to do, though. Becca has moved, and I can’t leave.”

“I ask you again: why are you not with her?”

“I’m not allowed to leave the area.”

Dad threw his hands up in the air. “Have you ever asked?”

“I did when I went—”

“To law school. I know, but I agreed in the end, didn’t I?”

“Yes ...” *Where was this going?*

“Brandon, is this about Pac and me?” Sandy asked, sliding in to the seat next to me.

I drew in a breath at the sound of Pac’s name on her lips.

I heard a deep sigh from Dad before he said, “You never did get over it, did you?”

I didn’t answer because I couldn’t. Why was she bringing this up? A feeling of dread and inadequacy washed over me, leaving me paralyzed. Thankfully, Luc knew what was happening and spoke up on my behalf.

“Dad, Brandon has never gotten over it as you suspected. He still thinks it’s his fault Sandy was taken and that Pac got away.”

“You fool,” Dad said, shaking his head at me.

Why were they bringing up the past when my present was dragging me down? Usually, nothing bothered me, but now Pac was back. Pac, the man who had kidnapped my sister and who now threatened Becca, my mate. I groaned and tugged on the ends of my hair.

Dad and Luc looked at me with what looked like pity on their faces. I bet Jacob and Bruno did too. My fists clenched. “You weren’t there at the beginning,” I bit out. “I should have smelled Pac coming and gotten him out of the way as soon as I realized his intention toward Sandy. I trusted him too easily.”

“Pac tell you that?” Dad asked.

“He—”

“Pac tell you that you couldn’t do anything even if you thought you could? That you were hopeless to save your loved ones? That because of you the whole pack would fall apart? Because of your negligence and your ability to trust?”

I knew I had gone pale, because I could feel the blood rushing from my head down to my feet and leaking from my very being. How did Dad know what Pac said to me before he hit me on the side of the head and took off with Sandy?

“He said all that, didn’t he?” Dad now demanded.

“Yes, but how—?”

Dad held up a hand and motioned for Jacob and Bruno to take a seat at the table as well. He ran a hand through his thinning hair and released a big sigh. Mom came in at this

point and put both her hands on his shoulders, which seemed to give him strength. He looked up at her then, a question on his face, and she bent down to whisper in his ear, though we could all hear what she said: “Julian is nowhere to be found. No one’s sure where he went.”

When he looked up again, he was back to his alpha self with a thunderous look in his eyes. Shaking his head, he continued, “I should have let Pac go when he was younger. I should have sent him to an older pack where the alpha could control him better. But your mom and I had just found each other, and Pac had helped to bring us together. If not for him, you boys would not exist. *I would not exist.*”

Mom sat down next to Dad and held his hand. He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand as he told their story. How he had found Mom and Dredge, all skin and bones. How they had wandered into Chen territory and met Mom’s grandfather for the first time. How Pac was like a son to Mom’s grandfather and saved the day by saving Dad.

“I know you boys know this story already, but what you don’t know is what your great-grandfather said when we told him we were adopting Pac.”

I arched an eyebrow at Luc, who shrugged his shoulder. Clearly, he hadn’t heard this part yet either.

“Your great-grandfather warned us to watch out for Pac,” Dad continued. “He told us that he was more cunning than he let on. That he would cause trouble for us.”

Dad sighed, and Mom put an arm around him. I thought I heard her say, “We didn’t know. We did the best we could.”

“I should have known better,” Dad said. “But I was starting a new pack and relied on Pac a lot. Dredge was still young and helped out where he could, but Pac was who I turned to. I became too dependent on him.”

He paused, collecting his thoughts, and we all silently waited for him to continue.

“I started suspecting something when I found two pack members in my office one night, snooping around. This was

when you two boys were small; Jacob and Bruno hadn't come along yet. They swore they were acting alone, but no one knew the code to my office except for me, your mom, and Pac. And I know your mom would never give it to a single soul. There was also the fact that these two particular wolves were ones Pac had brought into the pack. He had made a big deal about them joining. Proclaimed they were trained scouts who had been kicked out of their other pack for no good reason and needed a new home. I'm the first to admit it made me happy to be known as the leader that would take in strays, no questions asked."

"You used to not question them?" Jacob asked in amazement. "You give them the third degree now."

"I learned my lesson the hard way." Dad's stare was so powerful that we all looked down. He continued, "When my office was broken into a second time, they were very meticulous and didn't leave a thing in disarray. But I knew they'd been in there because of the lingering smell they left behind. I always thought it odd that they would try such a thing, knowing I could pinpoint them just by their smell the next day. But what was odd was the smell wasn't one I recognized."

Mom rubbed his arm as Dad continued, "I put up a camera, but I never caught anyone. After a year, your mom made me take down the camera, saying it made her feel like she was under lock and key being watched every day."

"And that was my mistake," Mom said. "Pac had taken care of my grandfather so well I believed he was good. That no one could be as bad as my own father and his pack. But I've since learned there are shifters out there who are just as bad as my father and ex-husband, those who want power more than anything—even over those we love."

Dad patted Mom's hand and gave it a squeeze. I wanted that—that partner in life I could lean on and give comfort to. My wolf howled inside my head, and I pushed him back. *Becca; I know!* I told him, but he wouldn't stop howling. I clutched my head with both hands, trying to silence him. The action didn't go unnoticed.

“Your wolf will not let you go without your mate now that he’s found her,” Dad said. “There’s no escaping your fate.”

I dropped my hands to the table and leaned my forehead on them in defeat. “I love her too much to hurt her.”

“You are a fool,” Dad said. “It took Pac kidnapping your sister for us to see how far over the deep end he’d gone. Maybe he was always like that, we don’t know, but that night you were with Sandy, you did nothing wrong. Do you hear me? You saved Sandy.”

“How? How did I do that, Dad, when I was out cold? He knocked me senseless and then ran off with her. If you and the pack hadn’t come to track them down, she would be lost. I was completely useless!”

“You’re wrong, Brandon. Those words Pac said to you are the same words he said to me before he went after Sandy.”

Dad paused to let those words sink in. I could see Luc and the others sit up a little straighter, their eyes laser-focused on Dad.

He continued, “Pac had asked for a meeting with your mom and me. We were so busy with you young ones that it had been a while since we spent time with Pac. Feeling guilty, your mom asked Dredge to look after Sandy, Luc, and you that morning so we could have a nice brunch with Pac.

“But that brunch did not turn out the way we thought it would. Pac came in that morning with ulterior motives, saying he wanted me to put in writing that he would be alpha of this pack when I stepped down. He threatened to harm the lot of you if I didn’t agree. Of course, I said no, and that’s when he spewed those words at me—the same ones he later said to you.”

“But ... how?”

“I’m getting there. Dredge was reluctant to look after the three of you, so he persuaded Sandy to watch over you, Brandon, while he took Luc hunting. After Pac realized he wasn’t going to get what he wanted, he left me and your mom and went straight to where you and Sandy were playing near

the pond. Unbeknownst to us, he had been making a move on Sandy, persuading her that he was her mate. We later found out this was his backup plan. But you boys know your sister; she's as stubborn as all of you put together and would not leave with him. Brandon; I believe you remember this part, at least—where Sandy put up a fight when Pac tried to take her.”

I nodded, remembering the surprise and hurt in Sandy's voice when Pac got forceful. I felt her hand slide into mine and squeeze tightly as I said, “I tried to bite Pac, and he threw me off like I was a—”

“Pup. He threw you off like you were a pup because you were a pup, Brandon! You weren't even a year old. There was no way you could have battled with a wolf who was trained to be one of the best guards in our pack. You didn't stand a chance. And you were just one pup, all on your own.

“When Pac left, I had a sinking feeling he was going to try something out of desperation, because I now saw him for who he was. Your mom and I immediately went searching for all of you. We found Dredge and Luc with no problem, but you and Sandy were harder to find.”

Mom spoke up. “You were always so afraid of water that we didn't think to look near the pond until we'd searched everywhere else.”

My gut twisted at the explanation. I shared, “Sandy had been bringing me to the pond for a few minutes each day to get me used to it.”

Sandy put an arm around me and rubbed my back. “We love you, Brandon. You did the best you could that day as a young pup. I was a fool for believing everything Pac said to me.”

I leaned in and gave her a hug back, silently acknowledging her words. I was unable to speak right now; the emotions were running high.

“We were able to catch Pac's scent after finding you on the ground by the pond,” Dad said. “You did nothing wrong, son. You were brave and stood up for your sister.”

Sandy added, “If not for you, Pac would have taken me sooner, and Dad might not have been able to find me so quick.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Alright, stop! You guys are making me soft.” I lifted a hand and wiped at the tears streaming down my face.

“We’ll only stop so long as you understand that it wasn’t your fault that Pac took Sandy. You didn’t fail her, Brandon, and I’ll hear no more of it. Now, go get Becca,” Mom said. “You deserve to be happy, and so does she.”

“But what about leaving the pack? Becca has moved away from here.”

“Bring her home,” Luc said. “Jill is here. You’re here. You mean more to her than you believe. She won’t say no to coming home with you—provided you explain how much of an idiot you’ve been.”

I nodded. He was right. I would go see her this weekend.

BECCA

THOMAS PICKED me up at six-thirty on the dot. He was dressed sharply in black slacks and a blue button-down shirt, and the waft of his scent was stronger today. He didn't fill out the shirt like Brandon did, but it didn't matter, because my body and mind still responded to him.

“Becca, you look beautiful. Breathtaking, really.”

I blushed. They were the words I had dreamed Brandon saying to me over and over again. “Thank you. Ready to go?” I wanted to be back in my bed and snuggled up with my teddy before midnight, because although Thomas was a good distraction, my heart was still aching.

We got to Le Pont right when Millie got there, and it was so good to see her. We entered a posh restaurant. Everything shouted extravagance but in a sleek modern way. We were seated in a private room where two other girls had already arrived. When we entered and everyone saw each other, the squealing was something else, and I found myself standing close to Thomas to get away from it.

After greeting her friends, Millie turned to gesture at me and Thomas. “Everyone, this is Becca and Thomas. They're my new friends from Crystal Lake. And these are my best friends from middle school—Tamara or Tammy, and Jocelyn or Jozy.”

Everyone shook hands, and then a thought came to me. “Does that mean Millie stands for something else?”

“You haven't told her?” Tammy said.

“It hasn’t come up in conversation,” Millie said. “And yes, it’s short for Millicent. I got made fun of when I was younger because it sounded like Maleficent, so I’d rather just be called Millie.”

“Of course,” Thomas and I said together.

“Well, let’s sit. No need to be standing around like this.” Millie gestured to the table that was already laden with food.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Jozy said. “We got here early and decided to order everything so it was here by the time you got here.”

“No, this is fantastic,” I said. “I wouldn’t have known what to order, anyways. My friend, Jill, is usually the one who orders for us.”

Tammy passed us a dish of lamb and green pepper, which smelled divine. “This is one of the best Taiwanese restaurants here. Their specialty is a crab steamed over fried rice, which is coming. It just takes a bit more time.”

“I can’t imagine more food coming. This is a feast,” Thomas said.

“Stay with me. I’ll feed you well,” Millie said, and her friends laughed.

“She sure will. She’d order everything off the menu if we didn’t stop her. Another reason why we ordered before you got here.”

I smiled at the comradery the girls had. This was what I needed. With Jill settling down with her life partner and me not going in that direction, I needed a group of girls to hang out with.

I scarfed down everything. There was braised pork with rice, whole steamed fish, fried rice with crab juice and the crab itself, pork belly with mustard greens, sautéed cabbage, bok choy, egg tofu, Chinese broccoli, and a ton of other food I wished I knew how to make at home. Thomas was clearly enjoying the meal, too, if the moaning coming from his direction was any indication.

I started slowing down about halfway through dinner.

“Are you two dating?” Jozy asked.

I spewed a huge glob of water all over my plate. The girls started laughing, and Thomas was immediately there with napkins to help me wipe up the mess.

“I’m guessing that’s a no,” Jozy said. “That’s too bad.”

