



PROTECTING HIS FOX

FOX HAVEN 3

FEL FERN KARA KITT

Protecting His Fox

Fox haven

Book 3

Fel Fern
Kara Kitt

Protecting His Fox © 2023 by Fel Fern and Kara Kitt

Cover designed by GetCovers

All rights reserved: No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental. All sexually active characters in this work are 18 years of age or older.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal.

* * *

Join Kara's newsletter to receive updates and bonus content:

<https://BookHip.com/FBHJFAS>

Contents

Blurb

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

A Preview of Crash

About the Authors

Also by Fel and Kara

Blurb

Your letters kept me alive all these years... but I'm done waiting.

Declan Simmons' time in the paranormal army left him with scars, both inside and out. Night after night, Declan dreams of the monster that wiped out his entire unit. Cliff is his safe harbor. He's the sole reason Declan hasn't given in to despair. He knows what's between Cliff and him is special... but there's Cliff's older brother to consider. How can he even begin to tell his best friend that he wants to make Cliff his?

Cliff Mullins has always longed to step out of his brothers' shadows. No one sees him, the real him, except Declan. For the longest time, Cliff has had a massive crush on his brother's best friend. During Declan's deployment, they grew even closer. Cliff's fox half knows Declan is theirs for the keeping, but there are other outside forces at work.

Apart from facing Cliff's brother, the malevolent force that slaughtered Declan's unit wants to finish the job... and it doesn't care if Cliff becomes collateral damage.

"Protecting His Fox" is the third book in the Fox Haven series. Love and danger entwine as Declan and Cliff fight for their love and their lives. Will they find the strength to defy the odds and build a future together, or will the past's shadows swallow them whole?

Chapter 1

Declan

“Declan, we’re one person short. Join us,” Parker yelled from outside the tent.

I had a mind to leave my dimly-lit tent and join my fellow troops. Inside here, it was lonely.

Out there, laughter and friendly banter filled the air.

Like always, the atmosphere before a mission was always charged, filled with electricity.

I carefully folded the dog-eared letter I had read a thousand times before tucking it in my wallet.

I was about to tell Parker to deal me in when someone stood outside my tent.

“Package for Declan,” someone said.

Heart beating in excitement, I hurriedly exited my tent. A fellow soldier of the paranormal army held a care package in his hands.

My heart skipped a beat as I recognized the sender’s handwriting on the package.

It was from my Cliff. To be honest, Cliff wasn’t my boyfriend.

He wasn’t my darling anything, just my best friend James’ little brother.

James and Cliff were the family I never had, and Cliff... we kept in touch ever since I joined the paranormal army.

Even though he didn't have to, Cliff always sent me something every month.

Wondering what surprise he had for me this time around was one of the few things that encouraged me to wake up every morning.

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I remembered the shy and quiet boy standing in James' kitchen, eavesdropping on James and my conversation.

No longer a boy, I thought to myself. Cliff must be in his early twenties by now.

I wondered how he was doing and whether he still had the same warm smile.

With shaking hands, I accepted the small box and returned to my bunk.

I tore the package right away, revealing a carefully curated assortment of snacks and chocolates.

There were also handmade cookies, along with another letter. I picked up the envelope.

Although I wasn't a shifter like James or Cliff, my human nose could detect Cliff's unmistakable cologne on the paper.

He always smelled of clean soap and pine. I unfolded his letter, my heart warming at Cliff's familiar and neat handwriting.

In the beginning, I kept all of his letters in a small bag, but the first of them got ruined during a trek through a river.

These days, I stored all of Cliff's precious letters in a waterproof bag. The letter began the way it always did, with Cliff telling me about the recent events in his life.

It seemed he made new friends in Fox Haven and his and James' barbecue business was going well.

He also wrote that he missed me and wished I could be back soon. I found solace in every word.

Cliff didn't know it, but the past two years I'd been deployed, he became the most important person in my life.

My sole connection to the real world as some of the other soldiers sometimes called it.

I grew up in a trailer park with a single mother who juggled two jobs.

While I appreciated all she'd done to raise me, we weren't close. Last I heard from her was a month ago.

She'd apparently met some nice rich guy and was traveling the world with him.

I was glad one of us was happy. Despite the distance between us, knowing James and Cliff were waiting for me back home, soothed my soul.

It wouldn't be long now, before I could leave this place and reunite with James and Cliff.

I pictured the three of us, having a warm meal at the table together.

After dinner, Cliff and I would have a little walk in the woods. He'd be in his fox form, and I'd be walking next to him, basking in the wonderful and powerful moment.

My soul would be at peace, and my heart... I didn't know what I'd do in my heart.

I was never going to tell my best friend that Cliff had become more than family during my deployment.

That his letters were what I clung to during moments of doubt and darkness.

I lay on my cot, clutching Cliff's letter to my chest and eating his cookies.

Now I pictured the two of us in his kitchen, standing side-by-side. Cliff would flash me that gorgeous, playful smile of his, while I became his cooking assistant.

"He's off-limits," I told myself for what felt like the hundredth time.

Still, James wasn't here to bash my head in for harboring romantic thoughts about his little brother.

I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, still holding Cliff's note like a lifeline.

* * *

The first light of dawn crept over the horizon, casting an eerie glow on the war-torn landscape.

My team gathered on the outskirts of an abandoned town. The air was rife with tension and anticipation.

We didn't know what dangers lay ahead.

We only received vague reports indicating that someone or something supernatural had hit this town two months ago and slowly began eating its citizens.

Another team had been sent by the army to investigate three days ago, but they hadn't returned.

Needing a moment to myself, I stood apart from my team for a moment.

I took out my favorite of Cliff's letters from my wallet. I had gripped this particular one so many times, the edges were crinkled.

The paper was going to fall apart one of these days, but I didn't care.

It had become a ritual for me to reread Cliff's first letter to me before each mission.

To me, it had become a kind of good luck charm.

"Parker, Johnson, scout ahead," ordered Captain Diaz.

"Dearest Declan," the letter began, and my heart skipped a beat at the endearment.

I yearned to hear those very words from Cliff's mouth.

Right at that moment, I wished I had a telepathic link to Cliff so I could tell him how delicious his cookies were. How I fell asleep the night before, with his words close to my heart.

While Parker and Johnson scouted ahead, the rest of my team went through their final checks and preparations.

I should be doing the same. Tucking the letter back in my wallet, I took a deep breath and focused on my mission.

I couldn't let my mind drift, not when I had a duty to fulfill. My team was relying on me as well to pull my weight.

Cliff's note had done its job. Reading it had given me the courage I needed to face the present.

The rest of my team entered the abandoned town. We moved forward carefully, one step at a time.

The town still looked intact, but the haunting silence and emptiness made the hairs on my arms rise.

I clutched my rifle as we moved through house to house, hoping to catch a glimpse of the supernatural entity that left an entire town dead in its wake.

"Simmons," Captain Diaz said to me as I announced the last house I checked was clear. "We've lost all communication with Parker and Johnson."

I sucked in a breath as the captain called for the rest of our unit to form up. I refused to let the captain's words sink in.

Parker and Johnson couldn't be dead. Heck, Parker asked me to join them for a game of poker just last night.

This morning, he even asked me if I was willing to share some of Cliff's homemade cookies.

I gave him one, and he told me it was the best chocolate chip cookies he ever tasted.

Deep down, I knew the truth. Whatever got the last team sent here had also gotten our scouts. There was one last house we hadn't checked, and it lay at the end of the street.

The grandest building in town. The former mayor's home.

We made our way to the building, hearts heavy. The stench of death hung heavy in the air as we entered the mayor's house.

A feeling of foreboding gripped me as we moved through the darkened rooms and corridors.

My boots shuffled over broken furniture and shattered glass, and every step seemed amplified despite the silence that surrounded us.

A sound of sudden gunfire made me and another soldier jump. A scream of torment followed.

“In the back,” yelled the captain from somewhere in the house.

I ran toward the source of the gunfire and finally emerged into the yard.

A chilling sight greeted me, one that would be forever engraved in my memories.

The once beautiful yard had become a kill site filled with lifeless bodies torn apart by violence.

I spotted corpses wearing the paranormal army uniform. Johnson lay on his side, and I swallowed, taking a step back after seeing his pale face.

My heart sank, and I clenched my jaw as disturbing slurping sounds reached my ears.

Two pale figures wearing rags were bent over another body. A soldier's body. Parker's.

One of them, the smaller one with long, flowing gold hair, looked up at me with red eyes and wicked long fangs.

I turned my rifle on the monster. The second figure flew at me, but the captain and the rest of the unit appeared at my back. I thought I smelled something burning.

“This is for Johnson and Parker,” I whispered and emptied out all my bullets at the monster running towards me.

Chapter 2

Declan

Two Months Later

Harsh sunlight filtered through the windshield, momentarily blinding my eyes.

I stirred awake, my heart still racing as I tried to shake off the remnants of the nightmare that had plagued me the night before.

It took me a moment to realize I was no longer in the military.

The horrors of war were behind me, or that was what I constantly told myself. After rubbing my eyes, I took a deep breath.

The familiar interior of my truck, my thermos, and my phone charging on the dashboard reassured me that I was now a civilian.

I leaned against the seat, momentarily closing my eyes and enjoying the sun on my face.

The captain's loud voice and the blaring alarms wouldn't be the first sounds I heard anymore in the morning.

Then again, the captain and the others were gone. With shaking hands, I lowered the window to let some cool air in.

The nightmare still clung to me like a shroud.

The images of the mayor's house, what we found there, and what happened after sometimes still played on repeat in my head.

The guilt of surviving while the rest of my unit had perished weighed heavily on my conscience.

When Captain Diaz and the rest of my unit entered that yard, I thought for sure we'd emerge victorious.

The captain was a mage trained in fire magic, and Austin was a wolf shifter.

How did everything go wrong so quickly?"

I asked myself the same question I had been asking ever since I was given a shiny medal and honorably discharged from the paranormal army.

Reaching over the passenger seat, I grabbed the waterproof pouch containing all of Cliff's letters.

I pulled Cliff's first one out. These hadn't just become a source of comfort, a reminder that I wasn't alone, but they had also served as my anchor to the real world.

I read Cliff's words out loud, despite knowing them by heart by now. The nightmare's grip on my mind loosened.

I breathed in and out, imagining it was Cliff sitting right next to me, his hand on my shoulder.

After composing myself, I tucked the letter back in the pouch. The scars left by those monsters on my body started aching.

They always flared up after a nightmare.

They would fade in time, unlike the wounds left on my heart, but I was determined to move forward, find peace in my civilian life.

My phone vibrated, and seeing James' name flashing across the screen, I smiled.

Things were finally looking up.

After James found out I had left the army, he offered me a place to crash, but I needed some alone time to myself, to try to come to terms with what happened two months ago.

I didn't want to return to Fox Haven as a broken mess, but it looked like I had no other choice.

Aimlessly driving from one town to the next wasn't helping me at all.

“Hey,” I said, answering the call.

“Hey back. So, when are you coming for a visit?” James asked.

Someone must have asked him a question in the background.

“Later, Shane. I’m talking to Dec right now. Cliff’s doing a delivery,” James was saying.

Shane was the middle brother. I wasn’t as close to him the same way I was close to James and Cliff.

The mention of Cliff’s name, however, didn’t fail to kick-start my heart.

I wanted to call Cliff right away the moment I left the army, but I never did.

I regretted my actions now, but back then, I had trouble telling reality from what happened in the past.

I still did some days, but I like to think I was getting better.

“You know what, James? I’ve gotten sick of being on the road,” I finally said.

“Finally,” James said. I could almost picture him rolling his eyes.

James continued, “The couch’s waiting for you. Actually, you can have Cliff’s room if you want. He won’t mind sleeping on the couch.”

“I don’t want to put him out,” I said quickly.

I was almost tempted to suggest that Cliff and I could share one bed. Almost.

Momentarily shutting my eyes, I pictured Cliff and me lying side by side on his narrow bed.

Me reaching out to touch his fingers, his warmth. Then I dismissed the fantasy because it was only that.

“Anyway, I’ll be there soon,” I told James.

“Why? Where have you ended up in?” James asked.

“I can’t remember the town name,” I confessed. “Can’t even recall what I had for dinner last night.”

It was meant to be a joke, and yet it wasn’t. James knew me better than most.

He could read me like an open book, and I nearly had forgotten that little detail about him.

“That bad, huh?” James asked.

I didn’t miss the concern in his voice.

“I’m okay most days,” I pointed out.

“Liar,” James muttered. “Just get your ass over here.”

“Why? So you can babysit me?” I teased.

“So I could keep an eye on you,” James corrected. “We’re family, aren’t we?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“Yeah, we are,” I said, voice a little hoarse.

“Good. That’s settled. Cliff would be over the moon if he finds out you’re coming back. Wait. I think I’ll surprise him,” James said.

“You’re awful,” I told him.

“See you soon, Dec,” was all James said, before ending the call.

That phone call left me in a good mood.

I started the truck and set off on the road that would eventually take me to Fox Haven, the town James and Cliff now called home.

Would I like it there? Cliff mentioned in his letters that he wasn’t sure how he felt about Fox Haven and his new pack at first.

Then his tone changed in the next letters.

Cliff always told me he felt like an outsider in his own family and former pack his entire life, but he’d grown to love Fox Haven.

Maybe I could learn to love this little town as well, if I tried hard enough.

After all, James and Cliff had decided to put down roots here. I wanted to see if I could do the same.

Before making my final stop, I rolled into a picturesque little town with charming storefronts.

My destination was the small bakery on the corner: Blissful Bites Bakery.

Cliff had mentioned this place in his letters.

He had to make a delivery to this place once, and he immediately fell in love with their apple pie.

After parking my truck near the bakery, I stepped out onto the sidewalk.

The scent of freshly baked pies immediately hit me, and my stomach rumbled as I entered the cozy bakery.

The gentle chime of a bell greeted me, along with the proprietress' smiling face.

The display case was filled with an array of mouthwatering pies.

Each one looked delectable as the last, but my heart was set on their apple pie.

I couldn't wait to see the expression on Cliff's face once he saw me with the pie.

"Good morning, what can I get for you today?" asked the friendly woman behind the counter.

"I'll take one of your apple pies, please," I said.

"Excellent choice. Our apple pies are our number one best seller," she said.

I watched her carefully pack the pie into a beautiful red box. She even tied a crimson ribbon around it.

The personal touch reminded me of Cliff's care package.

I could tell every time I opened each box that he packed every single one of them with care.

“Enjoy your pie,” she said, smiling after I made my payment.

“Thank you,” I said, tucking the box carefully under my arm.

I returned to my truck. With that last errand done, I was ready to head to Fox Haven.

The last leg of my journey was only a one-hour drive.

Anticipation and excitement hummed in my veins when I finally pulled into the driveway of James and Cliff’s house, like most shifters, they preferred to live near the woods.

I got lost a few times, especially after my phone died. Thankfully, asking a few friendly locals set me back on the right path.

Finally, I was here. Leaving my backpack in the back, I snatched the pie box and walked up to the front door.

I knocked on it, noticing the vehicles parked nearby. The well-used black Ford truck must belong to James.

There was a motorcycle parked next to it, which I assumed was Shane’s.

The blue Toyota was an unfamiliar one. Did that belong to Cliff?

I was tempted to examine the car a little while longer, but someone opened the door.

James beamed at me. Words weren’t needed between us. James automatically pulled me into a bear hug.

“Watch the pie,” I said in a muffled voice.

James pulled away, grinning. He noticed the pie box and raised an eyebrow.

“For me? You shouldn’t have,” James teased.

I was about to tell him it was for Cliff specifically but decided against it.

James might not take well to the news of me thinking of Cliff in romantic terms.

“Welcome to Fox Haven,” James told me.

“It’s good to be here,” I said, stepping inside the house.

I immediately looked out for Cliff, but I couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” James told me. “Cliff’s cooking.”

“Great. I can’t wait to eat,” I said.

Chapter 3

Cliff

James: Get something nice and fancy for dinner tonight.

Cliff: What? Why can't you get it yourself?

James: I can't. Busy. Shane's coming too.

Cliff: I'm busy too. You get it if you want something else for dinner.

James: Please? Do it for your big bro, ok? Dinner's at 7. I have a surprise.

I slammed my phone a little too hard on the kitchen counter. I immediately regretted it, quickly checking the screen for cracks or scratches.

Frustration surged within me as I reread the text message from my brother, James. I knew this wasn't an argument I was going to win, especially via text.

I let out an exasperated sigh, running a hand through my hair. Today had been more exhausting than usual.

I spent the entire day at Cal's Wilderness Wanderer's Camp, dealing with activities that completely drained my energy while supervising the kids.

After a long day of running around, organizing games, and cleaning up their mess, I was completely worn out.

On top of that, Owen, our lead alpha, was expecting me early morning tomorrow. I had to show a new member of the pack around the pack lands.

James knew this. It was all written down on a little chart we had up on the refrigerator.

James had a busy schedule too. He was running his own barbecue business, a small venture that was steadily growing.

His days were filled with grilling and smoking meat, managing orders and customers.

So why, in the midst of our mutually busy, chaotic lives, did he decide that tonight was the night for some fancy dinner?

Was it some family issue? If it was, why hadn't he just told Shane and me in our group chat?

Whatever. I was too tired to think about it.

"He wants a fancy dinner? A full course with all the works?" I muttered angrily to myself as I opened the fridge door.

I surveyed the contents of our refrigerator. It was filled with leftover containers, half-used condiments, and a few wilted vegetables.

I reached in, moving containers aside to find something, anything, that could pass off as a meal and found what I was looking for. Time to work my magic with the leftovers in the fridge.

I laid out some containers haphazardly on the counter. Three-day-old pizza for the first course and an assortment of half-eaten Chinese takeout for the main course.

As I looked at my makeshift feast, a nagging feeling crept in. Something was missing.

Hah! Of course. A salad course. Because James wanted something 'fancy', right? Fancy dinners always had a salad course.

Frozen mixed vegetables would have to do.

I was proud of myself and gave myself an imaginary pat on the back. James would think twice about springing last-minute

dinner plans on me again.

I reheated the pizza in the oven. Then, I dumped the frozen vegetables into a bowl and popped them into the microwave, but it didn't close.

Tsk. I slammed the microwave door again, and when it still wouldn't close shut, I pushed it a little harder.

The damned thing needed to be replaced; I had already told James that a month ago. I gave an exasperated sigh and reached for a wooden ladle.

I wedged it hard into the door to ensure it stayed shut. It worked like magic.

And now, the main course. I stared at the mishmash of leftover Chinese takeout containers laid out on the counter, wondering whether I should even bother doing anything about them.

Deciding a sniff test was enough, I opened the boxes one by one. Out of the six, only two had turned bad.

This was a win.

I then headed upstairs for a much-needed shower. I was so ready to wash away the grime of the day.

When I was done, I found my brother Shane standing in the kitchen, his gaze fixed on the microwave.

The microwave door was open, and the distinctive smell of microwaved peas, carrots, and corn filled the kitchen.

"Is that what I think it is?" Shane asked, his voice tinged with a hint of disbelief and amusement.

"Hey, I worked hard on this," I said with a mischievous grin, toweling my hair dry.

I joined him in the kitchen and continued, "Anyway, I don't see the problem. What's so special about tonight anyway?"

Was there some hidden family issue that needed resolving? Or some kind of celebration?

I looked at Shane closely, trying to get a feel for the situation. See if he knew something I didn't.

But, I couldn't get a read on anything. Although, Shane was always a hard one to read.

He was the typical free-spirited brother who did what he liked and always did the unexpected. He moved out a while ago, which in itself was a surprise.

The bigger surprise I discovered was the realization I had when it was just James and me left— Shane was the one who had been doing most of the cleaning around the house.

Ever since Shane left, the house had been a mess. I was left to pick up the slack.

Who would've thought our usually responsible oldest brother, James, was the house slob?

Wait, could this be James' big surprise? Was Shane moving back in? Was this why James wanted something special?

"So, what's happening tonight? Any exciting news?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

I didn't want to show that I was overly excited by the possible news. Although, at the back of my mind, I was already thinking about picking up a small whiteboard for a chore chart.

"Oh, it's nothing," Shane said, waving a hand.

Yeah, right. I knew that sing-songy tone of voice of his.

Shane always used that whenever he was keeping a secret or playing a prank on me. More importantly, that meant that Shane knew what James' surprise was.

While I was lost in my thoughts, I glanced out the kitchen window and saw the headlights of a vehicle. James' truck was pulling in.

We could finally get to the bottom of this. Both of them were hiding something from me, and I was itching to find out what it was.

Keys jangled from the front door, signaling James's arrival in the house. Just as I noticed another set of headlights flashing, James briefly stepped back outside.