I looked up at her with a quizzical face.

“You two are so cute together. It really is a shame.”

That got me upset. “Why would it be a shame? I already have someone.” Then panic hit me. That wasn’t true anymore; I no longer had Brandon.

“You do?” Millie asked. “And Jozy can be a bit too forward at times. Please excuse her.”

I saw Millie give Jozy a pointed look, who raised her hands and backed off, so I let the subject drop. But I knew from the look on Millie’s face that she wasn’t going to let this go. Thomas was also looking at me, and I felt like the spotlight on me wasn’t going anywhere for a while. I excused myself and went to the bathroom. Sure enough, Millie followed.

“You know, there’s nothing to tell,” I told her as soon as we entered the bathroom.

“That’s what you say, but there’s always a story when a girl says she has someone when she clearly doesn’t.”

I looked at Millie, who wasn’t laughing and was quite serious in her stance.

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re always blushing when Thomas is with us, and you moved to San Francisco without batting an eye. Remember when we first met? You invited me over, but I couldn’t come that day, then you said you were always home if not at work, so your door was always open. No one says that if they have a boyfriend or were planning to move.”

Well, she got me there.

“I ...” Turning on the faucet, I splashed some cool water on my face. I took some deep breaths, but my pulse wouldn’t slow down, and I could feel my face warming up.

“Are you okay?” Millie asked, and I felt her hand on my back, making small circles.

“I’m okay. Just need a second.” But it was more than a second before I finally caught my breath. “Sorry, I’m not sure what came over me.”

Millie handed me a paper towel, and I wiped my face clean. “It’s nothing, and I like what you did with your hair.”

I touched the ends and stared at the bright red strands. “Yeah.” I smiled. “It was the last thing Jill and I did together before she left last weekend.”

“Can I ask you something?” Millie suddenly asked, lifting up my chin so I was looking at her.

“Yes, of course.”

“There really is someone, isn’t there?”

“There was,” I admitted, and I almost started crying again.

“What do you mean there *was*?”

“I let him go.”

“He must have done something bad. Probably best to move on then.”

I started bawling then, and it was a bit before I calmed down again.

Millie pulled back from hugging me and shook her head. “He has no idea how lucky he is, does he?”

I laughed. “I think he does, but something is holding him back. I put an end to it, though.”

“You love him, don’t you?”

I looked up to see the knowing look in Millie’s eyes. There was no use lying to her. “With every fiber of my being.”

“Then I should apologize.”

My head snapped back up. “Why?”

“I invited Thomas here because I knew he was interested in you, and I thought the feeling was mutual. I thought I’d play matchmaker. I mean, he’s quite a catch.”

I giggled, then clamped a hand over my mouth. “I never giggle,” I said, which brought on a peal of laughter from the two of us. When we finally calmed down, I said, “You don’t need to apologize. You didn’t know. And Thomas is showing interest, and I can’t say I’m not attracted to him; because, funnily enough, he smells like the guy I love.”

Millie nodded. “Yes, he has a certain smell, doesn’t he? It’s very attractive. And have you noticed it’s gotten stronger today? I feel like it’s bombarding all of my senses.”

“Yeah! I thought it was just me ‘cause I’m sensitive to that smell.”

“Nope, not just you. The girls noticed it too. I wonder if he put on a healthy helping of cologne this morning because he thought you liked it?”

“Oh, I hope not. That would be so embarrassing.”

“It’s a mystery. If Lira was here, she’d go right up to him and ask him what his smell was all about.”

“I’m glad she’s not here!”

“Right? I’m always telling her to turn down the Lira factor.”

I shot her a smile. “You two seem to balance each other out. It sounds like you have a great relationship with your sister.”

“We do in a way. We’re such opposites, but I do miss her. Hopefully, I’ll see her soon. But on that note, I think we should head back before a search party comes looking for us.”

When we got back to the table, Thomas and the girls had finished up most of the food, leaving a few bites for me and Millie.

“Thanks for saving some!” Millie said, giving the girls a look that sent them into a fit of giggles.

“You two were taking too long. Thomas even went to the restroom and came back. Plus, I told you I was starving,” Jozy said.

“I hope you saved room, because I have the best boba tea place after this,” Millie said.

“More food?” I said, rubbing my belly.

“Always,” Millie said with a wink.

“While you four finish up here, I’m going to go make a quick phone call,” Thomas said.

“We’ll see you outside,” Millie said, waving to Thomas before turning back to us. “We’re going to get drinks and head back to my place.” Millie paused for a second. “Well, technically, it’s Becca’s place right now.” She turned to give me a hug and said, “I’m so glad you’re here. I just knew when we first met that we’d become good friends.”

THOMAS

I WALKED OUTSIDE and dialed Pac's number.

Her story checked out. With the ears of a wolf, I heard everything Becca and Millie said when I walked by the bathroom door. Hovering, I'd listened to as much as I could. Becca had never really opened up to me, so I was glad to finally get confirmation that what Pac had said about the situation was right. The only thing I was confused about was the smell she said I emanated. I didn't think I smelled any different than I usually did, but maybe my senses weren't what they used to be.

Becca said she loved Pac but didn't think she could have him. I wondered how horrific her parents could be to keep her away from the man she loved. It had sounded pretty bad with her crying the way she was in the bathroom. Thank goodness I bumped into Pac when I did. It was clear he and Becca deserved to be together. No one should keep two lovers apart that were meant for each other. I should know.

My fists clenched as I remembered how my best friend and his lover had been physically removed from each other's presence and then tortured so they could flush me out. Before that, I thought I'd still had a chance of living with my pack, of staying with my sister and parents. But my parents were under surveillance now my uncle was alpha. The latest letter my sister sent had reached me only a couple of weeks ago, begging me to come home. She'd said times were dire, that they needed someone to defeat my uncle. But I knew if I went back to my pack, he would kill the rest of my family just to

make an example of my insubordination, and I couldn't do that to them.

The phone line picked up on the other end. "I'll be there in thirty minutes," I said and hung up.

I could help Becca and Pac. That much I could do.

BECCA

THE BOBA TEA was the best I'd ever had, and I made a note to bring Jill here the next time she visited.

"I have something to show you before we head back to your place," Thomas said as we stood up to leave.

"Oh, I was going to—"

"You'll like it," he said quickly. "It's a surprise."

A surprise for me? From Thomas? There was a sudden urge to say no, that it could wait till later, but Thomas looked very excited and genuine. Decided, I turned to Millie, tapping her on the shoulder.

"Millie, Thomas wants to show me something, and he says it's a surprise for me only."

"Oh yeah. He told me he might pull you away tonight. I'm excited for you."

"But you remember our talk earlier?"

"I remember, but you're still a single lady, right? And what he has to show you will be breathtaking. I've already seen it a thousand times, so you go and enjoy."

I gave a laugh and hugged Millie. It was nice to have another friend.

I turned back to find Thomas, who was now waiting for me by the door. As he held the door open, we walked out to Tammy yelling, "Have fun, you two!"

In the car, I watched the city lights pass by. There were people milling about everywhere, and I was excited to experience what this city had to offer. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

“Could you give me a hint?”

“You said you’d never seen the sunset over the water before, so ...” He pointed in front of me, and I gasped.

The ocean was spread out in front of us as far as the eye could see, and the sun was casting a warm orange glow across the water’s surface and onto the sand as it set. It was glorious. Thomas parked the car, and we stared at the beautiful view. I had never seen anything like it.

Getting out of the car, I went to stand at the top of the sand dune, staring at the beautiful painting nature had made. It was surreal to behold while the city was behind me. I could hear cars zooming by, and I wished I could make them stop to enjoy what was right in front of them. It was breathtaking.

“You love it?”

“I do. Thank you, Thomas.”

“Being out in nature is one of my favorite things to do, and even though you live in the city, you have a lot of opportunities to go to the beach or hike without going very far.”

“Yeah, the outdoors is something I’ll miss from Crystal Lake, so it’s good to know there’s opportunities here.”

“Now you’ll get the best of both worlds.”

“Yeah.” It’d been fun so far, but looking out at the ocean, I missed the tranquil silence that only came from being away from the city. San Francisco was a bit too much for me.

I noticed Thomas kept checking his watch, and it was starting to make me nervous. It was then I heard a rustling sound from my right.

When I faced Thomas to joke that I was now hearing things, he wasn’t there anymore. I turned to look in the car

when an arm came around me. The smell of gardenias suddenly flooded my nostrils, and I turned around, confused.

Looking at me with beady eyes was a man I didn't know. A man who had hunger in his eyes. He was looking at me like he had just won the greatest prize.

I stepped out of his arms, looking for Thomas while I walked backward down the dune toward the entrance to the beach. On seeing that Thomas was now in the car, I headed toward him, but he just gave me a thumbs up. The stranger was by my side in the next instant, and I jumped; I hadn't even seen the man move!

"Aren't you glad to see me?" the man asked.

I took a step back. "I'm sorry, I don't know who you are."

"You don't?" He actually looked hurt. "I guess the surgeon did a better job than I thought. I made some modifications to my face since the last time you saw me."

Now I was really confused. I tried to move toward the car again, but the man blocked my way. Why was Thomas not helping me?

"Who do you think I am?" the man now asked.

"I really don't have a clue," I said, still trying to move away from him.

"Guess!"

I yelped, jumping at the sudden anger in his tone and almost slid down the dune. I heard a door slam shut and footsteps approaching. *Please let it be Thomas. This man is scaring me. Why did Thomas leave?*

"Boss, do you need some help?" a deep voice called.

"I already told you what to do," the man growled. His eyes seemed to shine orange for a split second, and a shudder ran through me.

"He's already taken care of," the new voice replied.

What did he mean 'he's already taken care of'? "Where's Thomas?" I asked.

“Thomas did what he was told to do. Now, you need to be a good girl and come with us,” said the strange man.

I shook my head. “You still haven’t told me who you are.”

“Oh, my apologies, where are my manners? I’m Pac.”

“Pac? Sorry, I don’t know anyone named—”

“Or Rich. That was how you knew me.”

At the sound of the name, I went rigid. *It couldn’t be.* Brandon said he took care of Rich. Jill was free.

“I can see your mind working overtime. It’s a pity I must get rid of you, Becca. The way you and Brandon worked to get Jill out from under me was the work of someone I’d love working for myself. But you’ve joined the wrong side, sweetheart. You’ve joined those who think they’re better than everyone else. They say they take in underdogs, but really, they take them in just for face value. There is no meaning behind the word ‘family.’ Trust me, I know.”

The last two words had come out with so much spite that I backed up a bit faster. But no matter how fast I moved, Pac was there, right in front of me. I tried to look around him to see if Thomas was coming, but he kept blocking my way.

“Thomas isn’t coming for you. No one is,” he said firmly. “Not even your precious Brandon. Remember, you left him? Left him to wither and die.”

“What? No, I didn’t! And what do you mean that Thomas isn’t coming? What did you do to him?”

“Oh, he’s only stunned. He’ll wake up after you’re long gone. I don’t believe in killing when it’s not necessary. Though, if Thomas interferes, he won’t be living long.”

I was horrified by the man in front of me and almost turned to run, but instinct told me I needed to keep an eye on him at all times. I could feel the slope of the dune start to level out a bit and knew I was near the entrance.

“You don’t know what Brandon is, do you?” Pac—or Rich—suddenly said.

“What he is?” I repeated, more than a little bewildered. “Of course, I do. He’s a better man than you’ll ever be.”

This elicited a laugh so hard from Pac that he bent over, clutching his stomach. I took the chance to bolt and ran toward the ocean. To do what, I had no idea; it’s not like I could jump in and swim away to safety.

But like before, Pac was on me in seconds. *How is he doing that?* He slammed me into the ground. My cheek hit the sand so hard it felt like sandpaper was brushing against my skin, and I just managed to squeeze my eyes tightly before any sand could get into them.

“You’re not going anywhere, my pretty one. I learned my lesson from Jill, so you’re coming with me. You’re staying in the house where I can keep a close eye on you.”

His hands were icy cold, and I shivered, but before I could break away, I felt more hands circling around my ankles and legs. I was carried a short distance before I was thrown onto the back seat of a car. Rope soon encircled my ankles and midsection before being tied around my wrists. A gag was placed in my mouth before my brain could register to scream. I was shaking hard when a black covering went over my head. In the next second, the car came to life, and my heart slammed against my chest.

What was happening? And what did they do to Thomas?

BRANDON

“WHAT DO you mean she’s not here? This is her address,” I said.

“And who are you?” the black-haired girl said.

“Yeah, why would we tell you if she was here when we don’t even know who you are?” asked another voice.

I looked around the black-haired girl to see a blonde-haired, freckle-nosed girl walking in a not-so-straight line toward me as she waved her drink in my direction. I noticed it was splashing on the floor and made to intercept her before she tripped when an arm came down and blocked my way into the house.

“I’m sorry, what does ‘who are you’ mean to you? This is my home. You can’t just come tramping in here,” the black-haired girl said firmly.

I stopped and looked at her, remembering what Jill had told me about Becca’s new residence. “You must be Millie.”

I had cornered Jill before I left and begged her to give me Becca’s new address. She had relented after Luc told her what happened with Dad and begrudgingly gave it to me. I’m glad she also told me who the house belonged to so I didn’t look like a complete idiot right now.

Millie narrowed her eyes. “And how do you know me? We’ve never met.”

“Jill told me your name. She’s Becca’s best friend and the woman who is getting married to my brother, Luc.”

“Yes, I know Jill. Sweet girl. Well, Becca isn’t here. She went out with Thomas to see a sunset. You know, a romantic outing?”

If she said that to make me jealous, it worked wonders. My wolf immediately reared its head, and a growl came out. It produced the intended effect, if the girls’ looks of shock were any indication. But instead of being allowed entry into the house, the door slammed shut in my face.

So much for trying the honest route.

Before leaving Crystal Lake, I had made the decision to not use the necklace to track Becca down. I didn’t want to lie to her about how I’d found her, but as Millie had slammed the door in my face, that route had come to a dead end. I couldn’t think of any other way to find her, which meant there was no other option but to use the tracker. *Hopefully she’s wearing it.*

Pac hadn’t contacted me in a while, and I was getting nervous. My wolf was also driving me crazy, because he knew she was close and that I had finally succumbed to our fate.

I opened the app on my phone and saw her location blinking on Ocean Beach. My first thought was that she had finally let loose and was treating herself to some quiet time, but then Millie’s words came back to me ... *She’s out with Thomas on a romantic outing.*

Fire surged inside me, and my fists clamped shut. Before I knew it, I had crushed my phone. Unfurling my palm, I stared at the broken electronic device and cursed, then punched the wall in front of me. A series of yelps were heard from inside the house. Realizing I couldn’t take my rage out on the house or scare the girls, I left the premises before they called the cops on me.

Walking across the street to the park, I headed toward Golden Gate Bridge. I looked down at the ring and saw it was glowing red. If I started walking in the right direction it would turn green; I just needed to work out which direction that was first.

When I made it to the end of the path and was standing under the Golden Gate Bridge, the ring turned pink, and it was when I started veering left, back inland, that it started turning a light shade of green. I ran faster, through the Presidio and the length of Golden Gate Park until I reached Ocean Beach.

The whole time I was running I kept wishing I could change into a wolf. It didn't matter that there were humans everywhere, I knew I could travel that much faster. But there was the problem of scent. When Pac had knocked me out and taken Sandy, he'd hit my nose so hard it had cracked. It had healed so well that no one could tell my nose was ever broken, but my scent had never been the same again. Because I couldn't smell very well, I'd had to rely on my brothers to know when danger was near. It was not something I was proud of, for it was a wolf's greatest senses.

I looked around, hoping to see Becca's flaming red hair, but all I saw were a couple walking hand in hand as they admired the quiet, dark, and magical scenery the beach provided.

Growling with impatience, I started walking up the hill and along the parked cars to see if she was in one of them. It wasn't until I passed a blue colored car that I caught a whiff of her scent. I looked inside to see a man slumped forward in the driver's seat, his arms resting on the wheel as if he was sleeping. Now, this was not something I saw every day. Dread spiraled through me. I walked to the driver's side and stuck my hand through the open window and poked the man, but he didn't stir.

After a couple more pokes, I placed my hand on his shoulder and leaned him back against the seat. I gasped when I saw his face. *It's Thomas!*

My wolf was on instant alert. He was fuming, believing Thomas had done something to Becca. It was then that I caught a whiff of Thomas's scent. It was the same sandalwood and citrus smell that Mom had always said was mine, a unique scent I owned. And the smell was strong—stronger than my scent had ever been.

Why did he have my scent?

The answers hit me all at once, and I let him go suddenly. Thomas fell back onto the steering wheel with a thud. I grimaced and hurriedly tilted him back against the seat till his head was leaning against the headrest.

He was still breathing by the looks of his chest, so I decided to slap his face a few times. He answered with a groan. When he began to grunt and shake his head on his own, I stepped away from the car and waited for him to wake up, aware that if he was anything like my brothers, he'd come shooting out of the vehicle to tackle me.

But Thomas only opened his eyes and stared at me. His nose twitched a bit and then he smiled. "It's you."

"What do you mean 'it's me'? Where's Becca?" I demanded. "I can smell her in the car."

"I don't know. They knocked me out." He groaned and then a look of horror came over his face. He growled and slammed his fists on the steering wheel. "She's in danger."

"What?" I roared, reaching into the car and grabbing his shirt. "What do you mean she's in danger? What did you do?"

"If you'd let me go and get in the car, I'll tell you the story. You're causing a scene right now," he said, pointing out of the front window.

I looked about and, sure enough, we were getting looks by passersby. I let him go and walked around the car, sliding into the passenger seat. After closing the door and rolling up the windows, I said, "Start talking."

"First off, I don't know where she is." At the sight of my clenched fists, Thomas held up his hands and said, "You're starting to shift."

"What? I can't—"

"Your eyes are turning orange."

I pulled down the visor and looked in the mirror. Sure enough, my fangs had started elongating, and my eyes were shifting. I could feel the first spark of transformation igniting

inside me. It felt so good to have my wolf back, but I took some deep breaths and told him not yet. “You’re one too then.”

“I would hope you’d have noticed at Dewey’s Cafe.”

My wolf instantly went on guard. “I was distracted,” I said carefully, not willing to share that I had a limited sense of smell. I then swiftly changed the subject back to Becca. “What is going on with you and Becca?”

He lifted his lips in a brief smile. “You’re very to the point.”

“If you’ve harmed her—”

He held up his hands again. “Nothing’s going on. I promise.” Seeing that I wasn’t mollified, he continued, “I was interested in her, but once I knew she was already taken, I didn’t hold out hope.”

“Then why was she out on a date with you tonight?”

He looked embarrassed, and I braced myself for his story. What he told me made me dig my fingernails into my palms. It was all I could do to not run out of the car and begin smashing it to smithereens. Pac had tricked him into luring Becca away! It explained why Thomas smelled like me, and that was confirmed when Thomas shared he’d been drinking some of Pac’s potions. Thomas thought he’d been getting two lovers back together again. But by the time he realized that wasn’t the case and that tonight’s rendezvous was a setup, Pac’s goons had gotten into the car and tied him to his chair so he couldn’t get out. Then they had made him watch as Becca tried to escape Pac. When she tried to run and Pac attacked her, Thomas had tried to break his bonds, but the goons had knocked him unconscious, which meant he had no idea where they went with Becca.

I told him about the necklace, and the two of us got out of the car and went to the beach in search of it. The necklace had led me here, and even though I hoped Becca still had it on her and she was here somewhere, the dreaded feeling that it was

lost in the sand was proven true when I saw the blue and silver stars glistening on the sand under the moonlight.

I picked it up and whimpered. Only one thought pounded in my head: *I'm going to get my mate back.*

BRANDON

BORROWING THOMAS'S PHONE, I dialed Luc's number.

"You were right," I said before Luc could get in a word. "I need help from the pack. Pac has taken Becca."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not. He's resurfaced and now has my mate."

"So, you've conceded."

"Yes! I've said it. Now, are you going to find Dad or keep talking to me?"

"I'll get Dad," he said, then promptly hung up.

"That went well," Thomas said from beside me.

I gave him a curt nod. "Dad will call me back once everyone is rounded up."

"You have a good family if they come running at your call and don't ask questions."

"Yes, a fantastic family. Do you not?"

Thomas grimaced. "Let's just say I won't be introducing anyone to them any time soon."

"That's too bad."

It wasn't Dad who called back, though, when I answered on the first ring. "Jill? What is it?"

"What do you mean Becca was taken by Pac? What the heck, Brandon!"

I had to hold the phone away from my ears. Thomas even leaned away, shooting me a worried look. “I should have told you sooner,” I said hurriedly, “but it’s not important now. What’s important is—”

“Is you catching me up on what the heck is going on right now!” she cut in.

I was about to protest when I heard Dad come on the phone. “You’re on speaker, son. We need to be updated so we know what’s going on before we can go in to save Becca.”

I hadn’t realized until then how much I needed Dad and the rest of my pack behind me. I’d thought I could solve my own problems. I’d been such a dunst.

I sighed and started telling them about the letter Pac sent me. Dad never said a word, but I could feel his anger emanating through the phone. Even here, my wolf was cowering in front of him.

When I was done, there was a brief silence before Dad spoke up. “You’ve been working too closely with humans and you let your pride get the better of you. You forget you’re part of a pack. We work together, son. We have each other’s backs.” His voice rumbled through the line as though he was standing right in front of me.

I realized then I’d let Dad down, but most importantly, I’d let the pack down.

Thank goodness Jill piped up. “I know where he took her.”

“You do?” I heard a crack and looked at my hand to see I had squeezed the phone so tight the edges had cracked. *Two in one night!* I looked at Thomas, who just shrugged. How could he be so calm? “Well, where is she?”

“She’s at Pac’s house.”

“How many houses does he have?”

“Too many to keep track of,” she replied. “But he has one in the Mission. Really proud of that one, too, because he has secret places inside where he can lock up those he doesn’t like.” Her voice had gotten quiet near the end.

Dad's voice came on the line. "Jill will give us the address when she can, and I'll text it to you."

"How does she know for sure Becca is there?"

Jill said, "I know she's there. He won't make the same mistake twice, either. He'll be watching over her himself this time, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, I agree," Dad said. "Son, you go and scout out the place for us before we get there. And do not let yourself be seen or scented."

"Like I would do that," I seethed.

"Don't get smart with me, Brandon." There was some muffled conversation in the background before he came back on the phone and added, "Dredge and Luc are already on their way. The rest of us will be following soon. We'll get Becca back, son, I promise. Now go and scout out the place so we know what we're up against."

BRANDON

“YOUR DAD’S THE ALPHA?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah. We live in a small town called Sugarville, an hour away from Crystal Lake where Becca was living—and I guess where you live too.”

“You do know I hadn’t realized she was in love with you or that you two were mated until just now?”

“We’re not—”

Thomas gave me the most incredulous look. “But you just said—”

“I know what I said to my family. It’s a long story.”

“I see. You’re acknowledging she’s your mate now?”

“Yes,” I growled. “No more questions. We’re almost there.”

We parked five blocks from the address and walked among the crowds of people going out to dinner. My heart was pumping. It would take Dredge and Luc at least three hours to get here—two and a half if they were driving fast, which I wouldn’t discount. What was I going to do while they got here? Just look around the house? Then sit at the local ice cream parlor and twiddle my thumbs until they came? Did Dad really believe I would last that long?

I smelled gardenias before I saw the house. The front window was cracked open, and that familiar scent wafted toward us in a thick haze. It was intoxicating, and I found

myself walking past the house and almost to the end of the block before I realized what was happening.

“He put something in the smell, didn’t he?” Thomas said as we backtracked to the house.

“Sure seems like it. Reminds me of magic, but Pac has no magic.”