Did James invite someone over for dinner?

When James entered the house with the mystery guest, their laughter echoed through the room.

A sudden pang of regret hit me as I realized that maybe reheated leftovers wasn't the best choice to serve a dinner guest.

I cautiously peered my head out to see who it was and froze as I caught sight of who was standing side by side with James.

"Look who it is!" James announced excitedly.

My heart skipped a beat. James's arm was draped over the shoulder of his best friend, who also happened to be my childhood crush. I was speechless.

Declan? Declan was here? Now?

Declan looked good. Really good, in fact. He wore a simple yet fitted polo shirt that accentuated his broad shoulders and jeans that clung to his lean, muscular frame.

He had clearly matured since the last time I saw him. He had a beard now, which suited him well. It framed his chiseled jawline, giving him a rugged look.

What changed the most was his eyes. There was a blend of strength and vulnerability there, a reflection of the world he had seen through the lens of war.

The light in his eyes seemed to have a touch of weariness, a glimpse of the challenges he'd faced.

Yet, amidst it all, I still recognized the person I had a crush on since I was ten.

I didn't know which I was more angry about: James not telling me about Declan coming for dinner or at myself for being petty, scrounging up leftovers rather than just buying something on the way back.

If I had known, I would've prepared a proper welcome back dinner for Declan.

Yeah, this was definitely James' fault.

Hey, Cliff," Declan greeted, pulling me from my thoughts.

His voice was as warm and familiar as ever.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out.

I must’ve been more shocked than I thought. My words came out blunt, almost like I was interrogating him. Declan looked taken aback by my response.

“I mean, sorry. I didn’t know you were coming. If I did, I would’ve prepared a nicer dinner,” I quickly added while shooting a glare at James and Shane.

James rubbed the back of his neck and flashed an innocent smile. Meanwhile, Shane seemed to be preoccupied, stirring the bowl of microwaved mixed vegetables.

Both of them definitely looked guilty.

Now that I think about it, I shouldn’t have thrown out the two boxes of spoiled Chinese food in the trash. Because right now, I really wanted to throw them at the both of them.

“I guess James didn’t tell you I was coming, huh?” Declan said, breaking the tension.

Declan placed the box he was holding on the table and came up to me. He wrapped his arms around me in a familiar hug.

This was normal between us since we’ve known each other forever. But for some reason, this particular one felt kind of different.

All the tension and anger I had earlier seemed to have disappeared as I breathed in his familiar scent.

I couldn’t help but notice how good he smelled—like clean soap and citrus. Better than I remembered, better than I had even imagined. My fox half immediately took notice.

He lingered just a little longer before eventually letting go. James and Shane didn’t seem to notice anything unusual.

Maybe it was all in my imagination, too. Maybe it was really just an ordinary hug between old friends.

I was pretty tired, after all. And I tended to look into things too much when I was exhausted.

Either way, it didn't matter. My day hadn't been the best, but now Declan was here. That was all that mattered.

"Is that what I think it is?" James asked, raising an eyebrow, his attention shifting to the 3-day old takeaway boxes on the kitchen counter.

I rolled my eyes at his question. It was the exact same one Shane had asked earlier. Sometimes, the both of them really seemed like they shared the same braincell.

Curious about James' remark, Declan glanced at the assortment of food on the kitchen counter, and he broke into a big smile.

Declan put his arm around my shoulders. I could feel my neck reddening in response. It was a normal, friendly gesture, but I couldn't help but flinch at the contact.

"This looks great, just like old times, huh?" Declan said, grinning at me.

Declan used to come over to our place frequently when we were young. Our meals were always simple and whatever happened to be available at home.

Cereal, plain bread, or if we were lucky, leftovers. I guess he was right; this did really feel like the old days.

"C'mon, you're the guest of honor. I'll grab you a beer," James said, patting Declan on the back.

James tugged Declan away from my side and guided him to the small round table in the kitchen that we usually used for meals.

It was weird, but I could've sworn I saw a flash of annoyance on Declan's face.

Did he want to stay beside me? Or maybe it was just my overactive imagination running on overdrive again.

As the last of the leftovers finished heating up, Shane helped set the table and began scooping out the Chinese food from the boxes. He seemed really quiet this evening.

Usually, he'd make a jab or two at me, especially after a prank like this. I made a mental note to ask him about it in the future.

Dinner went mostly well. 'Mostly' because Declan was sitting beside me, and with every touch, heat seemed to radiate up my chest and neck.

I blamed it on the small table.

It happened every time we both reached for the same dish. Or when our elbows accidentally bumped against each other.

Even when he casually draped his arm over the back of my chair, his fingers grazed my shoulder. I tried to tell myself that, like the hug he had given me earlier, this didn't mean anything.

I knew that. It was just Declan being Declan. He had always been nice to me, being his best friend's little brother.

I didn't know what was happening to me. Maybe it was because I hadn't seen him in so long, or maybe because he was sitting so close to me the whole time, but I could tell my face was constantly flushed.

I had to drink a few beers to try and cover it up.

"Hey, how did you know about this place?" James asked Declan, his mouth full of apple pie as he pointed to the pie box that Declan bought.

"Oh, Cliff wrote to me about it a few months ago," Declan answered casually.

If Declan wasn't looking down at his plate picking the raisins off his pie, he would've noticed me nearly spitting out the beer I was drinking.

He also would have noticed James and Shane sharing a quick, questioning look, both directed at me.

Neither of them knew I kept in touch with Declan while he was away serving in the paranormal army. And they certainly didn't know that I had been sending him care packages either.

I had started writing to him as soon as he was deployed. At first, I wasn't sure if it would be weird, but Declan always

wrote back.

Whether he was talking about his unit mates or complaining about his rations, it didn't matter. I loved learning about that part of his life.

Every time I received a letter from him, it brought me happiness that I didn't even know how to describe.

I started coughing as the beer seemed to go down the wrong way. Shane stood up from his seat and patted my back roughly.

Declan finally looked up from his plate, his gaze shifting between the three of us. He glanced at me and his eyes widened for a moment, as if finally understanding what had just happened.

As if he knew what I was thinking, he quickly added, "Cliff mentioned it when he sent me a card on my birthday."

I breathed a sigh of relief, which I tried to cover with a cough. James nodded, seemingly satisfied with the explanation, and helped himself to another slice of pie.

I was worried that James or Shane would ask more questions, but they didn't. I stood up from the table to grab some water from the sink.

My heart was beating so loudly I was worried my brothers' shifter hearing would pick it up.

I took a big gulp of water, and another. I needed to compose myself and didn't want them to see the confused expression on my face.

I had written to Declan about the pie shop nearly six months ago. His birthday fell a few months after that. He just lied to James about how he knew about the pie place.

But, why? Did this mean he didn't tell James or Shane that we wrote each other either? For some reason, that made me really happy.

As if it was our little secret. Something only the two of us shared together.

This night had been an emotional rollercoaster. Seeing Declan again after so many years was a surprise. Yet I was also relieved that this dinner was ending soon.

I was becoming too flustered around him. The last thing I wanted was for my brothers, or worse, Declan himself, to notice.

What if he found out that I've liked him all this time? I didn't even want to know the answer to that, not right now.

From behind me, I heard the scraping of chairs against the floor— they were done with dessert. Finally. I couldn't wait for this evening to end.

If this went on any longer, James or Shane would've definitely noticed I was acting weird. Or realized I was getting redder and redder by the minute.

Next time, we should definitely do something else where I wasn't so close to Declan.

Something where I could keep at least an arm's length away from him so he wouldn't notice the effect he had on me.

That was definitely what I needed right now. Some breathing space.

A moment to cool off and cool down. At least until the next time I see Declan, which might not be any time soon.

Just as I began to relax, James placed a hand on my shoulder.

“You don't mind if Declan stays here for a while, right?” he asked casually.

Wait, what...?

I whipped my head around so fast I felt like I pulled something in my neck. I needed to look into my brother's eyes to know whether he was joking.

He wasn't.

Chapter 4

Cliff

I yawned widely, let out a loud sigh, and raised my arms above my head to try to wake myself up completely.

“Wow, your mouth was open so big, I thought a fly would go in,” Ian chuckled, handing me a steaming cup of coffee.

Ian, Owen’s mate, was a friendly face. He found out from Owen that I’d be at the pack lands this morning to meet a new member of the pack.

Since they lived nearby, Ian asked if I wanted to grab some coffee before he headed off to work.

I didn’t mind since I had arrived almost 2 hours early anyway. I couldn’t get a wink of sleep last night.

First, James kept bugging me about giving up my room for Declan. I honestly didn’t mind, but even after Declan refused for the umpteenth time, James still didn’t give up.

This went on until 2 in the morning.

Secondly, just the mere thought that Declan was in my house, downstairs in the living room, kept me restless.

Different thoughts and scenarios kept running through my head. Like how we could easily bump into each other in the kitchen or on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

As if that wasn’t enough, when I still couldn’t sleep, the Declan in my imagination was suddenly shirtless.

Yeah, my overly tired brain wasn’t helping me at all.

I mean, I was 25 years old already, for crying out loud, not some infatuated teenager.

I admit, it wasn't like I'd never thought of Declan the whole time he was away on service. But it was different now, knowing that what separated us was only a few thin walls.

In the end, I gave up on sleep. I got up early and decided to sneak out quietly, hoping I wouldn't wake Declan when I left the house.

"Here," Ian said, breaking through my thoughts and bringing my attention back to the present.

Ian handed me a ziplock bag filled with slices of French toast and a generous portion of bacon.

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver!" I exclaimed, taking the bag and eagerly opening it.

The aroma of bacon and maple syrup instantly wafted up, making my stomach growl in response.

I wasted no time and happily dug in. It was around my third piece of bacon when I realized Ian was staring at me.

"So, what happened?" Ian asked.

I shrugged casually, trying to act nonchalant. "Nothing much. Just couldn't sleep."

Ian gave me a skeptical look, but he didn't press the issue. He knew that sleep was precious to me due to my multiple part-time jobs.

I had a habit of waking up only when necessary and grabbing sleep whenever I could.

It was clear to him that me being over 2 hours early for an appointment had some significance. However, I didn't want to talk about it.

Especially since the reason why I was here so early was something as silly as my childhood crush sleeping in our living room.

"Well, I've got to head to the shop. Give me a call if you need anything," Ian said, giving my shoulder a friendly pat as he got

up from the bench.

I glanced at my watch. There was still more than an hour left until my scheduled meeting with the new pack member.

I quickly finished my breakfast and decided to catch a quick nap in my car.

My phone alarm buzzed, waking me up from my nap. I got out of the car and headed toward the Fox Haven Pack House, which was just across the parking lot.

As I approached the building, my eyes fell on an unfamiliar face seated on one of the benches. It must be the new guy.

“Hey! You must be Matt. I’m Cliff,” I greeted, extending my hand.

“Hi, thanks for meeting me today,” he replied, shaking my hand with a friendly smile.

I took Matt on the standard tour of our pack lands, beginning with a visit to the Fox Haven Pack House and the small clinic nearby.

Then, I brought him around the residential area, where the majority of our pack members lived. Finally, the small town hall where we held our monthly meetings.

Once the tour was done, we made our way back to our starting point.

“Wow, this place looks great. Has it always been like this?” Matt asked.

“Not until Owen took over as lead alpha. Our old alpha... well, things weren’t exactly like this back then,” I explained, my words trailing off.

Matt nodded, his expression turning serious as if he understood my meaning. I found myself wondering what had happened in his old pack.

I wanted to ask him about it, but he didn’t seem like he’d want to talk about it.

When we arrived back at the front of the pack house, our tour had come to an end.

“Well, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to give me a call,” I offered, getting ready to head off.

“Oh, actually, would you like to grab some breakfast? I want to thank you for showing me around,” Matt asked, a hint of anticipation in his voice.

“Rain check? I’ve got to head to work,” I replied, glancing at my watch.

“Oh, okay. Whenever you’re free, then, let me know,” Matt said, nodding in understanding.

I felt a pang of guilt, knowing he didn’t really know anyone in town yet. But I had to head home soon. I had plans to meet up with James in an hour since I’d promised to help him out today.

During the drive back home, Matt’s words kept echoing in my mind for some reason.

Whenever you’re free, then.

“Free time, huh?” I mumbled to myself.

Those two words struck a chord with me. The truth was, I rarely had much time for myself. On weekdays, I juggled part-time shifts at the pack clinic and as a camp counselor at Cal’s camp during the day.

During weekday evenings and weekends, I pitched in at James’ barbecue joint. I usually did deliveries or helped out in the kitchen.

Sure, Fridays were reserved for movie nights with Nate and Ian. But beyond that, my time was largely consumed by work.

I didn’t know why I still kept thinking about those two words. Maybe it was because I was still annoyed at James for the prank he pulled last night.

Or the realization that due to my busy schedule, my time for hanging out with Declan was limited. Somehow, the idea of not having much free time and doing what I wanted was bothering me more than it should.

Both Shane and James found their callings, pursuing what they wanted to do in life. I, on the other hand, was simply going with the flow, juggling different part-time jobs.

The idea of what I actually wanted to do, or bothering to make time to do it, hadn't been on my mind much. Or ever, actually.

I never really put much thought into it before. I've always just been focused on working hard, and that was it.

Until now. But what did I want to do? What did I even want?

The drive back home felt surprisingly short. I had some time to spare so I decided to take a quick shower, hoping it would help distract me from my thoughts.

However, just as I settled in, the water pressure suddenly dropped. Someone must be using it downstairs.

It was probably James. I suddenly got even more annoyed with him because now I couldn't even take a proper shower.

I couldn't help but think that in this moment, what I really wanted was decent water pressure. Well, that and maybe to call a plumber to fix the issue.

I quickly brushed my teeth, still annoyed by the water pressure problem, when the door swung open.

Declan was standing by the doorway in a sweaty tank top that clung to his body like a second skin. My toothbrush almost fell from my mouth.

Declan looked like he'd just finished going for a run. Beads of sweat glistened on his skin, trailing down his neck and disappearing into the fabric of his shirt.

His hard, lean muscles were accentuated by the moisture, making it hard to tear my gaze away. My fox half startled awake with interest.

Declan's eyes met mine, and I felt a jolt of electricity run through me. His gaze raked over me, starting from my legs and traveling upward, slow and deliberate.

I was suddenly very aware that I was only wearing boxer briefs and a large t-shirt. My shirt reached down to mid-thigh,

but in that moment, it felt like I might as well have been naked.

Declan's lips curved into a half-smile before he shifted his gaze to the sink. However, I could still feel the weight of his look on me, like a lingering touch.

"Mind if I wash my face?" Declan asked.

Should I tell him that I'd be done soon and make him leave?

Somehow, that seemed more awkward than just sharing the space. It wasn't like we hadn't shared a bathroom before when he slept over when we were kids.

It would be weirder if I made him leave.

Just act normal. Be natural!

I moved aside, gesturing to the sink for him to use, and he nodded in response. While Declan splashed water on his face, I carried on brushing my teeth, determined to appear unfazed.

I made an effort not to let my attention linger on the flex of his back muscles as he cleaned up.

Instead, I tried to focus on a cobweb in a corner of the ceiling, as if that was the most fascinating thing in the room. It definitely worked because I was now wondering how long that had been there.

When Declan wrapped up at the sink, he moved aside and I returned to the sink to continue brushing my teeth.

As I turned to leave, I couldn't help but notice that Declan was still in the bathroom. He had strategically positioned himself against the doorway, as if he was waiting for me.

"Your brothers had no idea you were writing to me," Declan stated, folding his arms across his chest.

The remnants of last night's dinner conversation hung in the air, a reminder of how close our secret came to being exposed.

It wasn't lost on me that Declan didn't ask why I didn't tell James or Shane about the letters and packages I had been sending him.

“And you didn’t tell them either,” I replied.

Time appeared to slow as I held his gaze. Declan’s hazel eyes bore into mine, their hues deepening into rich dark chocolate.

Suddenly, my thoughts circled back to what had been consuming me earlier. What did I want?

It occurred to me that I wasn’t really bothered by the absence of a grand design in my life; after all, I was a person with simple wants.

Realizing this, one thing became clear right now—I wanted Declan.

My feet seemed to suddenly move on their own. I closed the distance between us, placing a palm on his chest.

“Thanks for not telling them anything,” I murmured softly.

Leaning in, I pressed my lips against his. Declan’s lips were soft and slightly salty from the sweat that clung to his skin.

It was a quick kiss. I didn’t dare to do any more than that.

Yet, it felt like it was charged with an intensity that had been building within me for years.

As I pulled away, I noticed Declan’s eyes widening slightly. His lips were parted in surprise, as if he was caught off guard.

His silence felt heavy, and a sudden pang of regret gripped me.

Doubt began to creep in. Was that too impulsive of me?

I couldn’t help but wonder if it was a mistake, if it would create an awkwardness between us.

Before I could overthink the situation, Declan leaned in. His hand found a place at the nape of my neck, a gentle yet firm grasp that drew me closer, eliminating the distance between us again.

A sudden loud bang echoed from downstairs, abruptly breaking the moment. And as if that wasn’t enough, James’ voice boomed through the house.

“Cliff, are you home? We’ve gotta leave soon!”

Without a second thought, I tried to slip past Declan, who was blocking most of the narrow bathroom doorway. Just when I thought I'd made it out, he caught my elbow and pulled me back.

My heart was pounding like a jackhammer. I didn't know whether it was because I thought Declan might try to kiss me again, or the fear that we'd be caught by my brother.

Declan's thumb lightly brushed against the bottom of my lip. I felt something rub off and I looked down to see what it was.

To my surprise, I noticed a small white smudge. Was that... toothpaste?

Then, he brought his thumb to his own lips and casually licked it clean. A flush of warmth crept up my cheeks.

"Minty," Declan quipped, a mischievous smirk playing at the corner of his lips.

Chapter 5

Declan

I jolted awake, gasping for breath, my heart hammering against my ribs like a desperate prisoner.

Sweat drenched my body, and the room seemed foreign, distant, like a place I had forgotten.

For a few seconds, I was trapped between the nightmare and reality, my mind clawing its way out of the horrors that held it captive.

Then, awareness flooded in like a cold wave crashing over me.

I was on a worn-out couch in James' living room—the faded cushions and the familiar scent of old leather were grounding.

I blinked, my gaze darting around the dimly lit room, the shadows dancing with memories I wished would stay buried.

I exhaled a shaky breath, my fingers trembling as they scrubbed my face. Safe. I was safe.

The nightmare was just that—a haunting echo of the past that refused to release its grip.

Peeling the woolen blanket off my sweat-soaked body, I pushed myself up, the worn fabric of the couch sticking to my damp clothes.

My bare feet met the cool hardwood floor, grounding me further in the present.

The air seemed quieter now, the remnants of the nightmare fading like distant echoes.

My gaze settled on the collection of framed photographs resting on the mantle, each one a glimpse into a time when life was simpler, when laughter came easily.

I reached out and picked up one of the frames, my fingers brushing over the glass.

It was a picture from what felt like a lifetime ago—a snapshot of James and me, grinning wildly with missing front teeth, standing in front of their old house.

It was a moment captured during the summer when we turned 13. Back then, worries were reserved for scraped knees and the fading light of dusk.

I traced the contours of our younger faces with a faint smile.

James, with his unruly hair and that mischievous glint in his eyes, had always been the daring one, leading us into all sorts of adventures.

And there I was, a little more reserved but equally eager to follow him wherever he went. Even back then, James called me his brother.

Beside that photo was another, this time of a wider group. It was us—James, Cliff, and me.

Shane had taken the photo of us. We were standing by a riverbank. I had casually slung one arm around Cliff's shoulder.

James was grinning at the camera man but Cliff was looking right at me, a faint smile on his lips.

I focused on Cliff's younger self. Even back then, I didn't understand my complicated feelings for him.

I never quite saw him as a friend or brother, the way I saw James.

I let my fingers linger on the glass, feeling the cool surface beneath my touch.

These photographs were more than just images; they were anchors, reminders of an innocent and wonderful time in my life.

As the memories of our childhood adventures washed over me, a sense of comfort settled in my chest.

The nightmare's grip had weakened, replaced by the reassuring weight of these moments captured in time.

In a world that sometimes felt fragmented, these photographs were pieces that I could hold on to—a lifeline to the past that reminded me of who I was beyond the scars.

With a renewed sense of calm, I carefully placed the photographs back on the mantle, arranging them just as they had been before.

Thirst scratched at the back of my throat, and I decided to get a drink in the kitchen.

A quick glance at the wall clock showed me it was past midnight. James must be asleep by now and my best friend slept deeply.

Cliff, on the other hand... I wondered if he already came home from his shift.