This time I made myself stare at the house while willing myself to not move on, but before we knew it, Thomas and I were back at the end of the block, the house behind us. I noticed others walked right by it without giving it a glance. Pac was using strong magic.

“I only know of one person that could help us with this,” I announced. *And she could get here before Dredge and Luc if she wanted to.*

“Who would that be?”

“My grandmother, Miti.”

“Your grandmother is a witch?”

“Yeah, a good one too.”

“And she had shifter babies?”

“Yup. If you have any more questions, you should save them for her, as she won’t tell us anything more.”

“Gotcha.”

I was busy dialing Miti’s number on Thomas’s phone when it rang. Looking down at the unknown number, I smiled. Miti always knew. “Hi, Grandma.”

“You need me now, don’t you?”

“You know I do.”

“I will be there shortly. Do what your dad asked.”

“But—”

“Find a way, Brandon. There’s always a way.” She hung up.

“What did she mean?” Thomas asked.

“We’ll have to find a way to scout the house, even though we can’t get near it.”

“Uh ...”

“Come on, let’s walk around the block.”

It was good Thomas didn’t ask any more questions, because I didn’t think I could take them. My nerves were almost shot at the thought Becca could be inside that house and I couldn’t get to her. We walked around the entire block twice before I noticed it—a little alley in between two store fronts. It was big enough for some trash cans and debris but barely wide enough for people to walk down.

Before heading down the alley, I tore off a length of my shirt and tied it around my face, motioning at Thomas to follow suit. It wasn’t a great deterrent for blocking the gardenia smell, but it was better than nothing. After securing the face covering, I realized my nose couldn’t filter out the various scents associated with the garbage and whatever else was growing in the dark, damp corners to work out Becca’s weak scent. Cursing the fact my ability to smell was so weak, I told Thomas that he would have to be the one to smell out Becca. A memory of Pac sneering at me flashed through my mind, but I pushed it aside. Becca needed me. I wasn’t going to fail her.

Thomas didn’t question why I couldn’t do it myself; he simply agreed, which I was again thankful for.

We headed down the alley. Hitting a fence at the end, we both climbed over. My chest was tight, and it was hard to breathe. I was getting anxious. My heart had not beaten this fast before, and it took all my willpower to not run straight through the fences and on to Becca. We’d passed five houses before I realized we’d gone too far. We backtracked and were almost to the alley when Thomas smelled something familiar—the scent of her shampoo. The smell of Becca’s shampoo was so faint that we needed to venture closer to the house to make sure of it. Thank goodness there were no gardenias in the backyard.

I attempted to shift to get the most out of my senses and felt a satisfied shudder pass through me when it was successful. Lifting my nose up into the air, I caught a clear whiff of Becca's shampoo, then changed into a human again.

"You're going to have to show me that trick of shifting without ruining your clothes," Thomas said.

I gave him a look, flabbergasted he'd mention that at a time like this.

Thomas must have read my thoughts because he added, "Sorry, I just watched you change back and forth, and it's fascinating that you don't lose your clothes. I've never seen another shifter do that before."

I shook my head. "I'll tell you later. Right now, focus."

I peeked into the window and saw that it was a kitchen with a small wooden table in the middle. Two men surrounded it, a can of beer in each hand. I closed my eyes and told my wolf now was not the time. We were just doing reconnaissance work. Thank goodness he'd been able to change and come out to play a little, because he calmed down enough for me to crawl to the window on the other side of the back door and see two more men sitting on the sofa watching television. If anything, it reiterated the fact that I needed to wait for my pack to arrive before I bulldozed inside and looked for Becca.

It was at this point in time I noticed Thomas was not next to me anymore. I looked around and found him balanced on a pile of crates, looking into the third-floor window. When he saw me looking at him, he climbed down, then beckoned for me to follow. We climbed back over the fences, away from the house, until we were back in the alley.

"The third-floor room had a slight whiff of gardenias coming out of it. There's a window on the other side of the room. I thought I saw a flash of red hair out of the corner of my eye, but every time I turned my head to see more, I'd find myself looking at the other window."

"You didn't get seen, did you? That's quite a long time to be looking into the room!"

“I stood to the side. I’m not stupid.”

I took a deep breath. My temper was getting worse, and I was starting to tremble. I clamped my head between my hands, hoping I could stay in control until Dad got here. I could feel a panic attack coming on. As soon as that thought registered, my legs gave out, and I fell to the floor. A splitting headache started, and I realized I couldn’t move. My wolf was groaning as well, and a blinding whiteness flashed across my eyes.

I didn’t know how long I was there for, but when the pain dissipated, I was able to sit back and lean against the wall. Thomas was sitting with his back to me, staring into the alley.

“How long was I out?” I asked him.

He jumped at the sound of my voice and was on his feet in defense mode in an instant. When he realized it was me who had spoken, his hands fell back to his sides. “You were out for a little more than an hour.”

I groaned, letting my face fall into my hands. Just what we needed. Me disabled when I needed to be at my best.

“This old lady came by.”

My head shot up, and I groaned again at the crack my head made against the wall. “What did she look like?”

“She had silver hair and a cackling laugh. She totally shoved me aside and wasn’t even scared of me.”

Thomas looked so bewildered I had to laugh. I didn’t care who heard me, because if no one had come to attack us in the last hour we were safe.

“What’s so funny? I’m disturbed because she walked straight through the fences as if they weren’t there.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Miti.”

“Your grandmother?”

“The one and only.” I continued laughing. “Where is she?”

“She already left. She shrouded us in something and said we were safe, but I’m not so sure I believe her. She also said

she would come back to take care of the gardenia smell, but —”

“You’re not sure if you believe that either?”

“Yeah. She said she needed one more ingredient she didn’t have, and that she’d catch up with your father to get him moving faster.”

I couldn’t stop laughing. This was so Miti; coming in to help, then dictating everything, as if she’d been part of the action this whole time.

“I don’t get why you’re laughing,” Thomas growled. “What if what she said isn’t true? What if we’ve been sitting ducks, and they’re just waiting for us to move so they can jump us at any moment?”

I willed myself to calm down for Thomas’s sake. “Everything she says is true. Miti doesn’t joke.”

“I know she’s your grandmother and all, but—”

“No, you don’t understand. Miti is not able to joke. She might sound like she’s joking because she likes to play mind games with people sometimes, but she really does mean what she says when it comes to fixing family problems.”

“Okay ...”

“Look, let’s go test it out.”

Thomas looked at me like I was crazy, but I actually felt good. The nausea had passed, and I had a new surge of energy. I hoped the panic attack wouldn’t come back again, but it wasn’t like I could sit here and do nothing when Becca was with Pac.

BECCA

PAC WAS EXACTLY who I thought he would be and just like Jill described. I cringed at the thought that he had carried me into his house before tying me to the foot of the bed and locking me in this room. Aside from the bed, which had one quilt on it and no pillow, there was a dresser, two barred windows, and the carpet I was sitting on. The only other thing in the room was a speaker nailed high up near the ceiling.

Music would waft out of it sometimes, and at other times, Pac would intermittently talk to me. Mostly about how disappointed he was in me. About how if I was truly Jill's friend, I should have let her stay, because Jill had such a good life with him. I didn't know if he thought he was doing reverse psychology on me, but it wasn't working, and with nowhere to go, his voice was grating on my nerves.

It'd only been a couple of hours, but my stomach was growling, and I was feeling sick. Someone came to the door one time, and some oatmeal—more like watered porridge—would be slid in for dinner, along with a slice of yellow cheese. I was thankful it wasn't moldy, because I could feel the wetness seeping in from the walls.

This whole house needed to be fumigated. The sound of little nails clipping around in the walls had my skin crawling, but thankfully, I didn't see any holes anywhere, so I figured I was safe from rodents.

The one thing this place had going for it was the smell of gardenias. I didn't know if they were pumping the smell in or

what, but I was glad I couldn't smell what looked like mold growing in the corners.

"You know," Pac said through the speaker, "I don't know what Brandon sees in you. You're so pale and not what I'd call beautiful. Jill, now she was a girl worth showing around."

Some howling ensued. Pac yelled at the others to be quiet. "Jill is mine. You all hear that? Jill is mine!"

I heard a fist slam into something hard and then what sounded like plates and utensils clattering onto the floor.

A new voice spoke up. "Boss, can one of us have the redhead?"

A scratchy laugh emanated from Pac. "She'd be a good one for you boys, but I need her for my purposes. If Brandon doesn't deliver, well then, she'll be all yours."

The howling became even louder this time, and I drew my legs in and squeezed myself into a tight ball.

"Did you hear that, Becca?" Pac said.

More laughter ensued. This time, they laughed so loud I could hear it through the walls of the house. They must not be too far from me then.

Thankfully, the howling ended, and I lay down as best as I could with my hands tied behind my back and let the tears fall. The last thing I wanted was for Pac to come back here before he was planning to. Mom was right—one of my cases came back and bit me. And I didn't have Brandon to come and save me anymore. I had done a great job of pushing him away.

BRANDON

“I TOLD YOU, it’s all gardenias. That’s Pac’s signature smell,” I said to Thomas.

“Why would he choose that smell?”

“He didn’t!” I dragged my hand down my face, wishing someone in the family would show up already. We’d waited a whole ten minutes, and it was all I could do to not shift and charge into the house.

“I don’t believe that he himself smells like gardenias,” Thomas argued.

“Well, it’s true.”

“Never heard of such a thing.”

I turned to Thomas with my hands outstretched. At the last second, I fisted them and slammed them into my thighs, withholding the roar that threatened to release.

“You can punch me, you know,” Thomas said, eyeing me closely.

I grunted, sticking my fists into my eyeballs and hoped the pain would stop me from shifting right this moment.

Thomas sighed. “You’ve got it bad.”

I swatted at him, but he caught my arm and slammed it back down.

“Look, there’s nothing wrong with having panic attacks,” he said firmly. “I thought me giving you a hard time about the flowers would get your mind off of waiting around.”

We were in the alley. After walking to the front of the house and not being able to get any closer, I gave in to the realization that we needed to wait for Miti. But ten minutes felt like an eternity, and who knew what Becca was going through. I ran my hands through my hair and started pulling the strands.

“Hey! Don’t do that. You’ve got to have a full head of hair when you see Becca.”

“Who says?” I said, though, even to me, it sounded more like an animal speaking. I wasn’t going to be able to last much longer. *Where was Miti?*

“Goodness, you look like a mess!” a familiar voice said from down the alley.

“Your scent is so strong I’m surprised Pac himself hasn’t come out to greet you,” said another voice I knew well.

We turned to see Luc and Dredge coming toward us, both dressed in all black and looking to pick a fight.

I stood up, feeling taller now my pack was here.

Dredge continued, “Dad will be here soon. Miti is with them.”

“How many is he bringing?” I asked.

“Only us brothers. We’re in the middle of a city; can’t bring too much attention to what’s going on.”

I grunted. I’d bring as much attention to us as needed if it meant Becca would be safe.

“Here, Miti gave us these to take. Said it’d bypass whatever spell Pac put on the gardenias,” Luc said, handing me a white pill. “It only lasts for about five minutes, so don’t take them just yet.”

“Good; you boys have your pills,” Miti said, coming up behind Luc.

I looked to Miti and saw Dad, Jacob, and Bruno coming up behind her.

“You all came,” I said.

Dredge set a heavy hand on my shoulder. “You idiot. Why didn’t you trust us with your problem?”

I shrugged off his hand and began walking toward Miti. At the same time, I felt a bunch of hands come and slap me across the head or back.

Jacob said, “That’s for being a twerp and thinking you could do this alone. Glad you finally came to your senses.”

I grunted. “Luc said we only have five minutes once we take our pills.” I looked at Miti for confirmation, to which she nodded.

“Then tell us what to do,” Bruno said.

Thomas and I updated the group on the gardenias. Since we only had five minutes, we’d split up. Thomas, Luc, Dredge, and I would go to the back door. Dad, Jacob, and Bruno would head to the front. And Miti said she’d go to the roof so she could signal both groups at the same time.