He was a hard worker, working both weekdays and weekends.

I haven't had the opportunity to ask him if he had any free time and if he'd like to hang out together, just like the old days.

The kitchen light spilled out into the hallway as I padded down its length, the darkness still clinging to the edges of my vision.

I filled a glass with water. As I brought it to my lips, the first sip eased the dryness in my throat.

I thought of our kiss in the bathroom, how warm his skin felt when I closed my hand on the back of his neck.

How good he tasted. God knew I wanted to do it again. One taste hadn't been enough.

I needed more but did Cliff understand that what I craved was more than his friendship?

I was confident I didn't miss the hint of interest in his eyes. James might be blind as a bat but Shane definitely knew something was up.

As I set the glass down, a figure emerged from the shadows near the fridge.

My heart stuttered, momentarily confusing the nightmare with reality.

But then recognition washed over me, followed by a different kind of warmth—the kind that came with seeing someone you cared about.

“Hey, you okay?” Cliff’s voice, soft and concerned, pulled me fully into the now.

He stood there, in jeans and a t-shirt, the same clothes he wore to work earlier that day.

There were dark circles under his eyes, and I wondered if he had a rough day at work. Despite all that, his eyes held a genuine worry.

“Yeah,” I managed to say, my voice rougher than I intended.

“Just... you know, trying to sort through some things.”

He leaned against the counter, his gaze focused on me.

“Are you still having nightmares?”

My fingers danced along the edge of the kitchen table, and I couldn’t help but feel a rush of vulnerability at his question.

“Yeah, they come and go,” I answered.

He nodded, understanding in his gaze. Cliff had always been perceptive, even when we were kids.

I wasn’t sure why I told him that when I wasn’t even comfortable sharing the truth with James or anyone else.

Drawing closer, his gaze unwavering, he asked softly, “Do you want to talk about them?”

I sighed, the tension that had been holding my shoulders hostage starting to ease.

I considered his offer, grateful for his willingness to listen.

But some things were difficult to put into words, even to someone as understanding as Cliff.

“Not right now. Maybe someday,” I answered.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Take your time.”

“Just know that I’m here whenever you’re ready,” Cliff added.

I managed a small smile, feeling a warmth in my chest at his words.

“Thanks, Cliff. I really appreciate that,” I told him.

He leaned back, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“You know, I’ve been trying to figure out how to help. What else can I do?” Cliff asked.

I hesitated for a moment, then met his gaze.

“Actually, there’s one thing,” I said.

His eyebrows lifted in curiosity.

“What is it?” Cliff asked.

I took a deep breath, my heart beating a little faster.

It wasn’t easy to ask for this kind of comfort, but with Cliff, it felt like a safe space.

“Can I... Can I get a hug?” I asked.

For a moment, he seemed surprised by my request, but then a soft smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Without hesitation, he stood up and crossed the short distance between us.

He enveloped me in a warm embrace, his arms strong and reassuring around me.

“You don’t have to ask for that,” he said softly. “I’m here, and I’ll always be here.”

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to sink into the embrace.

The tension that I had been carrying seemed to dissolve in his arms, replaced by a sense of comfort that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

It was as if his hug was a bridge connecting me to the present, grounding me in the safety of this moment.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice catching just a little.

He pulled back slightly, his gaze holding mine.

“Anytime,” he said.

I gently cleared my throat, stepping back slightly after our embrace.

It was a mix of comfort and nervousness that had me second-guessing myself.

Had I crossed a line? The connection between us was undeniable, but was I reading too much into it?

A torrent of thoughts swirled in my mind, a tempest of desire and fear.

I cared deeply for Cliff, that much was true, but acting on my feelings might alter the dynamics I held dear with both him and James.

Was I ready for that? I glanced at Cliff, my heart thudding as I tried to gauge his reaction.

“Hey, um... Have you eaten?” I asked, not wanting our conversation to end.

He met my eyes. “No, I didn’t really get a chance,” Cliff answered.

A small smile tugged at my lips.

“Well, how about I cook something up for you?”

“Okay,” Cliff agreed.

I moved around the kitchen with purpose, the clinking of pots and the aroma of food filling the air.

Preparing a quick pasta dish seemed almost therapeutic. As the pasta boiled, I set the table with utensils and a plate.

It wasn’t anything fancy, just a simple dish that I hoped would bring comfort.

Moments later, I placed the plate in front of Cliff, meeting his gaze with a small smile.

“Here you go. Quick and easy pasta,” I said.

He looked at the plate and flashed me one of his disarming smiles.

“Thanks, this looks amazing,” Cliff said. Cliff took a bite of the pasta.

“Anytime,” I told him.

Taking a seat across from him, I leaned back slightly, my eyes fixed on his.

“So, how was your day?” I asked.

Cliff leaned back against the kitchen counter, his posture relaxed.

“My day was... well, you know how it is. Work stuff,” he replied.

I nodded.

“Yeah, I get it. The usual grind.”

He took a few bites, savoring the food before speaking again.

“By the way, James mentioned you were interested in helping him with deliveries,” Cliff said.

“Yeah, I told him I needed something to do,” I admitted. “I think he’s worried about me.”

“I help him out with deliveries too,” Cliff paused, then continued. “You know, I could show you the ropes if you’re interested.”

“I might take you up on that,” I said, immediately leaping at the opportunity to spend more time with Cliff.

We continued chatting. Cliff asked for seconds and I grabbed a plate of pasta for myself too.

Maybe some carbs would help me sleep better. I soon forgot about my nightmare.

Inwardly, I realized it was getting late, and Cliff probably had to wake up early the next day.

Grabbing his used plate and cutlery, I stood up.

“Well, I should let you rest. It’s getting late,” I said with a bit of reluctance.

Cliff nodded. “Oh, right,” he said.

I placed the dishes in the sink. Realizing Cliff hadn’t left, I turned to face him. Was he waiting for something?

An idea struck me. I suddenly knew the perfect way to end the evening.

“Hey, do you mind if I give you a good night kiss?” I asked.

“Sure,” he whispered.

I approached him, leaned in close, and pressed a soft, lingering kiss on his lips.

Some part of me wondered if our kiss in the bathroom had been a figment of my imagination.

After all, I hadn’t been with anyone since my deployment, but that evening, I found out the chemistry between us was real.

“Goodnight,” I said after pulling away, because if I didn’t, I knew I would do more.

“I hope you sleep better, Declan,” he said.

I reached out, running my fingers through his hair. Cliff closed his eyes momentarily, leaning into my touch.

Then he pulled away, gave me a curt nod, then left the kitchen.

The warmth of his minty kiss lingered long after he had left, leaving me with an unfamiliar emotion. Hope.

The fears that had held me captive earlier seemed distant, replaced by the knowledge that maybe, just maybe, my feelings weren’t misplaced.

Chapter 6

Cliff

I was blankly staring at a paper clip on James' desk, vaguely aware that he was talking to me about something.

My thoughts wandered instead to where Declan and I should go for dinner tonight after our shift.

There were a couple of food trucks along Maple Street tonight. Would Declan like that?

Or we could check out that new Mexican place that recently opened across town.

I'd heard good things about it. Plus it was going to be near our last delivery point. And more importantly, it was far enough that we wouldn't bump into anyone we knew there.

But then again, we did have tacos just the other night. Maybe we should try something different...

"Cliff? Are you listening?" James asked, a hint of annoyance in his tone.

"Huh?" I blinked and looked up at James.

"I said, it's been a week. How's he doing?" James asked, tapping his pen on an order sheet.

Oh, right. We were talking about Declan. We were in James' small office behind his barbecue restaurant.

He gestured toward the door behind me, referring to Declan, who was visible through the small circular window.

Declan was outside helping load up the truck with a large order of ribs and sides for a party across town.

“Declan’s doing well. He picked things up pretty quickly,” I said.

It wasn’t a particularly challenging job. I didn’t even have to teach him anything.

Almost anyone with a navigation app on their phone and some form of transportation could handle it.

The real challenge came from dealing with customers.

Fortunately, James had recently introduced a ‘pay first’ rule, making it easier to handle those who didn’t want to pay up when their orders arrived.

Another common issue we faced was finding the right address. Some customers provided vague or incorrect addresses, causing delays in our deliveries.

This was pretty common in Fox Haven. Sometimes the locations didn’t even pop up properly on the navigation app, especially in more remote areas where technology seemed to take a backseat.

Teaching Declan to handle these situations was pretty straightforward.

Basically, we’d just have to use an actual map. I remembered Declan laughing when I told him that.

Other than that, I also had to show him the handy little shortcuts I’d picked up around town.

These shortcuts proved to be a real lifesaver, especially on busy days when time was tight, and I had to hustle through orders.

Or if I wanted to sneak in a quick break without James noticing.

“Good. Maybe tomorrow he can handle some deliveries on his own. A lot of orders have been coming in lately,” James remarked, his fingers tapping away on the keyboard as he focused on his computer screen.

Ah, crap.

Did that mean we wouldn't be doing deliveries together anymore? The past week had been one of the best times I'd had in a while.

I couldn't help but let out a sigh, and a hint of disappointment crept into my expression.

After our shifts, I usually got to hang out with Declan for the rest of the evening.

Sometimes, we'd grab dinner together or treat ourselves to some dessert, usually ice cream.

Our nights usually ended with a stroll around the park before we headed home.

These small moments had become something I looked forward to every evening for the past week.

They gave me and Declan the chance to spend more time together, which was something I really wanted to do ever since Declan came back.

Especially now that I had a feeling that he felt the same way about me.

"I think he could use another day before going solo," I said, trying to appear genuinely concerned.

I locked eyes with James, trying to look as serious as possible. I was hoping he wouldn't catch on to what I was trying to do.

Finally, James looked up from the screen, an eyebrow arched.

Crap. Did he suspect anything?

"Fine. One more day. I've got a ton of orders lined up for next week, so I'm going to need both of you to step up," James stated.

"We've got it covered, no worries!" I replied, trying really hard to keep my voice level and not smile too much.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I couldn't believe it worked. However, I couldn't shake off the slight pang of guilt that lingered.

I have always felt that I owed James a lot and wanted to give back to his business as much as I could.

Growing up, he had done so much for me and Shane. Even when we were young, James already seemed like a grown-up.

When our parents passed away, James stepped up to take care of us. He sacrificed his own childhood to look after us and manage everything at home.

We didn't have much money, but I remember never having to go to bed hungry.

That was why I wanted to help out as much as I could now, not only at home but also in his barbecue business, which had always been his dream.

But, spending one more day with Declan wouldn't hurt, right?

I stepped out of James's office and made my way to the front of the restaurant where the delivery van was parked.

Declan was already in the driver's seat, waiting for me with a wide smile on his face.

"The usual? I drive, you navigate?" he asked.

* * *

After completing the delivery and having a quick bite to eat, Declan and I decided to grab some ice cream at our usual place.

It was still pretty early, so James would probably still be up when we got back home.

"Raspberry ripple," Declan said, handing me my cone with a grin.

"Thanks. What did you go for this time?" I asked, taking a lick of my own ice cream.

"Mint chocolate chip," he replied.

I raised a brow. Declan usually got something plain like chocolate or vanilla. He never liked those with add-ins like

nuts or chocolate bits in it.

“I’ve been craving this minty taste recently. It’s been days since I had a taste,” Declan mused, licking his lips.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, knowing that he was still thinking about our kiss in the bathroom.

But deep down, my heart was doing somersaults. Those kinds with multiple twists and rotations.

As we casually strolled through the park, a comfortable feeling settled between us. It felt like we’d been doing this forever.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel a little sad, knowing this might be the last time we’d be doing something like this.

Way to be overdramatic, Cliff.

Yet, it wasn’t completely untrue. Our only real alone time was when we were outside.

Whenever Declan and I were doing something at home, James usually joined in.

Last weekend, Declan and I were enjoying breakfast together at the kitchen table when James joined in, interrupting our time.

Just the other night, while we were watching a movie on the sofa, James once again joined us and even made me move to the armchair.

It was frustrating.

“James said tomorrow’s the last day we’d be doing deliveries together,” I said, looking up at Declan.

“I see,” Declan said, a hint of sadness in his expression.

The thought of having less time for these moments, our simple dates, was tough to swallow.

He reached out, gently cupping my cheek and giving it a comforting rub.

“We’ll make it work, Cliff,” Declan said. “We still work together. We can grab lunch and sneak in quick breaks, just like we’ve always done.”

Declan's voice was comforting. However, a hint of worry still crossed my mind. What if James found out about us?

As if he knew what I was thinking, Declan leaned in, his warm hand still caressing my cheek, and pressed a reassuring kiss on my lips, chasing away any worries I had.

"It'll be fine," Declan said.

Declan was right. I always worried too much about the smallest things, overthinking every single detail.

Yet, being with Declan always brought me a sense of calm. He helped me see that most of my fears were just overblown.

His mere presence acted like a balm, soothing my anxious thoughts.

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed with a small smile. "Should we head back?"

Declan nodded and gently took my hand, our fingers intertwining naturally.

Together, we walked back to where we had parked the van, savouring the moment. It felt as though neither of us wanted this evening to end.

Suddenly, Declan came to an abrupt stop. His gaze was locked onto something in front of us.

I could feel his palms starting to sweat as his grip on my hand tightened.

"Dec...?" I asked.

I tugged at his hand, but Declan didn't budge. Something definitely felt off.

I glanced at Declan. His face was pale.

Declan's eyes remained fixed on whatever it was ahead of us. I squinted, trying to see what he was looking at, but in the dim light, it was hard to make anything out.

Gradually, a figure emerged from the shadows, stepping into the light from a nearby streetlamp.

The figure approached us slowly, its footsteps echoing loudly in the quiet night.

My heart pounded in my chest as I felt a growing sense of unease. I couldn't make out its face. Even under the light, it was as if its features remained hidden in the shadows.

I tried to tell myself that it was just another passerby, taking a walk in the park.

But my fox was telling me otherwise. It was begging me to run or shift, but I couldn't bring myself to do either.

Declan was still beside me, seemingly rooted to the spot. I knew I couldn't just leave him. I didn't want to either.

As the figure drew closer, panic gripped me, and I positioned myself in front of Declan.

I didn't know what to do, but I knew that I had to do something. Anything.

In an instant, it had darted from beneath the streetlight and materialized right in front of me. How the heck did it move so quickly?

The air around us seemed to grow colder, sending a shiver down my spine that I could feel all the way to my legs.

I felt as if I were rooted to the spot, unable to move even a single step.

Up close, it looked human, but there was something off about it. Its skin had a pale, almost greyish tint to it.

The smell that emanated from it was overpowering—a putrid blend of blood, earth, and rot.

My body tensed as the figure did something unexpected; it sniffed the air around me.

Its head and neck moved unnaturally in an almost disjointed manner, as if disconnected from the rest of its body.

Its eyes finally locked onto mine. Then, with a sudden shift, they flicked over to Declan and back to me.

Its mouth contorted into a horrifying smile, its lips stretching abnormally wide, exposing rows of long, sharp fangs.

Its bright red eyes widened with excitement. There was a strange familiarity in the way it looked at me.

It seemed like it had been looking forward to this moment.

“Hey! I know you!” The figure’s voice cut through the tension.

What? It knew me? How? What the heck was this thing?

Whatever it was, the fact that it seemed to know who I was, was more frightening than anything I had ever experienced.

I tried to ask how it knew me, but I couldn’t speak. It felt like my voice was stuck in my throat.

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of something shining around its neck.

Were they... dog tags? They looked just like the ones Declan was wearing.

“Yeah, I know you!” The eerie repetition of its words sent a chilling sensation through me.

It grinned broadly, exposing its fangs even more. Yet, it was a strange smile. It took me some time to realize what was so weird about it.

The smile extended all the way up, nearly reaching its eyes. It was as if its mouth had stretched so wide that it appeared to cut into its own cheeks.

I snapped back to reality. I needed to act. Now. My fox was begging me to.

“W-well, I don’t know you. I think you have the wrong person,” I stuttered.

It sounded so stupid in my ears, but it didn’t matter. My priority was to protect both myself and Declan.

Or at least buy some time until Declan snapped out of it. Then we could make a run for it.

It moved a step closer, and I instinctively stepped back. Should I shift now? I could feel my fox trying to claw its way out of

my skin.

The creature scowled, as though it could somehow sense my intentions.

In an instant, its hands shot out, seizing my throat with a vice-like grip, lifting me off the ground. My legs dangled helplessly in the air.

“Ack!”

Panic surged through me as I tried to break free. I could feel its long, sharp nails all the way to the back of my neck.

It squeezed harder, digging into flesh, drawing blood. I winced in pain as it trickled down my back.

I tried to reach out, to push it away, to loosen its grip around my neck, but it held me firmly in place.

“I don’t think so,” it taunted, letting out a sinister laugh. It went on, “You’re the one who used to send him those chocolate chip cookies, right?”

It pulled me closer to its face. I turned away; its hot, putrid breath was unbearable.

“Hey, do you have any more?” it asked, grinning widely once again.

Chapter 7

Declan

The day had been unexpectedly good. Cliff and I hung out after making deliveries, enjoying each other's company, and it felt amazing.

I wished time would slow down, but then a sudden shock jolted me. A figure emerged from the shadows as Cliff and I were walking back to the delivery van, and I froze, unable to believe my eyes.

It was Parker, a guy I served with in the army. But that wasn't possible. Parker had died during our last tour. Yet here he was, right in front of me.

Memories of my army days flooded back, dragging me from the present into the past.

I closed my eyes, and I was there again, back with my unit, surrounded by hushed conversations and the distant hum of machinery.

Parker sat on a makeshift crate beside me, eyeing the care package that had just arrived for me.

"You lucked out," he said, eyeing the cookies with a smirk. "Your boyfriend's really looking out for you."

I chuckled, tearing open the package and passing him a few cookies. I didn't bother correcting his assumption that Cliff was more than my friend.

"Cliff's got a way of making things better," I said.

Parker stared at the cookies for a moment, a hint of longing in his expression.

“Wish I had someone sending me stuff,” Parker murmured.

I understood his feeling. We all had our reasons for being here, our own motivations for getting through each day.

Parker had shared stories about his life back home, about the normalcy he missed.

“Maybe you’ll find someone after this,” I said, giving him a shrug. “Once we’re done with all this, you’ll have plenty of options.”

He laughed, a bit of nostalgia in the sound. “Yeah, guess so.”

We chewed on cookies, the desert air feeling surprisingly normal despite the circumstances.

These were the moments that kept us going, the small connections that made us feel human despite the chaos of war.

The last time I saw Parker was during that disastrous mission two months ago. Those monsters had been bent over his corpse, feeding on it.

“Hey, do you have any more?” Those words yanked me back to reality.

Lost in my thoughts, the memories of the past churned in my mind like a storm.

I blinked, the present snapping back into focus, only to find myself gripped by a horror beyond my imagination.

Parker—who should have been dead—stood there, his hands wrapped around Cliff’s throat.

My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline surging through my veins as I reacted on pure instinct.

I lunged forward, half-expecting Parker to dissolve like smoke in the wind. But he was real—terrifyingly real.

The world around me narrowed to that single moment, my focus honed on stopping whatever madness was unfolding

before me.

“No!” I roared, my voice raw with panic and fury.

Parker’s grip on Cliff tightened, his eyes meeting mine with a chilling calmness. Cliff’s face was a mask of shock, his hands clawing at Parker’s wrists in a desperate attempt to break free.

I moved without thought, my training taking over. My body crashed into Parker’s, the impact sending us crashing to the ground.

We grappled, fighting for control, and in that moment, I realized with gut-wrenching certainty that this was not some hallucination or ghostly apparition.

This was Parker, twisted and wrong, but real.

Panting heavily, I pushed against him, my muscles straining as I struggled to free Cliff from his grip.

Parker’s face contorted in a malicious grin, his grip unyielding as his fingers pressed into Cliff’s throat.

With a surge of strength born from desperation, I wrenched his hands away from Cliff’s neck, sending him reeling backward.

Cliff gasped, his hands flying to his throat as he sucked in air in ragged breaths. My heart ached as I stared at the marks on his fair skin, a vivid reminder of the danger he had just faced.

Parker slowly rose to his feet, dusting himself off as if this were some casual encounter.

“Been a while, Dec,” he said.

My blood boiled at his calm demeanor, the horrors of our past crashing back with a vengeance.

The memories of war, of the battles we fought together, were tainted by the monstrous figure before me.

I stood between Parker and Cliff, my chest heaving, my voice a dangerous growl. “What the hell do you want?”

“It’s your fault,” he spat out, instead of answering my question. His gaze burned into mine. “Why are you alive while the rest of our unit is dead?”

My heart was pounding like a drum, the world around me narrowing to a pinpoint of fear as Parker's chilling words reached my ears.