I updated them on the men I saw in the house and told them I would head upstairs where Becca was situated. The others would remain downstairs and fight off Pac and his goons. With that rough plan agreed on by all of us, Dad told us to take the pills at the same time. As soon as I swallowed the white tablet, what felt like an electric shock zapped through my body.

“Good, they worked,” Miti said, noticing our surprised reactions.

“Did you think they wouldn’t?” I asked. This wouldn’t be the first time Miti had tried something new on us.

“You never know, especially when I’m rushed.”

We all groaned, and I hoped with everything I held dear that they worked. Just in case, I told everyone to tear off a piece of their shirt and tie it around their noses. With the plan in mind, we dispersed into two groups and headed to our positions.

Thomas was lagging behind, and I looked at him, asking, “You not wanting to do this?”

“No, I just want to see your grandmother walk through the fences again. How is it even possible?” Thomas said.

Luc and I just looked at each other and smiled. “Same way she’s going to get to the top of the roof,” I said.

“In her own way,” Jacob added.

“Yes, don’t worry about Miti,” Bruno said.

Miti turned around then, and the look on her face was smug. “I’ve done it more times than you can count,” she said to Thomas.

We all laughed, and Thomas looked at us like we had gone crazy.

Climbing across the fences seemed to take forever this time. When we dropped into Pac’s backyard, my nails had elongated, and I could feel my fangs piercing my lips. We sneaked up to the door, and I shifted. It felt so good to be back in my wolf form. He was fired up and raring to fight.

Luc crept up behind me, ready to pick the lock. He stopped when we heard the scraping of a chair. I growled, but Luc gave me a shove, motioning for me to be silent.

There was something nagging me, a prickle on my neck. I paused and listened, searching my senses for what was out of reach. I realized there was no sound coming from the television, no voices talking. There was nowhere they could have gone; we had them surrounded. And yet, everything seemed too easy. Something was wrong. By now, the hairs on my neck were standing up straight. It should just be me going in, not my whole pack. What if—?

“Now!” Miti yelled from the roof.

Luc, Thomas, and Dredge shifted, and we charged into the house, ready to tear everyone apart. But the seven of us met in the middle of the hallway and heard and saw nothing. It was dead quiet. Too quiet. Thank goodness my family could still communicate in wolf form. Thomas, unfortunately, was the only one blocked from hearing our minds.

Dad took charge and said, *Brandon, Luc, and Thomas; go upstairs and check every room. The rest of you check this floor.*

I nudged Thomas to follow me. The three of us ran upstairs and started exploring the rooms upstairs, all of which we found empty.

One of the rooms had a door that led upstairs, and I rushed to the top when I caught a whiff of Becca's smell. I was panting from anticipation, but when I reached the top floor, all I saw was an empty attic. There was a bed in the corner that looked like it had been dragged a couple of feet along the dusty floor, a two-drawer dresser on the side, and what looked like a speaker in the corner. Her scent was everywhere.

My love, my mate. Gone.

My breathing was coming out in stuttered gasps now.

I vaguely sensed Luc behind me before I heard him. *Brandon, they didn't find her downstairs either.*

This wasn't happening. My head was getting muddled. Where was she? Where could they possibly have taken her? Then it dawned on me—it was when I had broken down. They'd taken her out of the house when I'd been unconscious. They'd moved her.

I had failed again!

I howled and started tearing the bed to shreds. Every last piece of it. Cloth caught in my teeth, and the sound of bars bending under my paws gave me great satisfaction. It wasn't until the last of the wooden dresser was in pieces that I stopped and noticed Luc was still standing at the top of the stairs, waiting for me.

You done? he asked.

This can't be happening. She was here not that long ago. It was then that I realized the whimpering sounds were coming from my lips. My heart was breaking at the thought I was too late.

That was when Luc came at me full speed and slammed me into the wall. I pushed him away and lunged for his neck.

What did he think he was doing attacking me like this when I was at my lowest? Before I could get a bite in, he was on top of me, holding my neck in his mouth. If he added a bit more pressure, he would puncture my vein. Calling his bluff, I twisted to get out from under him, but this time he didn't let go. He started sinking his teeth into me at the same time his claws dug into my side.

I stilled.

Are you done? Luc growled.

All I could do was grunt.

If you had asked, I would have told you they didn't find her downstairs, but they did find a secret door under the television.

I twisted my head to look into his eyes. He better not be getting my hopes up for nothing.

Yes, that's right. And if you're done feeling sorry for yourself, we thought you'd like to come down with us.

I blinked in assent, and he let me go. I immediately stood up on all fours, only to see my entire family staring at me from the doorway.

Deciding to ignore them, I ran to the stairs, only to be headbutted by each of them as I passed by. Aside from the reminder of what a dunst I was being, a part of me was glad they were here.

Once in the living room, I noticed the television had been moved to the side and the carpet was rolled up. Luc was right—there was another door in the floor. The trapdoor had been opened, and Miti was sitting there waiting for us.

“Took you long enough,” she said with a scowl. “Your mate could be far gone by now, thanks to you wallowing in your own self-pity.”

I wanted to growl at her but, being my grandmother, I smothered it, and it came out as more of a huff. She only gave me a stare before shooing me down the stairs. The rest of my

family followed, conscious we were walking into a dark tunnel where not a single light could be seen.

BECCA

“THERE’S no one coming to save me,” I called out to Pac.
“Which means there’ll be no ransom.”

All Pac did was give me a look before digging into his fried chicken. Watching him eat was gruesome, and I tried to turn away, but I was tied to a chair. One rope was wound around my shoulders, another around my legs, and yet another around my waist, effectively pinning my arms down with it.

“Boss, you think the ropes are tight enough?” a bony guy in a dirty white singlet said.

“I tied it good!” the guy next to him said, and like a three-year-old boy, he threw his half-eaten chicken bone at the first guy.

This started a chicken war, and if I wasn’t tied up, I would have found it amusing to watch a bunch of grown-up men having a food fight. The whole time, Pac just continued to eat as if nothing was going on around him. It was a bit disconcerting that he could be so calm among such chaos.

“Can I have some water?” I asked when there was a lull in the fight.

All I got was a splash of water in my face from Pac while he continued eating.

“You know I won’t be much good to you if I perish from hunger and thirst,” I pointed out, spitting the residual water in his direction.

“Don’t care,” Pac said, the first words he’d said to me since marching all of us into this new building via an underground tunnel system I had no idea existed in the city.

“Then, why bother taking me?” It just didn’t make any sense. I had asked him if this was about Jill’s case, and he had grunted, which I took as a non-answer. But I couldn’t think of another reason why he would want me.

“You want to know why you’re here?” Pac asked.

I nodded, keeping my chin level. I clenched my teeth so my muscles wouldn’t give away the need to quiver. To say I was scared was putting it mildly. But I was also pissed. This couldn’t be how my life ended! Not without telling Brandon how sorry I was for saying that he could never take care of me.

“You’re a pawn—a small fry in a grand plan. And the best one I’ve ever had.” Pac sneered and spit something onto his plate. “You weren’t always part of the plan. But if you’d just left Jill well alone, you wouldn’t be here. I’d still have Jill, you’d still be living your boring life, and my plan would still be moving forward just like it is now. It’s your own doing that you’re here.”

He grabbed another chicken leg and took a bite. Chewing furiously, he looked around the room at the wrestling crowd. “Everyone; get out!” he snapped.

But the others didn’t hear him; they were wrestling and biting and growling at one another. Pac stood up and upturned the table, sending the men scattering away.

“I. Said. Get. Out!” he roared, and the others scampered as fast as they could out of the room.

Having sent his goons away, Pac sat back down, but this time facing me. There was a glow in his eyes. That wasn’t natural. I scooted my chair back as far as I could go until I hit the wall. My heart rate had spiked, and I wrapped my fingers around the rope on my waist, pulling it so I could move the knot from the middle of my back to my right hand.

Pac watched me closely. “You don’t know what I am, do you?” His tongue came out to rub against his lips as if he was

hungry. “I can smell you. Not just your body odor, but your fear. It’s intoxicating.”

The smile that came across his face displayed crooked teeth that were more yellow and brown than white. I willed my heart to slow down and tried to regain some semblance of control. Now was not the time to freak out. This was just like the courtroom; I had to keep my faculties. I tried to focus on Pac’s face while keeping my features schooled. But ...

It couldn’t be! Did his teeth just get longer? What the heck was going on?

My breath quickened, and my chest hurt. I willed it to slow by holding my breath for a few seconds, then letting out a slow exhale.

His laugh sent shivers through me. “That won’t help you. This is only the beginning. Once you see what me and my men are, you’ll realize how futile it is to remain calm. I expect you’ll lose your mind once you see what I’m talking about.” He laughed, but this time it was intermingled with a low growl. “Brandon will try to save you, but he will fail. I’ve no doubt his family will come with him, and they, too, will all fall, one by one. The anticipation of this victory is like drinking a fine wine. I can taste it already.”

“Brandon,” I whispered.

“Yes, your lover boy. He’s your mate. But from the look on your face, you have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” He laughed again. “You two are meant for each other, did you know that?”

I knew that, but Brandon always said—

“Poor Becca. He pushed you away to the point you gave up on him. That itself will kill him ... literally.”

“What do you mean?” I stilled as fear gripped me, rooting me to my chair. Even my fingers had stopped messing with the rope.

“Now I have your attention, don’t I? Without you by his side, Brandon will perish. It will be a slow, painful death because his soul is incomplete. If he had never met you, he

might have been able to move on. But now that his wolf has met you and claimed you as his own, there is no turning back. Without you by his side, Brandon will die.”

The menace in his voice was like the sizzle of well-cooked meat. My heart rate was finally slowing down, but not because I was calm. It was because the truth of his words had dug so deeply into me that a flow of dread rooted itself in my heart.

I have to get back to Brandon.

My fingers started moving again, wriggling the knot and trying to undo it.

“It’s futile trying to escape,” Pac now said, a cynical smile on his face. “There’s no way to find you. We’ve dug multiple dens in various locations, and if they don’t get lost and attacked by my men first, the surprises I’ve laid along the way will take care of them.”

“Dens?” My brain registered that he had mentioned Brandon’s wolf earlier, but Brandon didn’t have a pet. He’d always said he could never have one. And each time I brought it up, Brandon would always look away from me.

“Yes, dens. Just like the one I lived in for years growing up. My parents only let me and my siblings out when they thought the place was safe. Why didn’t we move, you ask? It was too easy for my parents to get food because of the farms nearby. They were too stupid to think about what would happen if they were caught.” His voice dropped an octave, and I trembled, rushing now to loosen the knot.

“What happened?” Maybe if I kept him talking, I’d figure out how to get out of here. None of this was making sense, but I didn’t care, as long as he was distracted.

“They got themselves killed,” Pac said bluntly. “Left me and my siblings all alone. We had only left the den a few times, and I didn’t know where we were or what was around us. I was the youngest, and my two older siblings were not smart either, because they continued what my parents started, hunting the farms and eventually getting themselves shot too. Only I was smart enough to leave. I learned and evolved.

That's what humans say all the time, right? That only the strongest survive?"

A look of sadness seemed to come over him as his eyes dimmed back to a dark brown color. "That was until Cory found me. He was weak, but he saved me."

"Who's Cory?" I asked.

He looked up at me as if to gauge if I was worthy of his answer, studying me with so much intensity that I started squirming in my seat. A glint came to his eye, and the edge of his lips quirked up as I shuddered. "Cory Chen is the patriarch of Brandon's family. You don't know about him?"

I kept my head still, not wanting to give Pac the satisfaction of a response.

He cocked his head. "Stubborn one, aren't you? You'll be fun to break. Cory Chen was a Taiwanese American shifter who was Alia's grandfather. Alia you must know, right?"

Brandon's mom knows this man? What was the connection?

When I still didn't reply, he waved his hand at me. "Brandon must have really done a number on you. He didn't tell you anything about his family?"

"Of course, he did!"

"Then, who's Alia?"

"His mom."