I felt frozen in place, unable to move as the weight of his accusation crushed down on me.

Fear unlike anything I'd ever known gripped me, paralyzing my limbs and turning my thoughts to a chaotic jumble.

My eyes flicked to Cliff; Parker's words didn't seem to have the same effect on him. Cliff's clothes fluttered to the ground as he shifted into his fox form, his snarl a fierce challenge that filled the air.

Time seemed to stretch, the world moving in slow motion as Cliff and Parker clashed.

My mind was a whirlwind of disbelief and panic, and though every fiber of my being screamed for me to move, I was rooted to the spot, unable to tear my gaze away from the scene unfolding before me.

I tried to scream, to shout for them to stop, but my voice remained trapped within me. My limbs felt heavy, like they were made of lead, and I watched in helpless horror as the struggle escalated.

It was as if some dark force had taken hold of me, rendering me powerless to intervene.

A sickening crack echoed through the air as Parker tossed Cliff aside, his movements fueled by an unnatural strength.

I had lost my entire unit in the span of an afternoon. I wasn't about to lose anyone ever again, especially not Cliff.

The paralysis that had gripped me shattered, replaced by a surge of adrenaline and desperation. My fingers fumbled for the knife tucked into my belt, the cold metal a reassuring presence in my grip.

I lunged toward Parker, my movements driven by a mixture of fury and determination. The blade sliced through the air, finding its mark as it cut a line of blood across Parker's arm.

Parker didn't even react to the injury. My mind raced, the haze of fear beginning to lift as I confronted the surreal reality before me. My voice found strength as I faced him.

"What do you want?" I asked him again.

Parker's sinister grin twisted his features, his fangs peeking out as he pointed a finger at Cliff.

My heart pounded in my chest, and sweat coated the back of my shirt. And then, as swiftly as he had come, Parker vanished—disappearing into thin air.

The air itself seemed to sigh in relief as the tension ebbed away.

Left alone with Cliff's limp form, my senses sharpened with a surge of urgency. I rushed to his side, my mind racing.

He wasn't moving, and panic clawed at my throat. I needed to think, to act fast.

I considered taking Cliff to the nearest hospital, but doubt gnawed at me. Would they know how to treat a shifter in animal form?

The risks were too great. Another idea struck me like a lightning bolt. I had to get in touch with Cliff's pack—they'd know what to do.

I frantically located Cliff's phone among his discarded clothes. His birthday was his passcode.

With trembling fingers, I unlocked his phone and navigated to his contacts. I found Cliff's alpha, Owen, and dialed the number, praying that help would come swiftly.

The phone rang once, twice, and then he answered. "Hello?"

"Owen, this is Declan, a friend of James and Cliff," I said, my voice edged with panic. "It's Cliff. Something's wrong, he's hurt."

I heard Owen inhale sharply on the other end. "What happened? Where are you?"

"He's injured," I replied quickly, my words tumbling out. "We're at Willow Park, near the entrance. I need help, Owen."

“Stay there. I’ll be right over,” Owen said firmly before hanging up.

The wait felt like an eternity, every second stretching into an agonizing minute. My eyes remained glued to Cliff’s still form.

The sound of an approaching engine finally broke the silence, and relief flooded through me as Owen’s sheriff car came into view.

Owen jumped out of the car, his concerned gaze sweeping over Cliff and me.

“What happened?” Owen demanded.

“He needs help,” I said, my voice tight with worry. “He’s hurt.”

Owen nodded and turned to the car. I was relieved he didn’t ask any more questions, although I was sure they would come later on.

“I’ll put him in the back,” Owen said.

He was about to reach for Cliff, but I shot him a glare. Owen raised one eyebrow. I hesitated for a moment, torn between worry for Cliff and my stubborn determination not to leave his side.

“I won’t let anyone else carry him,” I said.

Owen’s gaze held mine, and after a moment, some understanding passed through his eyes. He nodded.

“Fine. Get in,” he said. “We can’t waste any more time.”

I climbed into the backseat, gently cradling Cliff’s fox form in my lap. His fur was warm against my skin, but the weight of worry bore down on me.

Owen sped through the town streets, heading toward the outskirts. I realized he was heading for the compound where most of Cliff’s pack mates lived.

As we entered the compound, my anxiety twisted into a mix of relief and unease. I was pretty sure the pack seldom allowed humans inside their territory. It didn’t matter. Cliff came first.

Owen pulled up to the pack clinic, and I stepped out, my arms still protectively wrapped around Cliff.

A healer was waiting, and Owen guided me toward him. I hesitated, feeling like an intruder in this world I didn't fully understand. The healer shot me, then Owen, a curious look.

"It's alright. Declan's a temporary guest," Owen told the healer.

I hovered in a corner as the healer approached Cliff. My heart raced as his hands glowed with a soft light, and I watched with a mix of trepidation and hope.

The healer's touch seemed to calm Cliff's restless form, and I prayed that he could help him.

Time seemed to stretch as I waited, my mind a jumbled mess of worry and guilt. Owen's voice broke through my thoughts, asking me softly, "What happened?"

I struggled to find the words, the memory of our encounter with Parker a haze of fear and chaos.

"I don't... I don't really remember. He was there, and then Cliff was hurt. I... I couldn't protect him." I was pretty sure I wasn't making much sense.

Owen's expression softened, his eyes filled with understanding. "You're doing everything you can."

As the healer's hands glowed brighter, a sense of gratitude and helplessness washed over me. Cliff's safety was all that mattered, and I would do whatever it took to ensure he was okay.

But as I watched Cliff lying there, vulnerable and injured, another thought tugged at the edge of my mind—how would I explain this to James and Shane?

I had put Cliff in danger, never realizing a ghost of my past would track me down to Fox Haven. The guilt weighed heavily on my conscience, and the image of Parker's twisted smile haunted me.

But that wasn't the only truth I needed to confront. My feelings for Cliff were as undeniable as the air I breathed.

How would I ever find the words to tell James that his best friend harbored more than just friendship for his younger brother?

Chapter 8

Cliff

Feeling disoriented, I drifted in and out of consciousness.

Everything around me seemed to be in a haze. I could hear faint voices somewhere in the room.

“...broken ribs...left arm... has a slight concussion.”

It was hard to focus, but I managed to catch bits and pieces of the conversation.

I could make out a figure in front of me. It was Declan.

He looked so sad and tired. I wanted to reach out to him and kiss him, tell him that everything was going to be okay.

But exhaustion weighed me down. I was so sleepy. Maybe in a little while...

When I finally came to again, it was still dark outside. My head throbbed as I surveyed the room.

My surroundings gradually came into focus. White walls, a strong smell of disinfectant, and the gentle hum of medical equipment.

I was in some kind of hospital ward or room. I must be in the pack clinic.

I attempted to sit up, but my muscles were screaming in protest. The left side of my body was aching, and my head hurt like hell.

I tried lifting my hand, but was met with a heavy sensation. It didn't take long to identify the source of the weight.

Declan's hand was clasped lightly over mine.

He must have been here the entire night, holding onto my hand. The sight of him here, by my side, was comforting.

Gently, I ran my fingers through his hair. To my surprise, the small movement sent a jolt of pain coursing through my entire left side.

Flashes of the attack in the park raced through my mind. I remembered being thrown off when I attacked it, whatever it was, but nothing more after that.

How had I ended up here? And more importantly, how was Declan here with me? Did anyone else know we were here?

I started to worry that someone might have called my brothers and told them I was here.

The idea of James finding out about last night filled me with dread. I didn't even know how to explain the whole situation to him. Where would I even start?

Hey James, Declan and I were having a little date at the park. This creepy monster suddenly attacked us.

Oh and it seemed to know Declan.

"I'm sure that would go over so well with him," I muttered to myself.

I pulled myself off the bed, ignoring the heavy weight of my body.

Carefully, I released my hand from Declan's grip and went out into the reception area, wheeling my IV with me.

A familiar face was stationed at the desk. It was Matt.

The other day, Matt had been on the hunt for a job and asked for my help. I managed to find an opening for the night shift at the pack clinic's reception.

"Matt," I croaked, my voice still hoarse.

"Cliff! You shouldn't be walking around!" Matt said, concern in his eyes.

I raised a hand to signal that I was okay. I needed to find out if they had called anyone for me yet.

“Do you know if anyone called my brothers?” I asked anxiously.

Matt hesitated before explaining, “I’m not sure if you remember, but last night when you came to, you begged Owen not to tell anyone else you were here.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that James and Shane might still be unaware of my situation.

However, my relief was short-lived. Matt pursed his lips, a troubled expression etching across his face.

“I’m sorry, but a few hours ago, Owen made me call your brother. No one picked up, so I left a message,” Matt said, looking apologetic.

My heart sank. That meant my brothers could arrive here at any moment. They could even be on their way right now.

I glanced at the clock on the wall; it was still early in the morning. A small part of me hoped they were still asleep.

“It’s okay, Matt. Thanks anyway,” I said, trying to hide my unease.

Matt nodded, and I headed back to my room. Should I just tell Declan to leave?

I found myself biting my fingers nervously. So many scenarios ran through my head, like what James would do or how mad he would get.

But then, I realized there was no reason to. It wasn’t like James and Shane knew there was anything going on between me and Declan.

All they would probably know was that Declan and I were attacked last night while making our way home, and I got hurt. That was all.

In fact, that was what happened anyway. They didn’t need to know the finer details.

I turned the doorknob, trying not to make a sound. But when I entered the room, I woke Declan from his sleep.

Declan's tired eyes glanced at the empty bed and then up at me. I walked over and sat on the bed.

"What are you doing? How are you feeling?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Declan moved around the bed and positioned himself in front of me. He placed his hand on my cheek and gently brushed it.

"I'm fine," I reassured him with a warm smile, leaning into his touch.

Declan ran his hand through his hair, looking visibly relieved as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

I wished he wouldn't worry too much. I was still a shifter after all. The injuries I had would heal in no time.

I examined him closely, searching for any visible bruises or marks, but found none. Thank goodness for that.

However, I could see something in his eyes that told me that whoever or whatever it was last night that attacked us had shaken him to his core.

I wanted to ask him more about it, but then I remembered how he looked last night. I could still see the fear and shock in his eyes.

Never have I ever seen Declan look that way before.

I didn't want to make him relive those emotions again. No, now didn't seem like the right time to ask him about it.

Declan wrapped his arms around me gently, taking care not to put any pressure on my left side.

It felt as though he was hesitant to release me, but eventually, he pulled back and met my gaze.

He leaned in again, his lips lightly brushing my left temple. Slowly, they traced a delicate path down my cheek.

Each subtle touch sent a delightful shiver coursing through my body that I could feel all the way to my chest.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my laughter bubbling up.

“Kissing you to make you feel better,” Declan murmured in a low voice.

He continued, leaving a trail of kisses to my nose and then down to the left side of my mouth.

I winced slightly as his lips brushed over a small cut. I quickly realized he was kissing the areas where I had some cuts and scratches.

“I think I hurt this part too,” I said, playfully pointing to my other cheek.

Declan smiled and placed a kiss on the spot where my finger was. Then, his gaze fell to my mouth, tracing my lips with his thumb.

He tilted my chin up, pressing his lips on mine.

The kiss was slow yet firm. I could feel the urgency as his lips moved against mine.

I groaned as he tightened his arms around my waist, pulling me irresistibly closer.

I didn't know what came over me. Or him. Maybe it was the life-threatening encounter at the park earlier, but I wanted more of Declan.

Our breaths were ragged pants at the end, heavy with want as he pulled away.

I didn't want to stop, but Declan pressed a last soft kiss on my lips.

“Let's put you back to bed. You need to rest,” he said.

I nodded, resigned. I was getting sleepy again anyway. But before I could fully settle back onto the bed, I heard a loud commotion outside.

“Can I sign you in first? JAMES MULLINS, was it?”

It was Matt's voice. He was talking weirdly, enunciating each syllable slowly and loudly. Especially my brother's name.

Declan, who had been preparing to place a blanket over me, paused, his posture stiffening.

He took a quick glance at the door and then quickly moved a few steps away from my bed.

“Cliff?” I heard James shout my name.

James’s voice rang through the room. It was loud enough to make it seem as if he were right outside the door.

“Please, let me check if the patient’s awake first,” Matt said.

There was a soft knock on the door, and it opened slightly. It was Matt.

He cracked it open just wide enough for his head to slip through and scanned the room until our eyes met.

I nodded, signaling to him that it was alright to let my brothers inside. I made a mental note to thank him later for the warning.

James and Shane barged into the room, their eyes quickly scanning me up and down.

Their gazes paused as they noticed the bandages on my left arm and neck before shifting their attention to Declan, who stood by my bedside.

Then, they both started talking over each other.

“What happened?”

“Are you okay?”

“Declan, why are you here?”

“Why didn’t they call us earlier?”

My head was throbbing again. This time, I was pretty sure it wasn’t from the concussion.

“Guys, please, not so loud. I’m okay. See?” I said.

To show them I was alright, I twisted my body from side to side. I then raised my right arm, followed with my left, hoping they wouldn’t notice the fact that I couldn’t lift it as high as usual.

I then locked eyes with both of them. They might both be older and stronger than me, but I knew that with a look, they'd listen to me.

It was the same look I gave them whenever I insisted we had to do our annual spring cleaning sessions. It seemed to have worked.

Shane stepped forward first, giving me a hug and a pat on the back. But when he pulled away, I noticed an odd look on his face.

He turned to face Declan and narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

James then came up to the bed. Shane seemed to move to intervene, reaching his hand toward James' shoulder as if he intended to pull him away from me.

However, James leaned in to give me a hug before Shane could do anything.

"You're right. You're okay, and that's all that matters," James said, breathing a heavy sigh.

Then, something changed. I felt James' body stiffen up. He pulled away slowly and looked at Declan, then at me, and then at Declan again.

James' eyes then started to darken to amber. His animal half was peeking out.

It all happened so quickly. In the blink of an eye, James moved toward Declan and, with arms outstretched, pinned him against the wall.

I tried to stand up, but Shane shot me a warning look, telling me not to interfere.

"What the hell, man?" Declan shouted, his hands pushing against James' chest.

"I can smell you all over him! What did you do to him?" James growled.

In a burst of energy, Declan managed to deliver a powerful kick to James's leg, forcing him to release his grip on Declan's shoulders.

It created just enough distance for Declan to strike back with a punch. However, James countered by shoving him back even harder.

James managed to pin Declan once more, this time with his elbows bent to maintain the advantage.

The gap between them had significantly narrowed, leaving Declan trapped with limited room to maneuver.

Declan attempted another kick, but it wasn't as effective as before.

He could only deliver short-range strikes, hitting James's ears and neck in a bid to regain control of the situation.

I was instantly gripped by fear. Declan was strong. I've always known that.

However, James not only possessed supernatural strength but also looked like he was quickly losing control of himself.

Shane finally stepped in. He moved quickly, slipping his arms under James's in an effort to pull him away from Declan.

At the same time, Declan continued his efforts, resorting to hitting James' back with his elbows, determined to break free.

When James seemed to slightly loosen his grip, Declan seized the opportunity. He landed a hard punch squarely into James's side.

The force of the blow seemed to target James's liver, causing immediate and excruciating pain.

James doubled over, clutching his side, and his grip on Declan was finally released.

Shane rushed to James's side. Bending down, he heaved James up and then dragged James out of the room.

Before leaving, Shane cast a glance in my direction but didn't say a single word.

In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but remember the times Declan and James fought when they were younger. But this time, it felt different. It was more intense.

It was as if something had shifted between them. I wasn't sure if things could ever be the same again.

Declan lowered his head and ran his hand through his hair.

“Damn it,” he muttered under his breath.

Chapter 9

Declan

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I glanced at Cliff sleeping soundly on the clinic bed. Then I turned my attention to the task at hand.

I took a deep breath and stared at my phone screen. Calling in this favor felt like a weight on my chest, but it was something I needed to do.

I needed to know what exactly happened during that disastrous mission. I dialed the number and waited.

When Mike finally answered, I cleared my throat, my voice steady despite the knot of unease in my stomach.

“Hey, it’s Declan.”

There was a brief pause on the other end, and then his voice came through, familiar and reassuring.

“Hey, man. It’s been a while,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” I replied, trying to keep my tone casual. “Listen, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“What do you need?” Mike immediately asked.

I took a deep breath. “I need to see the videos from that mission—the one where everyone... except me, didn’t make it,” I explained.

Another pause followed, the silence stretching for a moment that felt like an eternity.

I knew this wasn’t a small request; Mike could get into trouble with the higher-ups. But it was important to me, a chance to

find answers that had eluded me for so long.

Mike was a technician, so he stayed back at the base during that mission.

Maybe it wasn't wise, stirring up bad memories, but my strange encounter with Parker at the park was something I couldn't get out of my mind.

The videos could hold answers, details that I needed to fill in the blanks of that nightmare.

"I know it's a lot to ask," I continued, my voice quieter now. "But it's something I can't shake off. I need to understand what went wrong."

The silence stretched again, and I held my breath, waiting for his response.

"Give me some time, Declan. I'll see what I can do," Mike said.

Relief washed over me. I had expected Mike to outright refuse my request.

"Thank you. I appreciate it more than you know," I said.

Someone cleared their throat. It was Matt. He was carrying a tray of food. Cliff's breakfast.

"I'll set this down here," Matt said.

"Thanks, Matt," I said.

"You should head home and get some sleep, nothing will happen to Cliff here," Matt told me.

"I'm good where I am," I told him. Matt shook his head, then exited the room.

I was eating Cliff's oatmeal when I noticed Cliff stirring in the bed. He rubbed his eyes, looking a bit disoriented. With his hair sticking up, he looked downright adorable.

"Hey," I said, leaning closer to him.

He blinked at me. "Declan?"

"Yeah, it's me," I confirmed.

His gaze went to my bowl of oatmeal. “Are you eating my breakfast?”

“Guilty as charged, but we can share. Hungry?” I offered.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

I scooped up some oatmeal with a spoon and held it out to him. “Open up,” I said.

He blushed a bit but leaned forward to eat. It was kind of intimate, the way our eyes met for a moment as I fed him. After a few bites, I put the bowl aside.

“How you feeling?” I asked him.

“Better,” he said, smiling. “Shifter blood helps with healing.”

“Yeah, it’s impressive,” I said.

When breakfast was done, I handed him a glass of water and his meds.

“Here, drink this,” I ordered.

He hesitated but eventually did. It was clear he was still low on energy, but I could see he was getting better.

“You should rest more,” I suggested.

He gave me a half-salute, the gesture making me laugh. “Sure thing,” he said.

I grinned and ruffled his hair. “Good. You need it.”

I raised the blanket over Cliff’s still form, tucking it in around him with gentle care.

Pressing a soft kiss to his forehead, I whispered, “Rest well,” before quietly leaving the clinic.

The air outside felt crisp against my skin, a welcome contrast to the warm clinic.

I hadn’t gone far when I saw Shane, leaning against a nearby wall. His gaze met mine, his expression thoughtful.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I replied, my surprise evident in my voice.

I hadn't expected to run into him here. I wondered if he'd been spying on Cliff and me through the clinic windows.

Shane studied me for a moment before asking, "You've been in there since last night?"

I nodded. "Yeah, wanted to make sure he's alright."

He gave a knowing nod, understanding in his eyes. "James told me to swing by and see how Cliff is doing."

I leaned against the wall beside him, letting out a slow breath.

"How's James taking everything?" I asked.

It was a lot to take in— both the attack and my budding relationship with Cliff.

Shane shrugged, his gaze distant. "He's processing. Give him some time," Shane suggested.

A heavy silence settled between us, broken only by the distant sounds of the pack going about their business.

After a moment, Shane's gaze shifted back to me, his observation startling in its directness.

"You love him." It was a statement, not a question.

I raised an eyebrow, caught off guard by his bluntness.

"How do you figure?" I asked.

A half-smile tugged at Shane's lips.

"I snooped around in your things while you were here. Found a box full of Cliff's letters."

My heart skipped a beat, my secret laid bare. At first, I was appalled and mad he would go through my stuff without permission.

Then I realized he was probably just worried about Cliff.

"Oh." It was all I could say.

Shane's expression softened.

"Look, I'm not here to judge. I just want what's best for my brother," Shane explained.

I sighed, feeling a mixture of vulnerability and relief.

“Does it bother you?” I asked.

Shane shook his head. “No. If anything, it tells me you’re serious about him.”

I searched his eyes, looking for any sign of insincerity. “You’re not just saying that?” I asked.

He met my gaze, his honesty unwavering.

“I’m on your side, Declan. Cliff deserves to be happy, and if you’re the one who can bring some light into his life, then I’m all for it.”