"Very good. You must also know that she was a smart lady. I have high respect for Alia. She took care of me when Cory passed away, did you know that? I was like a brother to all the McCullough kids. I was the oldest of them all and Dredge's best friend for a while."

I was in a sea of confusion. How could someone so vile be related to Brandon? And why were his eyes glowing? His teeth had gotten longer too. None of this was computing in my head. It all boggled my mind.

A loud clang sounded from outside, followed by a scream and intense fighting. Pac immediately jumped out of his seat and ran to the door, closing it behind him. Not wanting to be left behind, I tried with all my might to loosen the rope around my wrists, but it was not budging.

That's when I heard howling. Dread flushed through me, and I screamed when there came a sudden bang against the door, shaking the room. Snarling, and what sounded like furniture crashing to the floor on the other side of the door, made me jump. Shaking, I scooted as far away from the door as I could, sweat pouring down my face. I couldn't help crying now. This was all too much. All I had wanted was to start my life over again, to forget Brandon, but I was in deeper water than I'd ever been before.

There came another bang against the door, and this time a crack formed in the middle. More howling followed, and it now sounded like a whole army of wolves was outside my room. The next hit against the door broke a hole in the middle of it, sending shrapnel flying in my direction. I cringed and tried to scoot away, but I fell over sideways, hitting my head on the ground.

Whimpering and growling sounded outside the door. It was then followed by a sudden silence—like the pause in the middle of a storm. I tensed, fully expecting the fight to continue at any second. Instead, when I looked back at the door, I saw a pair of golden eyes staring back at me. Eyes that were bigger than a human's eyes and surrounded by fur. I screamed.

The door suddenly flew open, and in ran Brandon, covered in blood. *Is it his blood? Oh my goodness, is he going to die?* My thoughts circled in my head over and over, but no words would come out.

I stilled as he crouched in front of me. I told myself he was really here, but I only half believed it. He slowly untied me, freeing me from the chair. I concentrated on his face, trying to see what he was thinking as he pulled me upright. *How is he here? What was all that growling and howling outside before?*

His voice broke the spell. “Becca.”

My name was filled with sadness, and I ventured a look down his body, realizing a lot of the blood *was* his. I started crying even more. He pulled me into his arms, and I found myself crushed against Brandon’s chest. I tried to push away so as not to hurt him more, but his arms were like steel bands, holding me in place.

The sound of nails hitting the floor came from behind him, and we both turned to see where it was coming from. That’s when I saw four wolves coming in, all limping or bleeding. They were bigger than any wolf I had ever seen, and as a group, they had a menacing air about them.

I couldn’t help it. I screamed again, trying to pull Brandon farther back into the room.

Brandon simply tightened his arms around me and said, “Don’t worry. It’s family.”

But before I could register his words, I fainted.

BECCA

I WOKE up in a space that smelled like Brandon. The pillow, the blanket; it all smelled like him. Not wanting to wake up from this dream, I snuggled deeper into the comforter, only to yelp when my wrist twisted. The burning sensation rushing down my arm had me pushing the covers off and raising my arms in front of my face.

Bright red lines circled my wrists. The sight of them brought back memories of being with Pac. I immediately shot up in bed, looking around to see if Pac or any of his men were present. The door opened, and I jumped, wincing at the pain that shot through my wrists and ankles.

“Lay down, Becca,” an old woman said, walking toward me. “You can call me Miti.”

I pulled the covers up, relishing in the smell that surrounded me, irrationally thinking Brandon’s smell would protect me.

“You’re reacting to Brandon’s scent,” Miti said, as if reading my mind.

She sat down on the bed next to me and reached out her hand. Without thinking, I placed mine in hers. She gave off a sense of peace, and I soaked it up.

“Have a drink of this hot tea, then lay back and relax. Just listen for now,” Miti ordered.

I did what she said, a calmness washing over me.

“You’ve been through a lot, but you are safe now, Becca. No one is going to hurt you. You’re in Brandon’s room, which you probably have never been, correct?”

I nodded.

She laughed when she saw my eyes get large. “My grandson is slow when it comes to love, scared is more like it. Did you know our family founded Sugarville?”

“That I knew,” I said.

She nodded. “But I bet you don’t understand the tugging that has been inside you since you met him.”

How did she know?

As if she heard my question, she said, “I heard Pac talking to you. You see, I was the first one to the house. While the others were crawling through the dens, I traveled above, following your signal.”

“My signal?”

“Everyone has a signal when they’ve found their true mate.”

Her eyes were twinkling, and for some reason that set me off. “This is the second time I’ve heard the word ‘mate’ associated with me.” I hadn’t meant to get riled up, but I couldn’t help it. “If Brandon and I were true mates—”

“*Are* true mates.”

“*Were* true mates,” I said, giving her a pointed look, to which she just smiled, much to my annoyance. “Then how come Brandon pushed me away? Answer me that! If we were meant to be together, why did he tell me I was just a sister to him? Only as friends, he said.” I was bawling by this time. “And why did it feel so awkward when I kissed him?”

“Because he’s a doofus.”

She said it so matter of factly that I choked on my sobs and just stared at her, right as a peel of laughter came through the door.

“I think you agree with me?” Miti said into the stunned silence.

I nodded, trying to catch my breath as I wiped my tears away. Before I could say anything, the door opened, and next thing I knew, Jill was lying next to me in bed and hugging me.

“I’m sorry, Miti, I couldn’t wait any longer,” she said. Then she turned to face the open door and yelled, “Brandon *is* a doofus!”

Miti laughed. “Well, I’ll leave you two girls to catch up.” She left and closed the door behind her.

“Oh my goodness, Becca! I thought I’d never see you again! I’m so sorry!” Jill announced as soon as the door closed.

“Jill!” I hugged her as tight as I could. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Did he do anything to you?”

“Only what you see on my wrists.” I held them up. “And my ankles.”

“I’m so glad you’re here and not missing anymore. I don’t know how you held it together when I was taken. I was a bawling mess when I found out. Luc wouldn’t let me go with them. He wouldn’t even let Sandy go, and Sandy is a fantastic hunter. Said something about her being too invested. The two of us sat at home just waiting, and it wasn’t until quite a long time later that Brandon walked in with you in his arms. He wouldn’t let anyone touch you except Miti. Brought you straight to his room and closed the door. Miti did a good job cleaning you up. You’ll love her, Becca.”

“She seems wonderful.” I was getting sleepy and could feel my eyes drooping. “So much information, Jill. I don’t know what to make of any of it.”

“It’s okay. Let’s not get bogged down on the details right now. Just rest. You’re safe, Becca. I promise. No one will disturb you here.”

“Okay.” And for some reason I believed her.

Jill gave me another hug. “I’m going to go help Sandy with your dinner. You just rest.”

I think I hummed a yes before I allowed myself to drift off. For the first time in a long while, I finally felt safe, so I was going to take their advice and rest.

BRANDON

A HAND WHACKED me in the back of the head. Not hard, but enough to startle me. I turned around to see Miti staring at me with the sternest look on her face. I hadn't seen that expression since she found me in the pantry scarfing down all the cookies Mom had made for the family get-together. "Grandma, what was that for?"

"Jill and I have calmed her down. She knows she's safe. I've given her a sleeping draught so she's going to rest now. When she wakes, Jill's going to make food for her. Then, and only then, is it your turn to do some explaining."

"Why can't I go in and sleep with her now?" I stood up to make my point. No one was going to keep me away from her any longer.

But all Miti had to do was give me a look, and I sat back down. Her power was stronger than even Dad's. It made me want to cower. I looked down and noticed my brothers doing the same.

"Brandon McCullough, you've made a mess of things with your mate," Miti said firmly. "Of all the siblings, I thought you would be the one who had the most sense. I should have known, though, that the best child would have the biggest tendency to be a not-so-great adult."

I looked up in shock at that statement. Jacob snickered next to me. Miti, however, was quicker at getting to him than I was.

With one pinched ear, he subdued to her whims. “Jacob McCullough, you mark my words that you will be next in line.”

He grumbled but kept his mouth shut.

“Your mates are precious. There is only one for each of you in the whole world. And for you to be truly happy and start a pack of your own, you need to acknowledge them. That’s not too hard to do, is it?”

We all shook our heads.

“I didn’t think so. And yet you, Brandon, have let your past cloud over the one you were born to protect.”

I could feel my face redden in shame. Becca was hurt, emotionally and physically, and all because of me. A surge of possessiveness shot through me at the thought of her all alone in my room, scared. I didn’t care what Miti said, she wasn’t going to stop me from going to her.

I stood up, fully expecting Miti to make me sit down again, but she just looked at me, willing me to defy her.

“All this talk is great and all, and it’s really good to see you, Miti, but I have someone I need to take care of.” I held up my hand to prevent her from talking. “I know she’s resting, and I won’t disturb her, but I need to be next to her. I need to see her.” I marched off before she could say anything more. I entered my room and closed the door behind me before leaning against it and letting out a breath. I listened to see if anyone was coming after me, but all I heard was Miti laughing and saying, “It’s about time.”

I smiled, thinking Miti always knew how to handle us and focused on the figure in my bed. She looked so small. Becca was sleeping on her side, with her red hair spread across my pillow. One of her hands was resting on the other pillow, and that’s the one I held as I slid under the covers next to her. I’d never been this intimate with Becca, and part of me wanted to get out of bed and sit by the chair and watch over her. But the thought of letting go of her hand was impossible. I would never let her go ever again. Becca was mine.

I ran my other hand across her cheek and smiled when she stirred and rubbed back. Not wanting to wake her, I closed my eyes and went to sleep, dreaming of my mate in my arms.

BECCA

I FELT someone warm next to me. The smell of sandalwood and citrus filled my senses, and I rolled closer, feeling an arm come around me in response. I loved this dream and could stay here forever, breathing in Brandon's scent.

"I love you," a voice said.

I smiled. I'd wanted to hear that for a long time. I didn't want to ever wake up from this.

"I've always loved you, Becca."

I snuggled in deeper and drifted off into a deep sleep. This was the best dream ever.



When I woke up, I made sure to keep my eyes closed and went through every second of my dream to save it in my memory, as I knew I'd be replaying it over and over again for the rest of my life.

With the blanket held close to my face, I took a big whiff of Brandon's scent. It was amazing how strong his smell was even when he wasn't here. Maybe I could ask Miti if I could take his blanket with me? I'd buy him a new one to replace it.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

I screamed and tried to get out of bed, but between the covers and whoever was holding me, I ended up half rolling

out, with my feet still in the bed and my hands on the ground. Pain seared through my wrists, and I could feel tears forming in my eyes.

Laughing ensued from behind me, and strong hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me back into the bed. When I was flipped around, I gasped.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Brandon said.

By reflex, my hand landed on his cheek with a slap. I winced at the pain but continued to stare into the brown eyes looking back at me.

“I deserved that,” he said softly.

I didn’t know what to say. Brandon was here—right next to me! I reached a hand out to touch his chin. “You haven’t shaved.” *That was the first thing I said?*

“Yeah, haven’t had time to.”

“What have you been doing?”

“Resting here with you.”

He was so close. I reached my toes out and felt his leg right next to mine. I started scooting closer, and his hands reached around my waist to pull me in. His leg went over mine, and before I knew it, I was fully encased in his arms.

The pain around my wrists and ankles were forgotten as I breathed in his scent and felt every part of my skin tingle at his proximity.

“I’m sorry I pushed you away,” Brandon said.

His apology spurned the memory of the one I wanted to make. “I’m sorry I told you that you would never be able to protect me. You saved me.”

“I always will.”

Something settled inside me, along with a dose of hope. But I didn’t want to ask him right now; the memory of how he’d pushed me away was too raw, too recent. Instead, I asked, “How did you find me?”

He looked embarrassed all of a sudden and tried to look away. I put my hand on his face and turned him back to face me.

“It was the necklace I gave you,” he said softly.

“The one with the wolf turning into a girl and back again?” There was a slight pause before it hit me. “Oh!”