A weight lifted from my shoulders. I hadn’t anticipated this conversation with Shane, but knowing I had found one ally, gave me a measure of relief.

Now all I needed to do was win James over, although I knew it wouldn’t be easy.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Shane asked, interrupting my train of thought.

I sighed, my mind a whirlwind of uncertainties.

“I’m trying to figure that out. I don’t know if that thing that attacked Cliff and me will come after us again.”

Shane nodded thoughtfully.

“You need to be prepared,” Shane said.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling the weight of responsibility pressing down on me.

“Yeah, but it’s not that easy,” I admitted.

“Have you considered asking for help?” Shane asked, his gaze never leaving mine.

I hesitated, then decided to confide in him.

“I’ve reached out to a friend from the military. He’s looking into some information, but it might take some time,” I said.

Shane’s brow furrowed as he considered my words.

“You might need something more immediate. There’s a guy in town, Oliver. He owns a magic store. He might have something that can help protect you.”

I blinked in surprise. “Magic store?”

Shane shrugged.

“On the surface, he sells souvenirs, but in the back of the store, Oliver sells magical tools and protections. It’s worth a shot. You’re dealing with things beyond the ordinary, right?” Shane asked.

I nodded slowly, his logic making sense. “Thanks, Shane.”

“Just looking out for my brother and the guy who’s making him smile again,” Shane said.

“I appreciate it,” I said.

Shane’s gaze shifted to the clinic door.

“You should go see Oliver now. I’ll watch over Cliff while you’re gone,” Shane said.

I met his eyes, grateful for his offer. “I won’t be long.”

He gave a reassuring nod.

“Take your time. We’ll be fine. I doubt the creature that attacked you both would come after Cliff in pack lands. Tell Oliver I sent you.”

* * *

I pushed open the door of Oliver’s store, and immediately my senses were assaulted by an array of gaudy and cheap souvenirs.

I hesitated, taking in the mismatched assortment of trinkets that adorned the shelves.

This was definitely not what I had expected when Shane mentioned Oliver’s magic store.

How was I supposed to bring up my request in this setting?

As I stood there, mentally preparing myself for the conversation, a voice broke through my thoughts.

“Hello there!”

I turned to find a cheerful-looking man approaching me. He was around my age.

Honestly, it was a little hard to take him seriously because he was wearing a souvenir shirt with the huge letters ‘Welcome to Fox Haven, your best haven’ stamped on the front.

He also wore a matching cap with the same words.

“Are you Oliver?” I asked.

He chuckled, extending a hand.

“Yep, that’s me. What can I help you with today?”

I shook his hand unthinkingly. Taking a deep breath, I decided to go for it.

“Shane Mullins sent me. He said you might be able to help.”

Oliver’s gaze sharpened as he studied me carefully.

“Ah, Shane, huh? You’re...human?”

He sounded more curious than anything.

“I’m a family friend,” I explained. “But I’ve known they were shifters since I was a kid.”

That explanation seemed to satisfy Oliver.

“Well then, come with me,” Oliver said.

He led me to the back of the store, and I couldn’t help but be surprised by the stark difference from the front.

The atmosphere shifted, and my eyes widened as they landed on an array of charms, crystals, and magical tools.

It was like stepping into another world entirely. Oliver turned to face me.

“So, what’s troubling you?” He asked.

I hesitated, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sudden change in environment.

Shane had vouched for Oliver, but I still wasn't sure how much I could trust him. Taking a chance, I decided to be straightforward.

"There was something... unnatural that attacked me and Cliff. Shane said you might be able to provide some assistance," I said.

Oliver's brows furrowed as he absorbed my words.

"I see. I'll need more details."

My frustration bubbled up. I didn't have all the answers yet, and I was growing impatient with the lack of solutions.

"Look, I don't have all the answers, okay? But something dangerous is out there, and I need to be prepared."

Oliver's expression softened, understanding evident in his gaze.

"I get it. Let's start from the beginning then," Oliver said gently.

I took a deep breath and began to recount the details of the attack.

He seemed particularly interested when I told him about the part where I was momentarily paralyzed in fear and couldn't act.

Oliver listened attentively, nodding at the right moments. When I finished, he seemed to be deep in thought.

After a while, he turned to a nearby display and began to rummage through the items.

"I think I have just the thing for you. Mind you, I can't guarantee it would work with whatever's after you and Cliff."

"I'll take anything at this point," I said, not caring I sounded a little desperate.

He turned back to me, holding a plain silver necklace with a simple pendant.

"This has a basic warding spell. It won't guarantee protection against everything, but it might buy you some time," Oliver

explained.

I studied the necklace, a mix of hope and skepticism swirling within me.

Trusting Oliver was a leap of faith, but it seemed I didn't have many options.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

"Remember, magic is about intent as much as the spells. Wear it with the intention to protect, and it should serve you well," he said, his smile reassuring. "And if you find out anything more about this creature, talk to me again, and we can work something out."

Chapter 10

Cliff

I stepped into the dimly lit motel room, greeted by faded floral wallpaper that had seen better days.

The musty smell of old cigarette smoke lingered in the air.

The worn-out carpet under my feet was covered in stains, and the curtains, probably once colorful, had a dull, lifeless shade.

I dropped my bags onto the floor, the thud resonating in the small room.

As I looked around the room, I paused and cringed when I touched a dusty surface with my index finger.

Yeah, I'd definitely want to do some basic cleaning before I touch anything else in here.

It was obvious that this place had seen its fair share of wear and tear, but it wasn't like I expected much anyway.

I knew I'd be here for a week at least, and I didn't plan on doing anything except sleeping, so it would do for now.

I lay down on the bed and put my arm over my head.

At first, I wondered if it was a good idea to ask Ian or Nate for a place to stay, but since Owen and Cal were friends with James, that didn't seem like the best option.

Staying at this motel definitely seemed like the better choice.

This morning, I quickly rushed back home after I was discharged from the pack clinic.

I knew James would have already left for work, and I didn't want to see him.

I didn't want to argue with him and wanted to avoid any potential conflicts. He was just so mad the other day when he found out about Declan and me.

I thought it would be best to keep my distance from him for a while.

As I quickly packed a few things, I was surprised to find James standing there as I was getting ready to leave.

He looked really upset and angry, but what was unsettling was his silence.

I had expected him to start yelling and asking questions about where I was going, something. But, instead, he just stood there with his arms crossed, watching me.

It wasn't until I began collecting some of Declan's things in the living room that he finally spoke.

He was harsh and irrational, saying, "If you're seeing him, don't bother returning."

It seemed like such a ridiculous ultimatum. The tension in the room had become too unbearable; I couldn't stand it anymore.

In the end, I only managed to grab Declan's backpack because I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could.

As I reached the door, I paused, feeling the urge to say something to James.

But he quickly turned away. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw a fleeting look of hurt on his face.

I had never seen him like that before, and it made me feel guilty. I had expected some kind of argument or even a fight if I saw him.

I was even ready for it. But I hadn't anticipated the vulnerable expression he had as I left.

For a brief moment, I thought about staying, having a talk with James. I wondered if I was acting too hastily in deciding to leave. But ultimately, I chose to go.

I couldn't forget the intensity in his eyes when he confronted Declan at the clinic. How he just lost control.

It was clear that he needed time to digest what had happened, and my being there would probably make things worse.

I figured it was best to let him cool down and process everything on his own.

Even though I left, I still made sure to let James know where I'd be staying for the next few days.

Sure, we were both mad, but that didn't mean I wanted him to worry.

Anyway, I knew that he wouldn't come barging into my motel room the moment he found out where I was staying.

For one, I knew he was stubborn. Because especially after a fight, he has never been one to make the first move to apologize.

But I also trusted that he would respect my need for space.

Although he didn't respond to my text message, I knew that he read it. That gave me a bit of reassurance.

I sat up on the bed and took another look around the room. I started to see it in a different way.

Earlier, it looked gross and unimpressive. Almost depressing.

But now, it took on a new meaning. It felt like, for the first time, I had the freedom to do as I pleased, entirely on my own terms, for my own benefit.

I could choose how to spend my time, and I was determined to make the most of it.

I glanced at Declan's bag, the one I had grabbed before leaving. I couldn't believe this was the only thing I grabbed of his.

All of his stuff was still scattered around the living room when I left.

That meant he hadn't come back to the house to pick them up. Hopefully, there was some useful stuff he could use in this

bag.

I reached for my phone and typed out a quick text message:

Cliff: Went back home to grab some stuff. I managed to get your backpack.

Dec: Thanks. Where are you?

Cliff: I'm at the Sunset Haven Motel on Highway 22.

Within just a few minutes, I heard a loud knock on the door.

Was it the motel manager or staff? Was there a problem with the payment?

It couldn't be James; I was sure about that at least. I cautiously unlocked the door, and, to my surprise, there stood Declan on the other side.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, surprised.

Declan responded with a wry smile, “I guess we both ended up at the only motel that had vacant rooms, huh?”

* * *

I gripped my supermarket basket handle tightly as we made our way through the crowded aisles of the large superstore.

The air was filled with a mix of sounds and smells. Above us, the store's speaker system crackled with announcements and cheerful music.

A voice over the intercom announced, “Cleanup on aisle 16.”

Declan was bent down next to me, focused on the toothbrushes on display.

He had two different types in each hand and looked a bit puzzled as he checked them out, turning them over to read the packaging. It was honestly kind of cute to watch.

How had we ended up here, of all places?

Oh, right. I was shocked when I found out that Declan was staying in the same motel. In the room next door, even.

It was definitely an unexpected but pleasant surprise. I mean, what were the chances?

Apparently, he had been going around town all morning checking out any vacant rooms. But all other inns and motels in town were fully booked.

The upcoming town fairs in Fox Haven had attracted so many tourists for the fall festivals that the only place with vacant rooms was the run-down motel on the outskirts of town.

I didn't know what to do at that point, so I suggested we go to the closest supermarket.

Since I hadn't managed to pack much from home, it made sense to grab some essentials.

Fortunately, we found a big supermarket a few minutes' drive from the motel. Declan was surprised at my suggestion, but we really needed to pick up a couple of things.

For one, I definitely wanted to get some of my own towels.

I wouldn't be caught dead using the ones the motel provided. It had way too many questionable stains on it.

Also, I loved going to supermarkets. It was one of my favorite things to do.

It was a familiar and calming activity, something I welcomed after the stress of the past few days.

"Let's go with this one," Declan said, settling on a toothbrush with soft bristles.

"I usually pick the hard one," I countered, reaching for a different toothbrush on the shelf. But Declan was determined.

"This one's better for your teeth," he explained, his eyes meeting mine.

As he placed two identical toothbrushes into our basket, I felt an unexpected warmth wash over me.

I kind of liked how Declan took control and made a choice for the both of us.

“What else do we need?” he asked, looking at our growing pile of items.

I glanced at our baskets. Declan’s was filled with non-food essentials like extra shirts, towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and soap.

In my basket, I had piled up an assortment of foodstuffs. Well, mostly snacks.

I mentally went through our checklist, making sure we had everything we needed, and noticed that we didn’t buy anything for breakfast yet.

“Let’s get some cereal,” I suggested, leading the way to the breakfast food aisle.

I reached for a box of my usual go-to cereal, Raisin Bran, but Declan stopped me by gently holding my wrist.

“Not that,” he said, eyeing the raisins on the front of the box with a grimace.

“You can’t be serious. You just had this at the house last week!” I exclaimed.

“I pick the raisins out when you’re not looking,” Declan replied with a deadpan expression, as if it would be a grave mistake to buy that particular box.

I couldn’t help but laugh. This was ridiculous.

This man went and fought who knows what during his two years in the army and even won a fight with James the other day. Yet, he still couldn’t eat raisins.

“You can just pick your own cereal,” I suggested.

“Why? Aren’t we going to eat breakfast together? And it’ll be a waste if we get too much,” Declan explained, his expression serious.

I could feel a blush creeping onto my cheeks. Breakfast with Declan every day?

I hadn't expected this surprising perk of being next-door neighbors. Declan reached for a box of plain cornflakes and placed it in my basket.

As we continued down the aisle, Declan suddenly stopped and grabbed a few mini cereal boxes.

Why was he getting more? When he placed them into my basket, I noticed they were Raisin Bran.

"Here. But we're still getting the other one," Declan said, giving me a quick, affectionate kiss on the cheek.

I wanted to tease him that we could do it the other way around, get small boxes of cornflakes instead, but I didn't. He must really hate raisins.

Why couldn't I stop smiling?

"Fine," I said.

With our cereal situation settled, we continued with our shopping.

I couldn't help think about our future together. I imagined us walking through supermarkets, hand in hand, deciding on items for our home.

Even the little choices, like which brand of butter to buy or which cuts of meat to choose, made me happy.

I liked how thoughtful Declan was when picking things out for us.

Maybe we'd bicker or tease each other a little, like we did earlier. But through our choices, we'd get to know each other's preferences better.

I couldn't believe I found the idea of these future shopping trips exciting. That's a thing right? Enjoying grocery shopping with your boyfriend?

Before suggesting we go to the checkout, I looked around the store one more time.

Should we get some toilet cleaning supplies? I was going to stay at the motel for almost a week and didn't mind giving it a good scrub before I used it.

But my grumbling stomach reminded me that we hadn't had dinner yet. Ok, toilet cleaning supplies could wait.

We could always come back tomorrow. For now, food was the priority.

"Come on, let's grab something to eat. I'm starving," I said.

Declan nodded and held my hand as he led us to the prepared food section. We picked up a couple of sandwiches, salads, and drinks.

After gathering everything we needed, we made our way to the checkout and paid for our groceries.

Outside the supermarket, we spotted a couple of empty tables. We were too hungry, so we decided to eat there instead of going back to the motel.

I reached for my sandwich, started to unwrap it, but before I could get it open, Declan took it from me and opened it.

As we finished up our meal, I found myself craving something sweet.

I glanced back toward the supermarket, wondering if I should run in and grab something.

Almost as if he could read my mind, Declan reached into one of the grocery bags and pulled out a chocolate bar.

Breaking it in half, he offered me a piece.

I munched on the chocolate thoughtfully. This was nice. It wasn't the fanciest of dinners, but it felt special, almost like a first date.

I noticed Declan digging into his pocket.

"Here," he said, handing me a necklace.

I took it and held it up, examining the silver necklace with a simple pendant.

I could feel something coming off from it. Some kind of magic, maybe?

Declan explained that he had gotten it from Oliver's shop. It had some kind of protective charm that could help us in case

we faced another attack.

Touched by the gesture, I immediately put on the necklace and gently thumbed the pendant.

“About the other night...” I began to say.

I wanted to know more about what happened. Declan seemed like he knew who it was. Not the monster, but the face it was wearing.

“I’m looking into it,” Declan said immediately, but nothing else.

He fell silent. Instead, he started clearing the table, deliberately avoiding the subject.

I could tell he was struggling with something. I didn’t want to pressure him and trusted that Declan would share more when he felt ready.

For now, I found comfort in the fact that we were both safe and sound.

Chapter II

Declan

As I stood before the mirror, adjusting my shirt and running my fingers through my hair, a whirlwind of thoughts swirled in my head.

Tonight was my date with Cliff, and I felt a mix of excitement and unease.

James, my best friend, came to mind. I knew he might see my relationship with Cliff as a betrayal. I had Shane keeping an eye on things, promising to let me know if James did anything reckless.

James was still important to me, and I didn't want to throw that friendship away.

Then there was the constant worry about Cliff's safety. The creature hunting me seemed to have a thing for him, and that gnawed at my conscience.

Being with me put him in danger, and I couldn't shake the guilt.

But looking at myself in the mirror, I knew I couldn't stay away from Cliff. Our bond was too strong to deny, and we faced whatever came together.

So tonight, I resolved to talk to him about the risks we faced and how we could protect ourselves.

Tonight was important. It was our official first date. Eating together at the supermarket technically didn't count.

With a deep breath, I left my motel room and crossed the short distance to Cliff's door. My knuckles rapped against the wood,

and I waited, my nerves growing with every passing second.

What if he'd changed his mind about our date? What if something had happened to him?

My mind raced, and for a moment, I even considered breaking the door or window to get inside. The thought of the monster that hunted me crossed my mind.

What if it had somehow gotten its claws into Cliff?

Just as panic threatened to overwhelm me, I remembered the necklace with the protective spells that I had given Cliff.

He must be wearing it, so he should probably be safe. I was just being paranoid.

Finally, the door creaked open, and Cliff's apologetic face appeared.

"Hey, sorry about that. I was in the bathroom," Cliff said.

Relief washed over me, and I managed a shaky smile.

"No problem. I just...worried for a moment," I admitted.

Then I told Cliff I was debating kicking the door open or breaking his window so I could get in. Cliff's eyes widened slightly, and he reached out to take my hand.

Without hesitation, I leaned in, closing the distance between us, and stole a kiss. It was brief but filled with a promise of the night ahead, and it banished the rest of my anxiety.

As we pulled away, Cliff's said, "You know, it's good to know you'd break down the door for me."

I chuckled, the tension of the past few minutes slowly fading.

"I'd do a lot more than that to keep you safe. Shall we?"

Our date began with a casual stroll through town as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Cliff and I walked side by side, our fingers occasionally brushing against each other, sending a pleasant shiver down my spine.

We wandered through the town's streets, chatting and laughing as if we'd known each other forever. Cliff's laughter was

infectious, and his smiles made the world seem brighter.

We found a cozy cafe tucked away in a quiet spot. The scent of fresh coffee and pastries filled the air.

We chose a corner table and deliberated over what to order, our banter light and easy. Over coffee and pastries, we talked about everything.

“You know, Declan,” he began, “After moving out of the house, I’ve been thinking a lot about what I’d like to do next.”

I set my cup down and gave him my full attention. “What’s been on your mind?”

Cliff leaned forward. “It’s just... I’ve always felt like I’ve been in my brothers’ shadows. Don’t get me wrong, I love them, but I want to carve out my own path, you know?”

I nodded, understanding his desire to strike out on his own. James and Shane could be too overprotective of Cliff at times.

“I get that, Cliff. It’s important to pursue your own dreams and find your own identity. What do you have in mind?” I asked.

A small smile tugged at the corner of Cliff’s lips.

“Well, you know I work at the Wilderness Wanderer’s Camp with Cal?” Cliff asked.

I nodded. Every time Cliff came home from the camp, he always looked happy, so I knew he enjoyed working with his fellow pack mate and teaching kids wilderness skills.

“Cal’s been thinking of stepping down and focusing on his furniture business. He thinks I should take over,” Cliff said rather shyly. “I actually haven’t told anyone about this.”

I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride for him.

“That’s fantastic, Cliff. I’ll be here to support you every step of the way.”

His eyes filled with gratitude, and he reached out to touch my hand briefly.

“Thank you, Declan. Your support means the world to me,” he murmured.

As Cliff shared his plans for the Wilderness Wanderer's Camp, I felt a sense of connection and shared vulnerability.

It was only fair that I reciprocated by opening up about my past. Taking a deep breath, I decided to share a glimpse into my time in the army.

"You know, Cliff, my time in the paranormal army... it left me with scars, both physical and emotional," I said.

Cliff's gaze remained fixed on me. He reached for my hand across the table, and his touch was warm and welcomed.

"I can't even imagine what you went through," Cliff said.

"It was tough, and there were times when I thought I wouldn't make it," I admitted.

I recounted some of the missions my unit and I had been through. Cliff listened attentively, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Cliff," I began, "I need you to know that your letters... they kept me alive all these years."

I met his gaze, wanting him to understand the significance of his words on my life.

Cliff's eyes softened, and he reached out to touch my hand.

"Declan, I'm glad I could be there for you in some way," he said.

I smiled, grateful for his understanding. But I knew there was something else he needed to hear.

"There's something else, though. About that night, the creature that attacked us in the park," I ventured.

Cliff's expression grew serious as he nodded, silently urging me to continue.

I took a deep breath, the memories still haunting me.

"It was wearing the face of my friend, Parker. I think it's using Parker's corpse as some kind of vessel," I said.

Cliff's eyes widened, a mix of shock and concern crossing his features.

"That's... that's horrifying, Declan."

I nodded. "I'm still waiting for my friend Mike to send me the video of that disastrous last mission. Maybe it'll shed some light on what we're dealing with."

For a moment, a heavy silence hung between us, the weight of our conversation pressing down. I shook my head, breaking the somber mood.

"I'm sorry, Cliff. This isn't how I wanted our night to go. I wanted you to have a good time," I said.

Cliff reached out and gently touched my cheek, his eyes filled with warmth.

"Declan, there's no need to apologize. I've enjoyed every moment of tonight, and I'm glad you were honest with me."