Brandon nodded. “That’s the one.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Miti made it. It’s used as a tracker.” He lifted his hand for me to see. “And this ring is what helped me to track you.”

I didn’t know what to say. *He tracked me? And didn’t tell me? And yet, if he hadn’t ...* I shivered at the thought.

“Are you cold?” He pulled me in closer and wrapped the blanket around us even tighter.

I looked into his eyes and decided now was not the time to dwell on the tracker. “What’s going on here, Brandon?”

“You’re in my bed and we’re snuggling, and I’m never going to let you go again,” he said simply.

His fingers were making little circles on my back, and it was all I could do to not close my eyes and lean in further.

“Becca ...”

“Yeah?”

“I loved the kiss you gave me before. I love everything about you. The way your smile brightens up your whole face. The laugh you make at my corny jokes. I—”

I kissed him on the lips, planning to only plant a soft one, but next thing I knew, he had me clamped tight to his chest with one hand while the other was behind my head, pressing my mouth against his lips. My hands went to his chest, and for the first time, I allowed myself to feel his muscles rippling under my fingers.

“You’re going to make me crazy if you keep doing that,” he said.

“Doing what?” My fingers were now tracing every ridge and dip on his chest and stomach.

He reached for my hands and brought them back up to his lips to kiss each knuckle before holding them to his chest.

I studied his face and realized something was off. “I remember you being bloody. How long have I been out?”

“Only a day.”

I opened the covers so that I could see his chest and gasped. After inspecting every inch of him front and back, I stared at Brandon. He in turn was looking at me with amusement.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You were really hurt. How do you look so perfect?”

“I heal fast.”

That did not compute, and I continued staring until he added, “I heal faster than a human.”

I gave myself a lot of credit when I didn’t blink an eye. Holding onto my resolve, I repeated, “Faster than a human?”

“Yes. I’m a—”

“Wolf.” The word came out even though the rational part of my brain was still fighting to believe what Brandon was saying.

“Yes.” He paused and looked at me for a few seconds. “What made you think that?”

“Pac mentioned it, but I didn’t understand him at the time. He said something about how your wolf had met me, that we were mates, and ...” I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks as I added, “That you would die if you weren’t able to be with me.”

“That’s all true,” he whispered. He seemed to be holding his breath while waiting for me to say more.

“I’m not sure what to think about it all,” I finally whispered.

“There’s no need to think too much into it. I want you to rest right now. I can explain more later. And Jill knows too.”

“Jill knows?”

“Well, she is with my brother.” He smiled. “My whole family are wolf shifters.”

“That means ... Jill is Luc’s mate?”

He nodded, and his thumb rubbed along my cheek. “You’re safe, Becca. I got you. No more bad dreams, and no more Pac.”

I leaned into his warmth and decided that even if all of this was crazy talk, I wanted this moment to last. I leaned closer to Brandon, and he pulled me in as he rolled onto his back. Laying my head on his shoulder, I relished the feeling that we were finally together.

This was everything I wanted. I’d worry about the details later.

PAC

“THERE’S nothing you can do, Theodore. Nothing at all.”

Our most esteemed alpha, Theodore McCullough, stood in front of me with a poker face. Probably hoping I’d cave and grovel back to him. I laughed, then cringed at the sound coming out of my mouth. All the surgery I’d done on myself and the elixirs I’d taken to conceal my scent had taken a toll on my body. Maybe it was for the best that Theodore got rid of me and let the others continue our path.

“What have you done, Pac?”

Theodore stared at me with hatred in his eyes. He hadn’t always looked at me like that. Once upon a time, he’d loved me as his own, but I guess I couldn’t expect that anymore after I had tricked him so many times.

“I’ve been drugging all of you since I’ve been living with you again,” I said. “You never knew, did you? That I and the ‘human’ doctor were one and the same?” I laughed again. Maybe this laugh did suit me. “I suppose it is hard to believe that you allowed me to live under your roof for the last month while doctoring your sick and wounded. You had no idea it was me who was providing you with tonics that you believed to be beneficial for your health.”

The horror on Theodore’s face spoke volumes. I congratulated myself on making him squirm.

“You’ve always been too trusting,” I continued. “Not proper alpha material. I, on the other hand, would do so much better in the role.”

Theodore's brows drew together. "That's what this was all about? You wanting to be alpha?"

"That's what it started out as," I admitted.

"But you could have formed your own pack ages ago."

"I know that now, and I have, Theo. I have. I did what you taught me, which was to take in every stray that needed me. But unlike you, I rule with an iron fist. I don't trust my men like you do. I rule with fear, and they listen."

Theodore stiffened. "That's not how you become a leader."

I waved my hand in denial. "You were always too soft! And it's too late now, Theo. You and your family are doomed. Even if you kill me, my plan will continue forward. I have loyal subjects who will carry out what I've started. And as for you, without an antidote you will soon lose your alpha powers—and I'll leave you guessing as to who else will also be affected by the same malady."

This was better than I had planned—being able to see Theo's horrified face and his fists clenching. I felt the first punch to my face a second later and laughed as he continued hitting me. I had won, and he knew it.

BRANDON

THE WHOLE PACK had been called for a meeting at Dad's house. While I had been with Becca, Dad had been interrogating Pac, and from what I'd heard on the grapevine, the news was not good.

When I headed to the kitchen to talk to my family, I saw some members were in wolf form, laying on the floor with their ears forward, looking ready to go on a mission if Dad asked them to. My brothers and Sandy were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me to join them.

"How's Becca?" Sandy asked when I walked in.

"She's doing well. She's at Jill's new house right now having lunch."

"Glad you finally came to your senses," Luc said.

I gave him a nod before Dad started speaking.

"As you all know, we recently apprehended Pac, who had taken Becca, Brandon's mate, hostage."

My hands tightened at the thought of what had happened. It was all my fault. I'd been thinking about myself and not the whole pack.

I felt a hard nudge and glared at Luc, only to have him say, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're part of this family. We're not going anywhere without you and vice versa."

I took a deep breath and nodded. This was my family. I turned back to Dad to hear what he had learned from Pac.

“Becca has shared with Brandon everything Pac said to her. With that information and what we’ve gleaned from Pac, it seems we must prepare for the worst.”

The resounding gasps around the room, followed by a lot of growling, lasted for a good full minute before Dad was able to calm everyone down again. We listened with horror while he explained what Pac had done and how we didn’t know who had been infected by the tonic water.

We were so enraptured we didn’t hear the front door open.

“Brandon!” Becca yelled.

Her yell startled the wolves, and they jumped up and snarled at her. But before I could get to her, Becca screamed and went running out the door. I chased her all the way to Jill’s before I got ahold of her.

“Becca! Becca!”

Her fists were hitting me everywhere; she was trying so hard to get away.

“What happened?” Jill said, coming out of the house. “Becca! Becca, it’s me, Jill.”

I managed to clamp Becca to my chest and simply held onto her until she stopped struggling. Moments later, she gripped the front of my shirt and began sobbing.

“She came into the building looking for me and startled the sentries,” I explained to Jill. “They were already tense as Dad was sharing news about what Pac has been up to. They were on edge and snarled when she came rushing inside.”

“Oh, Becca, it’s okay,” Jill said. “You’re safe here. Brandon, let her go so I can take her in. I think I need to talk to her first before you and the pack show her who you are.”

I didn’t want to let Becca go. Not when she was in this state, but what Jill said made sense. “Okay, I’ll be out here. Come see me when she’s ready.”

Jill nodded and took Becca, who was still shaking, into her house.

I was pacing outside the house when Luc found me. “Is she okay?”

“I’m not sure. She’s inside with your mate.”

Luc eyed me. “I’ll hang out here with you until they come out.”

I just nodded. This wasn’t how I wanted to show Becca who and what we were. I had a whole day trip planned where I would take her to the river, explain to her what I was going to do, and then shift to show her my wolf. Now everything was a mess. What if she ran off and wanted nothing to do with me anymore? Was I going to lose her after finally accepting her?

She came out of the house then, looking more beautiful than ever. Her face was a bit puffy, and her eyes were vulnerable. She looked fragile. I ran over and stood in front of her, afraid to touch her in case she ran away, but she walked into my arms, encircling me in a tight hug. Over her shoulder, I saw Jill slowly exit the house and walk over to Luc, their eyes on us.

“Jill explained everything,” Becca said softly. “By the third time, it finally sunk in. Especially after seeing all those wolves in your parents’ house.”

I squeezed her closer. “It wasn’t how I wanted you to see us for the first time. I had a whole day planned out around how to tell you.”

She leaned back to look me in the face. Taking a deep breath, she said slowly, “Why don’t you show me now?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, while Jill is here.”

I waited a moment, searching her face. Satisfied by the firm expression, I said, “Okay.” I let her go and stepped back a few feet. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. If this is who you are, I want to know the whole you.”

Without giving myself a chance to second-guess the decision, I shifted in front of her, and as I changed, my eyes

never left hers. I saw them widen in fear and almost stopped the transition, but then Jill walked up to Becca and hugged her from behind, whispering. Slowly, the fear left her eyes, and in its place was wonder.

“You’re beautiful.” Her words were no more than a whisper, but I could hear every word.

I walked up to her hand and licked it, my muzzle peeling back in a smile at the squeal that left her lips. When her hand came to rub my head and behind my ears, I whined and nuzzled closer. She kneeled and looked me in the eyes, the fear still lingering but something stronger pushing through.

“I see you’ve prematurely grayed,” she teased, “and you’ve gone all white on your muzzle. I’m sorry if I did that to you.”

I started laughing, as only Becca would say that at a time like this. I shifted and pulled her into my arms, giving her a deep kiss and pouring all my love for her into it. All I could think about was the time I’d wasted in not being with her.

A cough sounded behind me, and I smelled them all before I saw them. Turning, I found my whole pack had come out, and everyone had shifted. It was quite a sight to see a sea of wolves in front of you, and I turned back to Becca to see how she was taking it. She wasn’t looking at me, though, or even at the wolves; she was looking past me to someone or something else. Turning, I saw Mom walking toward us in her human form.

She took Becca’s hands in hers and said, “Becca, my son loves you, and we love you too. You are family now, and we welcome you into our pack. I already love you as a daughter and hope you can accept your place with us.”

With Mom’s announcement, it was now or never. I turned to Becca and held both her hands. “Becca, will you have me as your mate?”

Her eyes widened in shock, then delighted surprise. “Will you sit under the stars with me and just enjoy life?” she returned.

I smiled. “Yes. Always.”

Becca smiled and walked into my arms, whispering, “Then yes. For always and always.”

I squeezed her tight and swung her around amidst a sea of howling.

BECCA

I WAS EATING breakfast when Jill came in the next morning. “Becca, Thomas is here to see you. I told him to wait in the living room and that you’d be out soon.”

“Excellent, I was hoping he’d come.”

“What are you going to say to him?” Jill asked.

“Just that I hope we can all stay friends and that he won’t disappear off the face of the earth.”

“You think he’ll stay?”

“I hope so. I don’t want him to feel bad for what he did. He was duped like the rest of us and has a good heart.”

Jill’s lips pressed together. “Maybe you’re being a bit too trusting.”

“I’d rather be trusting than start thinking everyone has an ulterior motive.”

Jill gave a small smile. “True. Well, he’s in the living room waiting for you.”

I headed to the living room and, sure enough, Thomas was standing at the window, looking out at the front lawn.

“Glad you came,” I said.

He turned to face me. He looked so beaten. “I’m not sure how you can forgive me for what I did.”

“Everything turned out okay in the end,” I assured him.

He shrugged it off. “Yes, I’m glad you’re safe and with the man you should be with.”

As I got closer, I noticed his scent had changed. He smelled of old spice. “I like that you smell different now.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I stopped taking the drinks that Pac, or whatever he was called, had given me, and I’m back to how I’ve always smelled.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled, then stopped, as if it was inappropriate to laugh.

“You can relax around me, you know. Brandon isn’t mad at you, either. You helped save me.”

“I didn’t really do much since I got bitten by a couple of snakes in the dens when we were looking for you. I held one of the guys back, too, because he had to take care of me.”