* * *

After our heartfelt conversation, Cliff and I decided to take a leisurely walk back to the motel.

The night air was cool, and the soft murmur of the city faded into the distance as we strolled hand in hand. Finally we stood in front of my motel room.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked him.

Cliff nodded and I opened the door and turned the lights on. After locking the door behind me, we turned facing each other.

Cliff's eyes held a hint of anticipation, and I couldn't resist the urge to draw him closer.

Gently, I cupped his cheek and said, "Cliff, there's something I've been wanting to do."

He looked at me, his curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

Without hesitation, I leaned in, our lips meeting in a kiss that was all at once, possessive and rough.

As our kiss deepened, the world around us seemed to disappear, leaving just the two of us lost in the moment. Cliff's arms enveloped me, and I welcomed the closeness. I wanted more.

“Declan,” he whispered softly.

“Tell me if we’re going too fast,” I said.

“We’re not going too fast,” Cliff whispered.

I started undressing him. Cliff lifted his hands as I took off his shirt, exposing his lean torso.

He speared his fingers through my hair and I kissed him, on the mouth, the side of his neck, even his collarbone.

I smiled when he gave my shirt an insistent tug and I let him take it off. We hastily took off our pants and underwear.

Finally, we were both nude. I lowered Cliff onto the edge of the bed, straddling him.

At this point, my dick felt like a steel pipe between my legs. I closed my fingers over Cliff’s shaft and worked him until he was hard and ready.

I got off him and grabbed a condom and lube from a nearby drawer. I also made a quick trip to the bathroom and nabbed a towel, which I placed under him.

Cliff looked up at me, eyes half-lidded and trusting. A well of emotions surged through me. Some part of me still couldn’t believe that Cliff was here in my motel room, and he was mine.

I broke the condom foil, put it on, then lubed Cliff up. Once I deemed him ready, I settled his legs over my shoulders and pushed in.

Cliff groaned, gripping the sheets as I entered him, slow and steady. He felt so good and tight, I thought. In moments, I was buried deep inside him.

“You good?” I asked him.

“Yes,” Cliff admitted. “Less talking, please.”

That made me laugh. I picked up the pace and I couldn’t help but marvel how our bodies were a perfect fit.

Each time I entered him, it felt like all the cobwebs in my mind emptied until the only thing that mattered was us.

At my last push, Cliff came. I pumped in and out of him a few more times, before reaching climax.

After cleaning us both up with the towel, I curled up next to Cliff, wrapping my arms possessively around him. Cliff let out a contented sigh.

The moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a gentle glow on us, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of peace wash over me.

But there was something that had been weighing on my mind, something I needed to share with Cliff. I turned to face him, my fingers tracing absent patterns on his chest.

"Cliff," I began, my voice soft in the quiet of the night, "I have doubts."

Cliff's gaze met mine. "Doubts about what, Declan?"

I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words.

"That creature we encountered, the one that attacked us... I'm worried for your safety, Cliff," I admitted.

He reached up to cup my cheek, his touch reassuring.

"Declan, I understand your concern, but I'm not defenseless. I might not be a trained soldier, but I'm still a fox shifter. I can protect myself."

His words were like a balm to my worries, and I felt a surge of gratitude for having him by my side.

"I know you can, Cliff. It's just... there's a part of me that wonders if it's better for us to keep our distance, to keep you safe," I said.

Cliff shook his head. "I don't want that, Declan. I want to be with you. We'll face whatever comes together."

His unwavering support and the determination in his eyes left me without words. We talked all night, moving onto more mundane topics until exhaustion crept in.

I felt my eyelids grow heavy. This time, as I drifted into sleep, I didn't have the nightmares that had haunted me before.

Chapter 12

Cliff

“Anything good on TV?” Declan asked as he towel-dried his hair.

“Mmm, some kind of superhero movie,” I replied.

He had just stepped out of the shower and smelled amazing. Like, really good.

I glanced away from the TV and briefly looked at Declan. I couldn't help but admire the view.

He was bare-chested, wearing only the new pair of sweatpants he had bought the other day. They hadn't stretched out yet, so they fit snugly on his well-defined butt and thighs.

He also wore them a little low, accentuating his narrow hips. Damn. How could someone manage to look so good in sweatpants?

I mean, if I wore them, I always seemed to give off some sort of couch potato vibe. Declan, on the other hand, could just wear them anytime and everywhere.

I tried to focus on the movie again, but it was really hard, especially since Declan settled onto the sofa and stretched out, laying his head on my lap.

“Hey!” I said playfully, attempting to push him away.

But Declan remained firmly in place, grabbing my hand and gently placing it over his heart. I couldn't resist bending down to give him a quick kiss.

He turned to watch the movie while absentmindedly playing with my fingers.

This had become our nightly routine for the past few nights: a quick dinner, a movie (or whatever was playing on TV), some cuddling, and then sleep.

I loved how we had developed this comfortable routine together.

As I spent more time with Declan, I started noticing a couple of things that made him unique.

One was his strong hatred to raisins—more specifically, any type of dried fruit. He said he didn't like how shriveled they looked.

Another was his habit of tapping his fingers in a certain pattern when he was lost in thought.

I always got excited when I learned something new about him.

I mean, I've known him for years, and one would think I'd already know everything about him. Yet, there always seemed to be something else waiting to be discovered.

If someone had asked me a few months ago how I would feel if I told Declan how I felt, I would have been completely nervous.

I was afraid that things would become awkward or weird between us. However, it wasn't that way at all.

Maybe it's because we've known each other for a long time, and we were friends first.

But even so, there was just something about him, about us, that made me think we were two pieces of a whole. We seemed to fit each other perfectly.

It made me wonder why it took us so long to get together. It definitely made me think that I should have told him how I felt much earlier.

I looked down and noticed that Declan had fallen asleep. For a brief moment, I found myself mesmerized by the sight of his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Lately, I had noticed that Declan had been sleeping well, especially when he stayed over in my room.

Because on the nights when he wasn't with me, he appeared to wake up with heavy bags under his eyes in the morning.

It made me happy to see that Declan slept better when we were together, as if my presence brought him a sense of comfort and ease.

At times, he still tossed and turned during the night, and I wondered what he was dreaming about during those moments.

I knew part of it was because of what happened in the park, but I also suspected that James was on his mind.

Despite Declan's attempts to act like it didn't bother him, I could tell he was troubled by what had happened between them.

Sometimes, I could see regret in Declan's eyes when our conversations accidentally drifted back to our childhood days spent hanging out and playing with James and Shane.

I wanted them to reconcile, not just for my sake, but for Declan's too. They used to be so close, and it pained me to see their relationship strained because of us.

Declan and I still saw James when we had shifts at James' barbecue place doing deliveries, although James mostly ignored us or stayed in his office.

If I had to ask James about something, he would usually just grunt. Or, if I stared at him long enough while waiting for an answer, he'd give a one-word answer, if I was lucky. So I wasn't entirely sure if James was still angry with me.

On one hand, it seemed like he had been giving me less work lately.

On the other hand, he appeared to be piling more tasks on Declan, especially when Declan was about to clock out, adding one or two so-called last-minute deliveries.

Come to think of it, maybe James was doing that so that Declan and I would spend less time together.

Good grief, he's petty. And annoying.

However, yesterday, I did notice something when he gave Declan more 'last-minute' deliveries again.

As usual, Declan just rolled his eyes and got on with it, but there was a small smile on James' face, as if he found amusement in annoying Declan.

Seriously, James was just so petty.

But wasn't that a good sign? This was progress, right?

That took forever, though. At this rate, it would take months for them to start talking again.

Both of them were so stubborn, and neither seemed interested in making the first move. I felt like I had to do something if I wanted this to move along more quickly.

Ugh, but I don't want to.

But I knew, without a doubt, that nothing would happen if I didn't intervene. Neither of them would make the first move to patch things up.

I'll have to talk to one of them tomorrow or something. I'm not exactly thrilled about it, though.

* * *

I woke up feeling reluctant to get out of bed. Oh, I was on the bed. When did I move here?

Declan must have carried me from the sofa.

I patted the empty space beside me, but Declan wasn't there. I stretched my whole body like a cat, preparing to get out of bed, but I couldn't.

My body felt as heavy as a rock, and I just didn't seem to want to get up.

The thought of having to message my brother filled me with frustration and dread.

I didn't like the idea of playing mediator in their fight, nor did I want to get caught in the crossfire.

After all, they were both adults. Grown men. Why couldn't they resolve their issues on their own?

I heard the door lock click, and Declan entered the room, looking like he had just finished a jog.

That was another thing I had noticed about Declan; he was definitely a morning person. Like clockwork, he exercised every morning and had breakfast afterward.

I, on the other hand, preferred to sleep in whenever possible.

Usually, I have early morning shifts at the pack clinic, but for today, I asked Matt last night to swap shifts with me. I only need to come in after lunch.

Also, it was my day off at the barbecue place today. That meant I had only two things on my agenda: sending that text message and working my shift at the pack clinic.

I essentially had the whole morning to muster the motivation to send that damn text.

I realized that I, too, didn't like making the first move to reconcile after a fight. I guess I can be just as stubborn as they are.

Declan joined me in bed, wrapping his arms around me from behind and gently nuzzling my neck.

"You're sticky," I teased, feeling his lips curve into a smile. He chuckled softly, and I could sense his amusement.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"And you smell like sweat," I added with a grin.

"Mhm," Declan murmured, pulling me even closer.

I adjusted myself until my back was snug against his chest, and we lay there in comfortable silence for a few moments, our breathing in sync.

After a while, Declan reluctantly muttered that he needed to get ready for work. He went to shower, had breakfast, and then

left.

I remained in bed for a while and eventually decided to get up. I picked up my phone, stared at it for a moment, and then put it back down again. I still hadn't managed to send the message.

I procrastinated by doing some cleaning around the room, doing a load of laundry, and washing my car.

I did everything except type out the text I needed to send. I even watched a YouTube video on how to motivate myself, but in the end, I ended up watching three videos and further postponed messaging my brother.

This won't do. What the heck was wrong with me?

It's just a text, Cliff. A short text. If he doesn't answer, it's fine.

I repeated it to myself a few times and finally picked up the phone, hastily typing a message to my brother: "Can you meet me at the pack clinic later?"

Finally, that was done. I checked my watch and couldn't believe that a simple text like that really did take me the whole morning to send.

It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Although I would have gladly taken on three or even four back-to-back shifts at work rather than deal with this.

I made my way to the pack clinic to start my shift, but I couldn't shake the anxiety I was feeling.

He did send a reply—'k,' which had to be the most annoying response to a text ever. But, I still wasn't sure whether he would actually show up or what kind of mood he'd be in.

I mentally braced myself for the chance that he might nag me. He wouldn't shout or fight, I think, especially here in the pack lands. But that didn't mean I wasn't nervous.

Time dragged on at work, and I found myself distracted throughout my entire shift, making numerous small mistakes that I wouldn't typically make.

Checking my watch, I noticed there were just five minutes left in my shift. Then, I heard the unmistakable sound of a motorbike outside.

After a few moments, I spotted Shane waving at me from the window and I nodded to acknowledge him.

He looked like he was in a good mood, or at least not visibly angry. Okay, that was an encouraging sign. Better than what I expected so far.

When my shift finally came to an end, I gathered my belongings and headed outside to find Shane waiting for me on a bench.

“Thanks for coming,” I said.

“I was going to text you in a few days if this still went on,” Shane replied.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Was he really going to? I doubted it.

He was probably just saying that. But I couldn't blame him; this was mostly between James, Declan, and me.

“Why didn't you talk to James instead? Don't you see him at work?” Shane asked.

I made a face, and Shane nodded in understanding, raising both eyebrows as if to say, ‘ah.’

This wasn't the first time I had approached Shane when I had a problem with James.

James was a hothead who didn't listen and always thought he was right, so I usually asked Shane for help.

I told Shane all about my problem. I wanted Declan and James to patch things up and clear any misunderstandings between them. But I didn't know what to do since they weren't talking to each other.

Shane simply nodded and then offered some straightforward advice, “Look, you guys really just need to get into a room and talk it out. Or let them punch it out.”

“Ugh, no more fighting, please. So, will you help? Set up a family dinner or something?” I asked, giving him my best puppy dog eyes.

“Fine, but you owe me one,” Shane replied, the side of his mouth curling up into a smile as he ruffled my hair.

Chapter 13

Declan

I woke up feeling surprisingly good, with no nightmares haunting my sleep.

A smile crept onto my face as I glanced at Cliff, peacefully asleep beside me. His presence brought me comfort like nothing else.

But just as I was about to fully enjoy the morning's peace, my phone rang, jolting me out of bed.

I quietly slipped out of the motel room, not wanting to disturb Cliff's sleep.

I answered the call from my friend Mike, my heart pounding with anticipation.

"Mike, did you get the video?" I asked.

There was a brief pause before Mike replied, "Yeah, Declan. It wasn't easy, but I got it."

Relief washed over me, and I couldn't help but feel grateful.

"You're a real help, Mike," I said.

Mike's tone turned serious. "Well, don't thank me too soon. It's a tough watch, Dec."

I braced myself for what I was about to see.

"I have to see it, Mike. It's the only way to find some answers," I insisted.

Mike sighed. "Alright, I'll send it over."

I knew that watching that video would likely bring back painful memories and expose the horrors I'd been trying to forget.

But it was necessary, a step toward uncovering the truth and, hopefully, ending the nightmare that had plagued me for so long.

Returning to the room, I found Cliff awake, his eyes warm with the morning light.

He greeted me with a cheerful "Good morning."

"Morning," I answered, feeling a little numb.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, and Cliff, ever the affectionate one, wrapped his arms around me from behind, his head resting on my shoulder.

He asked in a gentle voice, "Who was on the phone, Declan?"

I leaned into his embrace, finding comfort in his presence.

"It was Mike," I replied. "He finally came through for me."

Cliff sat up beside me, concern in his eyes as he reached for my hand.

"What's wrong? You don't seem too happy about it," Cliff pointed out.

I sighed deeply. I really had to do this.

"It's just... watching that video means reliving the most awful moment of my life, Cliff. I'm not sure I'm ready for it," I admitted.

He squeezed my hand gently and moved closer.

"Declan, we're in this together now. Let's watch it together, and whatever we find, we'll tackle it as a team," Cliff reassured him.

I turned to look into his eyes, thinking I was so lucky to have him. Cliff was my safety line, my source of strength and courage.

I took a deep breath and nodded.

The room felt heavy with anticipation as I finally clicked the link in Mike's email.

Cliff and I sat side by side, the only sound in the room came from the video and our collective breaths.

I couldn't help but feel a knot of anxiety tightening in my chest.

As the video began to play, I felt like an outsider, detached from the scene unfolding on the screen, even though I knew I had been right there in the thick of it.

It was as if I were watching a nightmare that I couldn't wake up from.

Members of my former unit, all of them now dead, except for me, rushed into the building that had once been the mayor's house.

My heart lurched as the camera panned across their faces, capturing the fear and determination etched into their expressions.

I could almost hear the shouts, the orders being barked, the adrenaline coursing through their veins.

And then, the camera swept across the horrific scene.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen, even though every fiber of my being screamed to look away.

The images were gruesome, the chaos and violence unfolding before us were like a nightmare come to life.

Cliff's hand found mine. I had to close my eyes momentarily, to shut out the horrors playing out before me.

"Replay that part," Cliff's voice cut through my distress.

I reluctantly opened my eyes, turning to him with a look of uncertainty. Part of me was a little ashamed for acting like a coward.

"I'm not sure I can watch it again," I confessed, my voice heavy with the memories the video held.

Cliff gently pried my phone from my hand, his touch reassuring.

He muted the video and paused it at a specific moment, a part that I had almost missed in the chaos.

“Look,” he said, his voice tinged with excitement.

I focused on the screen, my eyes narrowing as I followed Cliff’s pointed finger.

There, behind one of the monsters, was a shadow, something I hadn’t noticed before.

“What am I supposed to see?” I asked, struggling to make sense of it.

Cliff zoomed in on the image, and as it became clearer, a sense of realization washed over me.

“It’s some kind of spirit,” I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper.

But then, as I continued to watch, I saw that a black mist wasn’t just floating near the monster; it was escaping from it. A spirit?

It was as if the monster’s body had been some kind of vessel, a host for a malevolent force that was now breaking free.

The implications of what we were witnessing were profound, and a shiver ran down my spine.

As we sat there, the weight of what we had seen in the video still heavy on our minds, I couldn’t help but think about the monster that had attacked Cliff and me in the park.

I turned to Cliff, my thoughts spilling out as I spoke, “You know, Cliff, I’ve been thinking about this...monster. It doesn’t have a physical form. It might need to possess someone else to manifest itself.”

Cliff nodded in agreement, his brow furrowed as he considered the implications.

“That’s why the monster that attacked us in the park was wearing your friend’s face, right? Parker’s corpse was probably possessed.”

I shuddered at the memory of that night, the feeling of helplessness as I faced a creature that had taken on the guise of someone I had known.

“Exactly,” I replied, my voice was a little shaky from the weight of our discovery. “It’s like these spirits or entities need a vessel to carry out their intentions, whatever they may be.”

Sitting there with Cliff, we delved deeper into the unsettling mystery that had entangled us.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that the monster, whatever it was, had a particular fixation on me.

Why, though, remained a troubling question.

“I think it’s after me because I’m the only one left,” I finally said, breaking the contemplative silence. “It wants to finish the job it started with my unit.”

Cliff, his expression a mixture of uncertainty and concern, didn’t immediately respond.

After a moment, he spoke softly, “Declan, I think we need an expert’s opinion on this. We’re in way over our heads.”

I nodded, conceding the point. The situation had grown far more complicated than we could handle on our own.

As I looked at Cliff, my eyes fell upon the silver necklace around his neck. An idea sparked in my mind.

“We should visit Oliver,” I suggested, my gaze lingering on the necklace. “He might have some insight or advice on how to deal with this.”

Cliff considered my proposal for a moment before nodding in agreement.

“You’re right. Oliver might be our best chance at understanding what we’re up against,” Cliff said.

* * *

This time, Oliver led us directly to the back of his shop. Oliver turned to us with a calm yet curious expression.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

I hesitated, grappling with the weight of my decision to involve another person in the situation. Cliff and I found ourselves in.

But Cliff, always the voice of reason and support, gently encouraged me to proceed.

With a deep breath, I warned Oliver, “The video we’re about to show you is a bit graphic, but it’s important.”

I played the video for him, watching as his face shifted from curiosity to surprise and then to a determined focus.

He quickly recovered from the initial shock, which told me he was no stranger to the supernatural.

After the video, I showed Oliver our findings and speculations, outlining our growing understanding of the malevolent force we were up against.

Oliver leaned back, his fingers steepled in thought.

“This is indeed a troubling situation,” he admitted. “I need a moment to consult some books and references. Please, wait here.”

As Oliver immersed himself in his books, I turned to Cliff, my heart burdened by a long-overdue conversation.

The urgency of our situation had forced my hand.

I took a deep breath and said, “Cliff, there’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while now.”

I paused, choosing my words carefully. “I think it’s time to make amends with James.”

Cliff’s eyes met mine, and I could sense his inner conflict. He had always been understanding, but the situation had escalated beyond our control.

“Declan,” he responded softly, “I know it won’t be easy, but I agree. James and Shane should know everything, especially in case this... thing comes after them.”

I had anticipated some resistance from Cliff. Instead, he appeared thoughtful and determined, which reassured me.

I suggested, "Maybe Shane can act as an in-between and we can all sit down for dinner to talk things through."

Cliff nodded, and I could see a glimmer of hope in his eyes. But there was one more thing I needed to make clear.

"I want you to understand," I continued, "that I'm determined to earn James' approval. It's important that he sees how serious I am about you, about us."

Cliff blushed. It was a precious moment, an unspoken exchange of feelings that left us both feeling warm inside.

Our contemplative silence was interrupted as Oliver returned, his arched eyebrow conveying curiosity.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Cliff shook his head. Oliver led us to a nearby table, where he carefully placed an ancient tome with pages filled with inscrutable script.

I leaned in, squinting at the unfamiliar writing.

Cliff gasped softly, his finger hovering over a drawing that caught his attention.

I followed his gaze and found a depiction of what appeared to be a drawing of an evil spirit, its visage twisted with anger and malevolence.

Oliver, sensing our interest, leaned in and began to enlighten us.

"What you're looking at is a Fearweaver," he explained, "or at least, that's a loose translation from ancient Sanskrit."

I leaned closer, my brow furrowing. "A Fearweaver? What is that?"

Oliver took a moment to choose his words carefully.

"A Fearweaver is a type of Jinn. It's a malicious spirit that thrives on the fear of its victims."