“But all is well. I’m back, and everyone is safe.”

“That may be, but I think I’ll need some time before I forgive myself,” he said, looking lost.

My heart tore for him, and I thought of the conversation I had with Theo yesterday morning. “Just know you have a home here with this pack if you ever want to come back. Theo has said as much.”

“I appreciate it.”

But I could see he wasn’t going to stay. The urge to move on was almost biting at his heels. “Where will you go?”

“I don’t know yet. Somewhere quiet. I have a lot to think about.”

“All I ask is that you be safe.”

I gave him a hug, then watched as he walked out the door before shifting and running into the woods.



“I had the necklace I gave you made into a ring,” Brandon said, pulling me closer to his side. We were sitting on a rug observing the rest of his family finish up Luc and Jill’s house. “And for full disclosure, it still has the tracking capabilities that the necklace had. But as you can see, I’m not wearing the ring. I don’t feel comfortable monitoring you, so it’s being safeguarded by Miti. I won’t be tracking you, I promise. It’s an option just in case something happens to you because I don’t trust Pac and his goons and whatever plan he has up his sleeve. Please understand, Becca.”

“Brandon, I trust you. It’s okay.” I gave him a kiss before adding, “It’s Miti I wonder about.” I laughed and was happy to hear him laugh along.

“That’s true. Maybe I should get the ring back from her.”

“It’s okay. It’s in safe hands, and I trust Miti too. I was just joking.”

Brandon laughed and pulled me into his lap. “Good. In that case, will you move in with me, Becca?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Yes!”

Brandon looked relieved, but then he frowned. “What about your new position, though?”

I sent him a smug smile. “I already talked to my boss, and he said I can keep the job. He really wants me there, and we agreed I can work remotely provided I go down to the office once a month.”

The smile that came across his face almost made me faint. I was never going to get enough of Brandon. Our dream had come true, and I was never going to let him go again.

EPILOGUE

JACOB

“IT’S ONLY BEEN a couple of days, but Brandon and I are doing great,” Becca said, taking another sip of her white wine.

Mom and Dad had invited us over for dinner, and we were sitting in the living room waiting for Luc and Jill to arrive.

“We sure are,” Brandon said, pulling Becca in closer and giving her a kiss that I had to look away from.

“You guys are ridiculously cute and cheesy,” Sandy said, which made the whole family laugh.

“Jacob’s next in line with the way it’s going,” Bruno said, trying to grab my shoulders to lock my head in a nuggy.

I dodged his reach but didn’t like the sudden shift of attention that put me in the spotlight.

“Son, you feel the pull at all?” Dad asked.

“I can’t wait to see who it is,” Becca said, scooting her legs over Brandon’s and reclining back on the sofa. “She’s going to have to be pretty strong-willed if she’s going to keep up with the McCullough Pack.”

“You’ve taken to our pack pretty quickly,” I said, hoping this would change the subject. It’s not that I didn’t want to find my mate; I just didn’t want to be pressured into it.

“I’m still getting used to the fact you are all shifters, and wolves at that,” Becca admitted.

“We’re tame compared to some of the other shifters out there,” Dredge said.

“There’s other kinds?” At this, Becca’s eyes went big, and some of her wine spilled onto the sofa. “Oh, shoot! I’m so sorry!” She sat up and grabbed one of the napkins that was on the table and started dabbing at the wine.

“It’s okay, Becca,” Mom said. “There have been worse things spilled on this sofa.” She grabbed a towel from the kitchen and helped Becca dab up as much wine as she could.

“Back on you though, Jacob,” Brandon said.

“I know I’m the next oldest, but I don’t want you guys on my back pushing me toward finding my mate. If we’re meant to be, then it’ll happen, right?”

“Doesn’t hurt to nudge it along though,” Sandy said, giving me a wink.

I put my face in my hands. My family couldn’t help it. Now that Luc and Brandon had found their mates, they had their eyes set on me. “Wait! Why hasn’t Dredge found anyone? He should be next.”

“Don’t drag me into this,” he said, popping grapes into his mouth from where he sat in the corner of the room.

“But it’s true. Why haven’t you found someone, Dredge?” Bruno asked.

“I just haven’t. Now drop it.” Dredge growled and slinked further into the corner.

“Ooooookay then,” Sandy said. “Jacob.”

I groaned. “Can we just drop it?”

“For now.” But the look on her face said otherwise even as she changed the subject. “Before Luc and Jill get here, have we thought more on what we’re going to get them for their wedding?”

“Jill’s getting married?” Becca said, spilling more wine on the couch. “Ah!” She got up and took the glass to the kitchen and came stomping back with a towel.

“You doing okay there, Becca?” I asked, which was the wrong thing to ask.

“I’m fine,” she snapped. “How come I’m the last to know Jill is getting married? She hasn’t even told me.”

“Probably because in a normal human situation, Luc would have proposed and that has not happened yet,” Brandon said, looking at Becca and taking her hands into his.

“Then why—?”

“They’re mates,” Sandy said. “It’s assumed they’re already married.”

“Oh, but—” This time Becca looked at Brandon and gasped. What she saw had us all smiling.

Brandon was holding up a ring and kneeling in front of Becca. “Becca, sweetheart, the love of my life.” He smiled. “I will never get tired of saying that. I should have said it as soon as I met you, but you know how it went.”

“I sure do!” Becca said, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Will you finalize our union by marrying me?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” she said, jumping into Brandon’s arms.

“This calls for celebration!” Mom said. “Theo, go get the nice champagne.”

“Oh, I’ll go grab that cake I made last night,” Sandy said, jumping off her seat and already halfway to the door.

“You made a cake just because?” Becca asked.

“A little birdie might have mentioned something to me a couple of days ago,” Sandy said, winking at Brandon.

“You’re the best,” Becca said, and pressed her lips to Brandon’s so hard he almost toppled over.

While everyone laughed, I headed to the kitchen. I was happy for them, but witnessing their love-fest was the last thing I wanted to see. The others might be joking around with me but finding a mate had been bothering me more than usual recently. It felt like my wolf had been running in circles trying to get my attention. I didn’t know why. As far as I knew, I hadn’t met her yet. There was no reason for my wolf to be so antsy.

“Jacob.”

I turned to see Becca standing behind me.

“Sorry for snapping at you,” she said. “Sandy explained that Luc just hasn’t thought about proposing yet. He hasn’t hung around humans as much as Brandon has. I’ll have to give him a little nudge.” She smiled.

“No problem. You didn’t know.”

“By the way, Sandy said one of the ideas you guys had for a wedding gift for Luc and Jill was a piece of art for their new house.”

“Yeah, Luc would never decorate his house with anything if he had a say. His apartment used to have only a four-by-six photo of the family in the living room. The rest of us kept adding photos and random things to his place just to annoy him, but that’s the only reason why he has decorations—and color for that matter—in his home.”

Becca laughed. “Sounds like Jill can have her pick of decorations then.”

“She sure will.”

“Well, I know the perfect place you can find a high-end art piece for their home.”

“You do? The bigger the better. We want Luc to be able to see it every day.”

“My friend, Millie, is the daughter of an artist. And she’s been looking for a gallery that will take her dad’s art because he can no longer stockpile it at home. He’s world renowned but prefers to sell to private collectors.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Great! I’ll get you two in touch with each other.” She smiled in a way that had me questioning why she had come to tell me all this and then walked back to join the family.

I shook my head. It was now Becca and Brandon’s celebration dinner, and she was excited and probably wanted a painting from this gallery too. Hint taken, Becca.

I started toward the cabinets Mom kept her special dishes in and felt a tightening around my chest—a pull I had never felt before. It was throbbing within me, and my wolf started to howl. I rubbed my chest and shook my whole body to loosen up my muscles. That seemed to do the trick. All this talk about mates and me being next in line was getting to me.

I laughed, thinking if anybody was next in line, it'd be Dredge, not me. I still had a long way to go before I would be ready for a mate.



Thank you for reading Becca and Brandon's story. The family saga doesn't end here. Continue The McCullough Pack series with Millie and Jacob in *Adored by the Wolf*. Continue reading for a sample or [visit this link to start reading](#).

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SNEAK PEEK

Adored by the Wolf The McCullough Pack Book 3

Millie

Why was I always the one at her beck and call? I could hear her now, “Millie, you need to come and take over for a day. It’s an emergency. Just one day, okay?” It’d been three days already! And a week before Christmas! Aggravated didn’t even begin to describe what I was feeling. Lira got to jet off whenever she pleased, leaving me to finish whatever job she started, pick up the pieces of some broken love she left behind, and whatever other mess she’d gotten into.

“I love my sister!” Though no one answered seeing how I was all alone in my room, dresses strewn everywhere around me. I was supposed to be on vacation. Take my first ski lesson, drink hot chocolate by the fire. Not be stuck in an art gallery selling to people who I didn’t care about. The anxiety that had started three days ago was building higher and higher as the seconds ticked by. I disliked being the center of attention and having to keep a calm demeanor while trying to sell. It set me right on the edge of my sanity.

I held up a simple black dress with capped sleeves. This would have to do. It was the last clean dress I had. I looked around at the strewn snow pants, long johns, and new waterproof jacket I had just bought, all appropriate for skiing or hiking through the snow, but definitely not for selling high end art.

“Ahhhhhh!” I stuffed the clothes back into the dresser.

I slipped on the dress, which matched my black eyes. Tying my black hair in a bun at the nape of my neck, I went to the front closet and found matching black boots and a parka. I was ready. Time to go sell some of Dad’s paintings.

Jacob

Becca came up to me as I was leaving Luc’s house.

“Jacob, here’s the gallery’s address for Millie. It’s in Tahoe City. They know you’re coming. Lillian Yin is the curator. Millie sent me pictures of the ones they’re selling so we can get a head start.”

As Becca flipped through her phone, I thought about the jolt that had just gone through me at the mention of Millie’s name. This was the second time that’d happened, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Shaking my head, I focused back on Luc’s painting. He’d live in a stark bare house if he could. I bet he’d stay in wolf form and live in a cave for the rest of his life if he had the choice.

“You okay?” Becca asked.

“Just fine.” I put on my best smile, but from the scrutiny Becca was giving me, I wasn’t sure I passed the test.

“If you say so. You know, if your brothers are giving you a hard time, just let Jill and I know. We’ll take care of them for you.”

I laughed because I knew the girls would. They had Luc and Brandon wrapped around their fingers.

“Here we go, these are the six the family narrowed the paintings down to.”

“Oh, so, I get final pick?” This was going to be fun.

“Yup. Everyone else just wants a big painting to hang on Luc’s wall so that it annoys him. It was your mom who suggested you get the last pick. She said something about you having good taste.”

“Ah, yes. Just like I’m helping with the interior decorating of your new homes.”

“Do you mind?”

I looked at Becca, and she had such hopeful eyes, I laughed. “Why would I mind? It’s for my brothers and their mates.”

“It just feels like the family is asking you to do things without consulting with you first.”

A sigh threatened to come out as she was right. It used to annoy me, but I’d gotten used to it. “I’m part of the pack. I do my part.”

Becca just looked at me. Without a word, she looked back at her phone and started scrolling through the photos.

I had to give it to her. She knew when to drop a subject. Brandon was a lucky one. Good thing he finally got his head screwed on right.

The photos in front of us were seascapes, landscapes, and just beautiful scenery. Nothing exciting or mysterious. Luc was going to be alpha one day. Maybe sooner than later. He needed something in his house that would keep others on their toes.

“These all look beautiful, but I’ll go visit tomorrow and see.”

“Your mom said not to embarrass him too much.”

“*Too* much?”

Becca started laughing, noticing the smirk that had started forming on my face. “Yeah, that’s about what I thought your reaction would be.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nola Li Gordon lives with three humans and a dog. She has always loved wolves, and it was with excitement that she discovered the wolf shifter romance genre. At the same time, her kids were getting into dragons, magic, and other fantastical fantasy elements. In the hopes of sharing her stories with them sooner than later, her romances are always sweet with a happily ever after.

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