Cliff turned to Oliver, his eyes filled with a mixture of hope and uncertainty. “Are you sure about this, Oliver?”

Oliver shook his head slowly, a hint of reservation in his expression.

“I can’t say I’m absolutely certain, but I’ve made an educated guess based on what you’ve told me,” Oliver said.

Cliff leaned in, curiosity etched on his features. “How did you come to this conclusion?”

Oliver explained his process, his eyes focused on us both.

“I narrowed down the area where your unit was deployed and conducted research on local customs and legends there. Everything pointed to the possibility of a Fearweaver’s presence. But again, this is just a theory,” Oliver admitted.

I silently processed the information Oliver told us and decided to trust him.

“Now that we know what we’re facing, it’s time to talk to James and Shane about it. This won’t be an easy conversation,” I told Cliff.

Oliver blinked in surprise. “Wait, James and Shane don’t know about this?”

Cliff interjected, “James isn’t exactly thrilled with Declan and me right now. But we’re planning to tell my brothers soon.”

Turning back to Oliver, I asked, “Do you have anything that could help us against this Fearweaver? Any stronger protection charms, perhaps?”

Oliver pondered for a moment.

“I’ll need more time to prepare, to gather the right materials and enchantments. I’ll contact you both once I have something to offer.”

“Thank you, Oliver,” I told him. Another thought occurred to me. “The necklace you gave me before, do you have another one?”

“I do, but I’m not sure if it can protect you guys from the jinn,” Oliver admitted.

Cliff and I traded knowing looks.

“It doesn’t matter, we’ll take any protection we can get,” I said.

“Hold on a moment, I’ll get you another one,” Oliver answered.

Chapter 14

Cliff

I patted my pockets—phone, keys, wallet. Check, check, and check.

I looked at my watch again. I didn't want us to be late.

Declan had mentioned he was picking up dessert and had a few other errands to run before picking me up at the front of the motel.

We were going to have dinner with James and Shane tonight.

Running my fingers through my hair nervously, I double-checked my pockets once more and then headed to the front of the motel.

There, I saw Declan leaning against his car, checking his watch. I approached him slowly, unable to believe what I was seeing.

I looked him up and down.

“What?” he asked.

He was wearing really nice dress shoes, which looked polished. He had on a pair of jeans and a crisp polo shirt that I had never seen before.

The only thing missing was a tie and a blazer, and he looked as if he were ready for some kind of interview. I squinted my eyes, looking him up and down again.

His hair even looked like it had some product in it. Wait, did he trim his beard too?

“Why do you look like that?” I asked, my suspicion growing.

“Like what?” Declan asked innocently.

“You look... good,” I admitted.

“I always look good,” he replied with a smirk, then quickly turned and opened the car door for me. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

I stared at him for a moment as he went around to the driver’s seat. I looked down at what I was wearing and immediately felt embarrassed.

I was in a sweatshirt and sweatpants set that I had been wearing all day, along with my trusty trainers.

Suddenly, I became very aware of the hole on the tip of my shoe and the unidentified greyish stain on my pants.

There might even have been some dried oatmeal on my sweatshirt.

I wanted to tell Declan that I needed to change into something else, but he had already slid into the car and started the engine.

Casting a quick glance at the outside of the car, I noticed it looked cleaner than usual. The dust and grime that usually covered it was gone. Did he wash the car?

Declan waved at me to get my attention when he noticed I wasn’t getting in.

I entered the car and looked around. Even the interior of the car seemed different. It was like someone else’s car.

There was no litter, no random pieces of receipts on the floor, and the coffee stain on the dashboard was gone.

Even the random books and hoodie that he always had in the backseat were nowhere to be found.

Instead, there was a tie and a blazer hanging at the back of the car, along with a dessert box.

So, he really was planning to wear a blazer and tie. That seriously seemed like overkill.

I glanced at Declan, but he remained silent as he drove. I wondered about the sudden cleanliness of the car and why he

looked so dressed up.

When I tried asking him about it, he just nodded, his mind seemingly preoccupied.

It wasn't until we stopped at a traffic light that I began to put the pieces together.

Declan's kept tapping his fingers on the steering wheel in a rhythmic pattern.

Was he nervous? He got dressed up and everything, as if he wanted to make a good impression.

A warm smile spread across my face. He was too cute, and I appreciated him making an effort.

As we arrived at the house, Declan remained seated in the car for a brief moment, seemingly lost in thought.

I couldn't resist the urge to break the silence, so I gently took his arm and pulled him closer, planting a quick kiss on his cheek. I felt the tension in his body slowly melting away.

"You look great," I said.

"Do you think it's too much? Am I overdressed?" he asked, a touch of uncertainty in his voice.

"Well, my sweatpants do help balance us out," I said jokingly. "Oh, and please don't put on the jacket and tie."

He chuckled, a laugh that seemed like he had been holding it in the entire day.

Reaching out, I straightened his collar and smoothed down his shirt, taking a moment to tuck in the protective charm that had started to peek out.

The necklace looked exactly like mine. God forbid James or Shane thought it meant something else.

But on the inside, I liked the fact that our necklaces looked similar. Maybe in the future, I'll get us something matching we could both wear one day.

"Let's go," Declan said, grabbing the dessert box from the back of the car.

We approached the house, and I knocked on the door. Shane promptly opened it, giving us a nod to enter.

As we walked in, James emerged from the kitchen, and for a moment, an awkward silence hung in the air.

I moved further into the kitchen, taking in the sight of microwaved frozen vegetables and reheated takeout food neatly laid out on the small circular dining table.

Unable to contain my grin, I turned to James and teased, “You jerk.”

James responded with a broad smile, pulling me into a tight hug. “Your favorites, right?”

I playfully nudged his side, and he exaggeratedly winced before turning his attention to Declan, his expression becoming more serious.

“Hey,” Declan greeted, placing the dessert box he was holding on the table.

“Hey,” James replied, stepping closer and resting a hand on Declan’s shoulder. “Let’s dig in.”

Dinner was a little awkward at first, but after a few rounds of beer, it was as if the events of the past week had never happened.

Of course, we avoided talking about the incident at the hospital. I also purposely left out some of the details of my current living situation.

For instance, I told them about the crappy motel I had been staying at, but I didn’t need to tell James that Declan and I were practically living next door to each other.

Or waking up almost every morning next to each other. Nope, that little detail definitely didn’t have to be mentioned at all.

I also didn’t want to mention that there was something after Declan.

But since nothing has happened since that day at the park, I hoped that the monster had moved on or disappeared.

Nevertheless, my inner fox told me to stay alert because although everything seemed to be going well, I couldn't shake the feeling that the other shoe would drop soon.

That made me somewhat nervous.

As if sensing my unease, Declan reached for my hand under the table and held it reassuringly.

No, I was probably just overthinking things again.

By the time we were having dessert, we were already making jokes and reminiscing about the old times.

Occasionally, I'd catch James glancing between me and Declan. It was obvious that James was still processing what was going on between us, but he didn't say anything about it.

I could tell that James had questions he wanted to ask, but for the time being, he was holding back.

I was just grateful that we had all made amends, or at least taken the first step toward it. We could work things out along the way.

For now, it seemed like everyone wanted to put the recent events behind us and enjoy the evening catching up properly.

"Hey, let's take our drinks outside," Shane suggested.

Even though I had already downed a few beers during dinner, I didn't mind the idea.

James grabbed Declan by the shoulder, and they headed out the door first, with me following closely behind.

As we stepped out, a refreshing cool breeze brushed against my face. I wished every night would be like this.

I noticed James pulling Declan aside. James looked a little drunk, swaying slightly as he spoke.

"... Hey, I'm fine with all of this," James stated, pointing between me and Declan, "but we still need to have a little talk."

James's tone was dead serious, but he must've accidentally stepped on something, causing him to stumble slightly, which

somewhat lessened the weight of his words.

“Of course, anytime,” Declan replied with a nod, giving James a pat on the back.

I took a seat on a nearby bench, and soon felt someone sitting down beside me. It must be Shane.

He leaned against me, feeling heavier than I had expected. He must have drunk more than I thought.

I caught a faint whiff of rot and wondered if something had died under the house. At least the wind blew the smell away quickly, I thought.

I made a mental note to call an exterminator to check it out.

A pang of worry crossed my mind as I wondered how James had been holding up while I was gone.

But the house looked fine. It looked cleaner than I had expected. And James seemed to be doing okay, too.

I realized I had been worried for no reason at all.

My gaze shifted to James and Declan, who were sharing a laugh over some joke, and I couldn't help but feel relieved that they had made up.

Suddenly, I heard the kitchen door behind me open, followed by the sound of breaking glass. I turned to see Shane by the backdoor, looking at me.

Wait, Shane?

Broken beer bottles were scattered at his feet, and his eyes were wide with surprise. No, he wasn't looking at me. His gaze fixed on something next to me.

I suddenly became acutely aware of the presence beside me on the bench, feeling a hot breath on my neck.

The air around us grew still, and a pungent, overwhelming scent of blood, earth, and rot filled my nostrils.

My heart pounded loudly in my chest, the sound ringing in my ears.

I couldn't bring myself to turn around and look at what was beside me, even though I already knew what it was.

James and Declan were no longer laughing and had fallen silent. All eyes were fixed on the presence beside me.

The atmosphere became suffocatingly quiet, with only its ragged breathing echoing in the yard.

In an instant, Declan was by my side, pulling me close to him and away from the bench.

The creature stood up and put both its hands up, wearing a wide smile that stretched from ear to ear.

“Oh, am I interrupting this little family reunion?”

Chapter 15

Declan

The sound of breaking glass jolted my mind back to reality, my senses were instantly on high alert.

Fear mirrored in Cliff's wide eyes, and my heart raced as I followed his gaze to Parker, grinning maniacally at all of us.

Paralysis gripped me momentarily as memories of my last mission threatened to swamp my mind.

But I knew, we both knew, what this creature thrived on—fear. I had to block it out, think of Cliff, James, Shane. My family.

With a sharp tug, I yanked Cliff to my side, trying to shield him from Parker.

James, his gaze locked on the monster, seemed incapable of words or movement.

“James, get away from it!” I shouted.

I knew James had a bit too much to drink that evening, impairing his reaction time. However, despite his efforts, James reacted too late.

In a horrifying blur, the creature lunged at him with its inhuman teeth, and I caught sight of its grotesque claws and fangs.

My shout of warning echoed through the yard as James was taken down, and I could only watch in sheer terror and helplessness as the nightmare unfolded before us.

My mind raced, trying to process what was happening before me.

Cliff and I were both wearing the protective necklaces, so it stood to reason that this monstrous version of Parker would target James and Shane next.

Amid the chaos, a low growl reached my ears, and I turned my head to see Shane transforming into his fox form.

His clothes fell to the ground, and with an innate agility, he bounded toward Parker, teeth bared, fury in his eyes.

“Shane, stop!” Cliff’s voice cut through the tense air, his own panic evident. “We don’t even know if we can hurt it.”

But Shane didn’t heed his warning, driven by a mix of courage and anger, his instincts as a fox shifter overriding his fear.

The sight of him rushing into the fray, a brave but reckless act, left me torn between wanting to protect Cliff and joining in the fight.

James quickly recovered from his initial shock. Both Shane and James fought off Parker like a well-coordinated team.

“Protect Cliff!” James shouted, throwing a look at me.

I nodded, my gaze never leaving the dangerous battle.

The creature, its eyes filled with malevolent intent, lunged at James, who barely managed to sidestep the attack.

In his hands, James wielded a broken lawn chair leg, a makeshift weapon, swinging it with all his might.

Shane, in his swift fox form, darted around the monster, his teeth bared, making quick, calculated strikes.

The creature hissed and recoiled, its grotesque claws slashing through the air.

I turned to Cliff, who stood beside me, his eyes wide with fear.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him behind a sturdy wooden table, creating a makeshift barricade between us and the chaos.

“Stay low and quiet,” I whispered urgently to him, my heart pounding in my chest.

It didn’t sit well with me that Cliff and I were hiding.

Then I pictured Cliff lying injured on the clinic bed and gritted my teeth. I didn't want him to get hurt again.

Parker was my problem to deal with.

Cliff turned to me, his eyes blazed with determination. I had a feeling I wasn't going to like that he would say next.

"I can't just stand here, Dec," he said. "I have to help them."

I could see it in his eyes—nothing could change Cliff's mind. His love for his family and his innate courage drove him to take action.

I hesitated for a moment, torn between keeping Cliff safe and respecting his decision.

But in that crucial moment, I knew what had to be done. I reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"Okay, Cliff," I said, meeting his gaze. "We'll fight together. Maybe we can overwhelm the monster with numbers."

We left our makeshift barricade behind and joined James and Shane in the heat of the battle.

Adrenaline surged through my veins as we confronted the jinn.

The air crackled with tension as we closed in the enemy. James, fought viciously, swinging his makeshift weapon with deadly precision.

Shane, in his fox form, darted in and out, delivering swift strikes, his speed unmatched.

My fists clenched as I unleashed a flurry of punches, my training from the paranormal army coming into play. Cliff too, shifted to his fox form.

The yard was filled with the sounds of struggle, grunts, hisses, and clattering outdoor furniture.

The battle was intense, every moment teetering on a knife's edge.

The monster fought back with relentless ferocity, its face shifting and contorting unnaturally.

With the combined efforts of the four of us, we managed to drive the creature to the very edge of the yard.

It was a hard-fought battle, and exhaustion clung to us like a heavy shroud.

“How do we finish it?” James asked, his voice tense with anticipation.

I shook my head, admitting, “I don’t know.”

Frustration gnawed at me because I had no clear answer. The uncertainty weighed heavily on all of us.

The creature, sensing an opportunity, made a supernatural leap over the garden gate and disappeared into the darkness.

Tension hung in the air as we watched, waiting for any sign of its return. But nothing happened. For now, it was over.

As I surveyed the aftermath of the battle, a painful pang gripped my heart.

I knew I was responsible for involving Cliff, James, and Shane in this dangerous mess.

Guilt gnawed at me as I realized the risks they had taken to stand by my side.

Cliff, ever quick to recover, was the first to spring into action.

He rushed over to James, who was leaning heavily against the remnants of a broken table, blood seeping from his wounds.

Shane, too, bore the marks of the brutal confrontation, his injuries evident.

I fumbled for my phone, my hands shaking as I dialed Owen’s number once more.

The phone rang, and my heart raced as I waited for Owen to answer. When he did, there was an edge of concern in his voice.

“I hope you’re not calling to tell me Cliff got hurt again,” Owen said, his tone tinged with worry.

My heart ached, filled with guilt as I replied, “It’s James and Shane. They need medical attention.”

There was a heavy silence on the other end of the line as Owen processed the gravity of the situation.

Finally, he spoke, "I'll be right there."

* * *

The drive to the pack clinic was eerily quiet.

"Grab James, be careful with him," Owen said sternly, while he carried Shane out of his cruiser.

Cliff trailed behind us, his face now drained of color, still in shock from the night's events.

As we entered the clinic, Owen's harsh demeanor seemed to intensify.

He barked at me to get James to a bed, and I did so, my heart heavy with worry.

It was clear that James had lost a significant amount of blood, and the sight of him unconscious sent a chill down my spine.

I stepped back, giving the skilled healer the space to work his magic.

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. How had everything gone so horribly wrong this evening?

Cliff and I had only wanted a pleasant dinner with James and Shane.

I had hoped to use the opportunity to show James how serious I was about winning Cliff's heart.

But the malevolent jinn had ruthlessly shattered our plans and left us with chaos and fear.

"You should leave. We take care of our own," Owen said, his tone cold and unforgiving.

Owen's words stung like a slap to the face. Cliff, standing beside me, grew visibly angry.

"Why are you treating Declan like this?" Cliff demanded, his voice laced with frustration and confusion.

I couldn't help but hold Cliff from behind, seeking comfort in his presence.

He leaned back against me, understanding my need for support.

"It's okay," I whispered to Cliff. "Your lead alpha has every right to be angry. This is all my fault."

Owen's gaze remained angry and he reiterated that I had a lot of explaining to do. Cliff interjected, defending me by insisting it wasn't my fault.

Their words passed over me like water. Maybe I was still in shock myself.

Sensing that an argument was on the verge of erupting, I kissed Cliff's cheek gently and told him, "I'll step back for now. I'll check on James and Shane later."

Cliff searched my eyes, his concern evident.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded, a heavy sense of guilt and regret settling in my chest. I turned and left the clinic.

The walk from the pack compound back to the motel felt like an eternity, but it had given me the opportunity to gather my thoughts.

If I had never accepted James' invitation to stay in Fox Haven, none of this would have happened.

If I had continued traveling on my own, that monster would have hunted me down but left Cliff, James, and Shane alone.

I arrived in my motel room, physically and emotionally drained. I let out a bitter laugh, realizing that feeling sorry for myself wouldn't help anyone.

I couldn't have imagined staying away from Cliff. Besides, time only moved forward, and there was no way to turn it back.

I didn't know how long I had been sitting on my bed, lost in thought, but then the door to my room opened, and there stood Cliff.

He looked just as tired as I had felt. Cliff didn't say a word; he simply sat down next to me.

Cliff's fingers brushed tentatively over mine, and I held onto them tightly, finding solace in his presence.

It was in that moment that I made a decision.

"Cliff," I began, taking a deep breath. I considered my next words with care, before continuing, "I've caused enough damage to you and your family. This is my mess, and I need to deal with it alone."

Unable to face Cliff any longer, I left the motel room.

"Where are you going?" Cliff demanded, but I didn't answer him and kept walking. This was all too much for me to handle.

Chapter 16

Cliff

It had been three days since Declan started avoiding me. When he walked out that night, I waited up for him, calling him and leaving messages, but he never responded.

He didn't even come back the next morning.

Yesterday, I even woke up early at 5 a.m., thinking I might catch him on his morning run, but he wasn't at his usual jogging spot.

At first, I felt hurt and sad, wondering why he left just like that. We didn't even get to talk things through.

Then I grew worried—what if something had happened to him? What if he was hurt and alone somewhere?

But this morning, I saw him drive off in his truck, and all my concern turned into frustration and annoyance.

The last message I sent him was a simple “Are you alright?” with no reply. How hard was it to respond to a simple text? Even a one-worded answer would do.

I absentmindedly tapped my phone again to check for new notifications, hoping there was a text I hadn't seen. Still nothing.

The uncertainty and Declan's silence were driving me crazy, making it hard to focus on anything else.

“You didn't have to come in, you know, with your brothers still here and all,” Matt said, passing me a cup of coffee.

“It’s okay. I’d go crazy if I stayed home alone,” I replied, nodding my thanks.

I rushed here after receiving a call from the clinic saying James had finally woken up. But it wasn’t visiting hours yet, so I had to wait around for a couple of hours before I could see him.

I didn’t want to just hang around the motel, so I decided to spend my time at the pack clinic instead. Matt had been accompanying me at the reception desk for hours.

I sipped the coffee, which was more like bitter brown water, and coughed as it burned my throat.

Strangely, I found myself appreciating it, given my mood. I felt guilty too, as if I didn’t deserve good coffee.

I couldn’t blame everything on Declan, knowing deep down why he had walked out. I was just frustrated that we couldn’t talk it out before he left.

I took another sip and winced at the bitterness. I noticed Matt looking at me with pity on his face.

“I think the doctor just finished his rounds; you can see them anytime you want.”

With a nod, I rose from behind the reception desk and walked to the room where my brothers were.

Stopping at the door, hand on the handle, I hesitated to go in. The doctor had mentioned that Shane had only minor cuts and bruises, but James had it much worse.

The healer had to work on him more than once due to the amount of blood he lost.

The attack had blindsided us. It was as if the monster had waited until we let our guard down.

What disturbed me the most was that we still knew so little about it and why it had targeted us in our own home.

Declan and I had been staying at the motel for almost a week already, and it hadn’t attacked us there. So, why did it attack us last night?

This unpredictability made the situation even more unsettling. Now more than ever, we had to be on our toes, and we had to stick together.

If only Declan would answer his phone.

Taking a deep breath, I finally turned the doorknob. Shane was awake, using his phone, while James was sleeping.

James looked pale, but there was some color returning to his face compared to a few days ago.

“How is he?” I asked Shane as I took a seat next to James’s bed.

“He’s doing much better. They said it’s best to let him sleep for now,” Shane explained.

I nodded, not saying anything more. Shane must have noticed that I had a lot on my mind.

“How’s Declan?” Shane asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied, frustration starting to bubble up.

I began to explain my concerns to Shane. I vented about how Declan hadn’t been responding to any of my messages or calls, and how he’d been avoiding me.

Eventually, I even found myself ranting about trivial matters, like how messy Declan’s motel room was. Shane merely chuckled.

In the end, I knew that everything I was feeling right now was because of my fear of losing Declan after everything we’d been through, especially now that we were finally together.

Shane gave it some thought, staying quiet for a moment.

“Sometimes,” he eventually said, “people just need to hear the right words to come back.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“James might be his best friend, but you understand Declan better than anyone,” Shane explained. “You and Declan have a bond that’s stronger than you think.”

I looked at my brother, surprised. Honestly, I had expected him to tease me or make a joke.

I nodded, taking in his words. Deep down, I had always known that I could find the words to reach Declan. I just needed to make sure he heard me.

“I need to make a call,” I told Shane as I got up from my seat.

Shane shooed me away, lying back down on his pillow.

Before leaving the room, I turned around and said, “Thanks, Shane. I owe you one.”

He grinned and replied, “Next time you ask me for relationship advice, don’t. Now, go.”

I headed outside and sat on the bench outside the pack clinic, gazing up at the sunrise.

Suddenly, a memory rushed back to me—a scene from our childhood days by a riverbank on a morning much like this one.

It played in my mind like an old film, taking me back to those carefree days.

It was a warm summer day, and the four of us had decided to spend the morning by the riverbank. Shane and James were in the river, splashing around.

Declan and I sat on a wooden log nearby.

Declan had a distant look in his eyes, as if something had been bothering him all morning, his gaze fixed on the rippling river.

“I don’t want to go back home,” he had said, his voice filled with longing. “Sometimes I wish I could just stay with you guys instead.”

I knew Declan had some problems at home, but I didn’t really understand what they were at that time. He wasn’t the type to openly share his family problems either.

But none of that mattered.

I scooted closer to Declan, our shoulders touching, and spoke in a soft, reassuring tone. “You don’t have to go back home if you don’t want to. You can always stay here with us. You’re practically family.”

Now, feeling like I knew what to say, I looked for Declan’s number on my phone once again. I didn’t want to send a text message; I knew he needed to hear my voice. So, I left a voice message:

“Declan, please come back. Don’t try to handle everything on your own. You have us; we’re your family, and we always have been. I’ll be at the pack clinic all day. I’ll be waiting for you here.”

In less than half an hour, I heard someone calling my name. “Cliff?”

I looked up, and there was Declan. Tears welled up in my eyes.

“I didn’t know if I could come here. Your lead alpha...” Declan began to explain.

Before he could continue, I pulled him into a tight hug, inhaling his scent, a deep sense of relief washing over me.

“Declan,” I began, my voice wavering slightly, “we need to talk about what happened. I can’t stand seeing you shut me out like this.”

Declan’s eyes met mine, and he muttered, “I just thought... I thought I was protecting you. I never wanted to bring danger to your family.”

“You don’t have to do this alone, Declan. We’re in this together, always have been,” I assured him.

Declan’s shoulders slumped, and he looked down, unable to meet my gaze.

“I know, but I can’t help feeling responsible for what happened,” Declan said.

I moved even closer to Declan, my voice determined.

“Declan, listen to me. Blaming yourself won’t change anything. But shutting me out? That hurts more than anything,” I said.

Declan finally looked up, his eyes filled with vulnerability.

“I was scared, Cliff. Scared that you’d get hurt because of me,” Declan admitted.

I took Declan’s face in my hands, making sure he held eye contact with me.

“I’d rather be hurt together with you than be apart and in pain. We’ve already faced so much together, and we can overcome this too. But we have to do it together.”

Declan nodded slowly. “You’re right, Cliff. I can’t keep pushing you away. You mean too much to me,” he said.

I smiled and wrapped my arms around him again.

“Don’t leave me again, ok?”

“I promise,” Declan said.

He removed the dog tags from around his neck and placed them gently around mine.

I glanced at the dog tags, feeling a rush of emotion as I held them tightly in my hand.

“Do you want to come inside?” I asked. “I think there’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

“I’ll talk to James tomorrow,” Declan said and I agreed.

Chapter 17

Declan

After Cliff and I managed to talk things out, I decided to pay a visit to the pack clinic to see James and Shane.

The next day, James and I were playing a quiet game of poker while Shane snored away in the background.

The cards were in my favor, and I had a decent hand. But I also didn't want to wake up Shane with our hushed banter.

James, however, seemed to have a fantastic hand, a royal flush.

He laid his cards on the makeshift table, and a small smirk played at the corner of his lips.

"Looks like Lady Luck is on my side tonight," he whispered.

I couldn't help but snort at his comment. James gave me a sly, suspicious look.

"You're not letting me win, are you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes in mock accusation.

I chuckled softly, shaking my head.

"Nah, you've just got all the luck today, my friend," I replied, playing along.

Sitting there, trying to focus on the game, my mind kept drifting to more worrying thoughts.

James had been making progress in accepting my relationship with Cliff, but that recent monster attack had put us on shaky ground again.

I couldn't blame him for feeling a bit uneasy.

I was doing my best to act like everything was normal, but deep down, I knew I wasn't fooling anyone.

As James carefully held onto the cards, I felt his eyes on me.

It was an intense look, like he could see right through my attempts to hide my true feelings.

I met his gaze, and the tension between us was palpable.

James deserved more than my façade, and I knew it was time for an honest conversation.

"I think it's time you tell me everything. Start from the beginning," James said, his voice firm.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding as I began recounting my last mission.

It was painful to recall the worst moment of my life, the horrors I had witnessed, and the guilt that had plagued me ever since.

But James deserved to know the truth, no matter how difficult it was for me to talk about it.

As I spoke, emotions welled up inside me, and I felt tears stinging my eyes. My voice quivered, and I had to pause a few times to regain my composure.

It was a struggle to draw each breath into my lungs, but I forced myself to continue.

When I finally finished, James let out a curse under his breath.

"I know you told me parts of this story before, Declan, but that's the first time I've heard the full extent of it," Shane remarked from his cot.

James turned to Shane, his expression a mix of disbelief and hurt.

"You knew about this jinn and didn't tell me?" James asked, his voice tight with emotion.

I quickly interjected, not wanting Shane to shoulder the blame.

“James, it’s not Shane’s fault,” I said earnestly. “I bumped into him while visiting Cliff at the clinic. It wasn’t his secret to share.”

Guilt hit me twice as hard in the chest. I had the urge to explain myself, to make James understand why I hadn’t confided in him earlier.

But at that moment, I simply waited for his response, feeling the weight of my past decisions bearing down on me.

“You shouldn’t have dragged Cliff into this,” James said, his voice chillingly stern.

The harshness of his tone caught me off guard, but I could see that he was simply being protective of his family.

Shane chimed in, trying to mediate the situation, “James, let him explain. We need to understand what we’re dealing with.”

James pursed his lips, still visibly upset, but he nodded reluctantly. It was my chance to clarify everything.

“I didn’t think that thing would follow me back home,” I began. “Believe me, James, if I had known, I wouldn’t have come to Fox Haven and endangered Cliff, you, and Shane.”

I could see the turmoil in James’ eyes as he processed my words.

“If you did that, you would be dead by now,” James said flatly. “No one wants that.”

I nodded in agreement. “Exactly, and I haven’t been idle. Cliff and I visited Oliver the other day to find out more.”

I explained to James and Shane what we were facing, a Fearweaver, a variant of a jinn.

“Oliver is looking through some of his books to assist us. I did some research online, but I only hit dead ends,” I said grimly.

I then pulled out my necklace, the one Cliff and I had.

“Let me guess, there’s some kind of protective spell on that?” James asked.

“Oliver wasn’t sure it would work against the jinn,” I admitted. “But only Shane and you were attacked last night.”

“So it’s effective,” Shane mused out loud.

“Cliff and I will contact Oliver again, see if he has any extras,” I told them.

James shot me a sharp look and asked, “Where exactly is Cliff?”

Shane, always quick with a jest, chimed in with a playful tone, “Don’t tell me you left him back at the motel, Dec.”

Before I could respond, someone cleared their throat, and there was Cliff, joining us.

He had that irresistible smile on his face, the one that could melt my heart in an instant.

Cliff explained that he had waited outside politely, giving me the chance to talk to his brothers privately.

A pang of longing for Cliff hit me, even though he had been waiting just outside. I missed him, his closeness, his warmth.

For a brief moment, I was tempted to close the distance between us and kiss him right there, to feel his lips against mine again.

But I knew that might be a bit too much for James, considering everything that had happened.

Cliff walked up to me, and I could feel the magnetic pull between us, drawing me closer.

My desire to kiss him grew stronger, but I resisted the urge, aware of James’s watchful eyes.

James let out a sigh and said with a resigned smile, “I guess I’ll need to get used to this.”

“Get used to it soon,” I told my friend. Cliff only laughed.

* * *

I was walking to Oliver's store while talking to Cliff on the phone.

"Are you sure you'll be fine on your own?" Cliff asked, the concern in his voice evident.

A warm feeling spread through me at his worry.

"I'll be perfectly fine," I assured him.

Three days had passed since I visited James and Shane at the pack clinic.

In truth, I was secretly relieved that Cliff had decided to stay with his brothers and hadn't come with me.

There was no real danger, after all. I was just going shopping but still, it reassured me to know Cliff was safe.

When I had called Oliver the night before, I was glad to hear that he had extra necklaces available.

He had seemed surprised when I told him about the effectiveness of the protection charms.

I was eager to get my hands on the additional necklaces. That would guarantee James and Shane's safety.

"I'll call you again once I'm done," I told Cliff as we wrapped up the call.

As I got closer to Oliver's store, I couldn't help but notice that the "Closed" sign hung in the window.

That was strange; Oliver was expecting me, and he wouldn't close up shop just like that. Checking my watch, I realized I was right on time.

I was about to text Oliver when a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach told me something wasn't right.

My hand hesitated above my phone as I glanced around the quaint, quiet street. There were no signs of any disturbance or commotion.

Frowning, I walked up to the front door of the store and reached out to grasp the handle. What met my touch shocked me.

The handle was loose, and it jiggled effortlessly. Fear gripped me as I realized someone had broken the lock.

My heart raced, and I knew I had to be cautious.

I took a deep breath, pushed the door open slowly, and stepped inside, my senses on high alert.

The dimly lit interior seemed undisturbed, but the fact that someone had broken in raised a series of alarms in my mind.

The bell above the door rang softly as I entered, my footsteps echoing slightly in the stillness.

“Oliver?” I called out cautiously, hoping for a response, but met with silence.

My eyes scanned the shelves and counters, filled with gaudy souvenirs and T-shirts. It all seemed eerily untouched.

I continued deeper into the shop, my hand reaching instinctively for the necklace I wore under my shirt, feeling the reassuring presence of its protection charm.

My every sense was alert, searching for any sign of Oliver or any potential threat.

I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to him.

Was Oliver taken? Or had he left in a hurry? Whatever it was, I needed to find out and make sure he was safe.

My heart raced. The tension was unbearable, and I desperately hoped to find Oliver unharmed.

Finally, his raspy voice answered me, coming from the back of the shop.

“Declan, in the back.”

I wasted no time, my fear pushing me forward, propelling me toward the source of that weak voice.

Each step felt like an eternity, and the dim lighting seemed to conspire with the silence to intensify my dread.

What had happened here?

When I reached the back room, my worst fears were confirmed. Oliver lay on the floor, surrounded by a pool of his

own blood.

My heart dropped, and for a moment, I felt like I was reliving a nightmare from my past, standing among the lifeless bodies of my fallen comrades.

But Oliver's voice broke through the fog of my traumatic memories. With a sharp intake of breath, I snapped back to the present.

I needed to focus on the task at hand, not let my past haunt me.

I knelt beside Oliver, my hands trembling as I assessed his injuries. The scene was grim, but I couldn't afford to lose my composure now.

I could see that he was alive, but he was in bad shape.

"Oliver, hang in there," I whispered, trying to reassure both him and myself. "I'm here now. Let me see what I can do."

Gently, I began to examine his wounds, trying to assess the extent of the damage.

My mind raced, already forming a plan to get Oliver the help he needed.

But as I worked, my thoughts also turned to the question that now loomed over us: did the jinn come for him, and why?

With shaky hands, I reached for my phone and dialed 911.

I knew that Oliver needed immediate medical attention, and I couldn't afford to waste any time.

As I spoke to the operator, giving them our location and describing Oliver's condition as best as I could, my mind was already racing ahead to the next call I needed to make.

My first instinct was to dial Cliff's number.

After all, he was the one who had insisted that I call him once I was done at Oliver's shop. But something held me back.

I couldn't bear the thought of involving Cliff in yet another dangerous situation.

If the jinn had attacked Oliver and was still lurking around, Cliff might be in danger too. I needed to handle this on my

own if I could.

Instead, I dialed James' number. My best friend had a level head and was more than capable of handling himself in any situation.

I knew he would help. Besides, he deserved to know what was happening, especially since Oliver was his friend as well.

James picked up after a few rings, and I wasted no time explaining the situation.

His voice was tight as he listened, and he didn't say much during my explanation. But he agreed to come right away.

I knew James was concerned, even if he didn't show it.

As I ended the call, a mixture of relief and anxiety washed over me. Help was on the way, and James would be here soon.

While I waited for the ambulance's wailing siren to pierce the night and for James to arrive, I couldn't help but feel helpless as Oliver clung to my hand.

His grip was surprisingly strong, given his condition, and it reassured me that he was still conscious and fighting.

"Are you ok? Do you need anything?" I asked.

Oliver's breaths were shallow, and he struggled to speak. But he pointed weakly toward a table stacked high with books and parchments.

His eyes urged me to look there.

I hesitated, not wanting to leave his side, but I realized that whatever Oliver was trying to convey could be crucial.

With a final reassuring squeeze of his hand, I reluctantly let go and moved to the table.

The sight of the books and the two necklaces sent a pang through my heart. Oliver must have delved deep into his research on the jinn.

My eyes were drawn to the open tome on the table. It was a large, ancient-looking book with intricate symbols and text that I couldn't decipher.

Frustration welled up in me, knowing that the answers I needed might be right in front of me but locked away in a language I couldn't understand.

Just as I was about to admit my defeat to Oliver, I noticed something beneath the book, a scrap of paper with hastily written text.

It looked like a translation, an attempt by Oliver to make the ancient knowledge more accessible.

I quickly picked up the paper and read the translation, heart racing.

I stared at the scrap of paper in my trembling hands, my mind racing to process the single cryptic line it held: "The Fearweaver hunts with its mate by its side. The box might work?"

The word "mate" was underlined twice, as if to emphasize its significance.

As the implications of those words sunk in, my heart raced with a mixture of dread and understanding.

So far, only the same jinn had attacked Cliff, James, Shane, and now Oliver. Where was the creature's mate? Was it still out there or perhaps...

Before I could fully process this revelation, I heard approaching footsteps.

My heart leaped with a mix of relief and tension, hoping it was help arriving.

I turned to see James, his usually warm and friendly face contorted with anger and concern as he took in the injured form of Oliver.

His gaze landed on me, and his expression was hard to read.

"He's hurt bad, and you're over there reading a piece of paper," James interjected, his voice dripping with frustration and rage.

I opened my mouth to explain, to tell James about the vital clue I had discovered, but the words got caught in my throat.

Before I could utter a sound, the paramedics arrived, their urgent, no-nonsense demeanor snapping me back to reality.

Desperation welled up within me as I turned to James, a plea in my eyes.

“What can I do to help?” I asked, hoping to make amends in some way.

But James’s response was cold, his voice devoid of its usual warmth.

“You’ve done enough,” James said bitterly, his gaze never leaving me. “Declan, why is it you hurt everyone near you? First Cliff, then Oliver?”

His words struck me like a punch to the gut.

I wanted to explain, to make James understand that I never intended for any of this to happen. I couldn’t say a single word.

As the paramedics continued to work urgently around Oliver, one of them finally spoke up.

His voice was calm but firm, and he addressed us with a sense of authority that left no room for argument.

“Only one person can ride with us in the ambulance,” he stated, his eyes shifting between me and James.

Without hesitation, James stepped forward, his decision made.

James looked back at me briefly, his expression a mix of worry and frustration, as if he still couldn’t fathom the mess we found ourselves in.

But duty called, and he knew he had to go with Oliver to ensure he received the medical attention he needed.

Feeling a deep sense of helplessness and guilt, I watched as they loaded Oliver onto the stretcher and into the ambulance.

The vehicle’s doors closed with a decisive thud, and the ambulance pulled away, sirens wailing in the distance, carrying my best friend and the injured mage who tried to help me.

As the ambulance vanished from sight, I remained standing there, clutching the piece of paper tightly in my hand.

The guilt was eating away at me as I stood alone, surrounded by the chaos of the evening.

James' harsh words still rang in my ears, cutting deep with their painful truth.

I had dragged my loved ones into this mess, and now they were paying the price.

If James, Shane and Cliff weren't fox shifters and could heal faster than humans...they probably would be dead by now.

Oliver was a mage, but mages didn't possess the regenerative abilities shifters did. There was a possibility he wouldn't survive this attack.

The temptation to call Cliff was strong. I longed for his comforting voice, his reassuring presence.

But James' words gnawed at me. Had I already put Cliff in too much danger?

Perhaps it was time for me to face this jinn alone, to prevent further harm to those I cared about.

I made a decision. I would confront this jinn on my own.

Sensing someone was watching me, I glanced up. My heart hammered in my chest as I scanned the familiar park across the street from Oliver's store.

There, between the shadowed trees, I saw a ghastly sight that made my blood run cold.

Parker's face, or what remained of it, leered at me from the darkness. The once-familiar features now contorted into a grotesque, inhuman visage.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the horrifying sight. It was as if the jinn had twisted my friend's corpse into a macabre puppet.

The creature crooked a finger towards me, beckoning me to come forward. The jinn's creepy invitation shook me to the core but I was also angry.

It was clear it wanted to play a dangerous game, and despite knowing the risk, I found myself drawn to follow it deeper into the park.

Every step felt heavy with guilt for the harm I'd brought to my loved ones, but I couldn't back down now.

With each move I made, I knew it was likely a trap, a way for the jinn to exploit my weaknesses.

But I couldn't let this malevolent spirit tear my family apart.

My fear pushed me forward, my mind filled with images of Cliff, James, Shane, and Oliver, reminding me of the responsibility I had to protect them.

As I chased the jinn through the park, my thoughts raced like a whirlwind.

The faces of my former unit members haunted me, their restless souls weighing heavy on my conscience.

If I could rid the world of this malevolent jinn, perhaps their spirits could finally find peace.

But the daunting reality was that I had no idea how to defeat this supernatural creature.

It was something otherworldly, a spirit. I doubt normal weapons would be able to hurt it.

Still, I couldn't afford to slow down or hesitate. Dread filled my insides, but I had made up my mind. I sent Cliff a quick text.

This had to end now.

Chapter 18

Cliff

James called me in a panic just now, saying he was in an ambulance. He tried to explain what had happened but couldn't provide all the details.

He found Declan and Oliver in the magic shop, and while he said Oliver was injured, he didn't specify the extent of his injuries.

I rushed to the hospital, providing Oliver's name at the reception to locate his room.

Why does this keep happening? I was so tired of hospitals at this point.

When I found Oliver, he was getting stitched up. He gave me a weak smile and a thumbs-up.

He seemed okay, though visibly pale. I couldn't help but dread what might have happened if he hadn't been brought to the hospital in time.

Anxiety crept in as I realized Declan was missing. I scanned the room, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, where's Declan?" I asked James, who didn't respond.

He looked visibly annoyed.

Turning to the nurse, James asked her about Oliver's condition without answering my question.

Their conversation revealed that Oliver's injuries were relatively minor. The cuts were superficial and hadn't reached any vital organs.

Tension hung heavy in the room as James's frustration became increasingly apparent. He ran a hand through his hair and let out a frustrated sigh.

It was then that I noticed bloodstains on James's shirt, near his abdomen.

"Wait, are you okay?" I asked, concerned.

"Crap, my stitches must've ripped," James said as he touched the area, causing blood to spread on his shirt.

"James, where's Declan?" I pressed again, but he continued to ignore the question.

"I have to get back to the pack clinic," James said as he started to leave, but then he stopped and fixed his gaze on me. "You stay here with him. I'm coming back as soon as I get stitched up again."

Annoyed and anxious, I grabbed his arm and shouted, demanding answers. "You said Declan was at the shop. Why isn't he here? Where is he?"

"I don't know. He's probably fine," James replied, brushing away my hand, leaving me shocked and speechless.

How could he say something so thoughtless in this situation?

"Don't you see? Everyone's getting hurt except him," James added bitterly, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

I let go of his arm and had to think quickly. It was clear that Oliver had been attacked by the jinn.

What if the jinn was still there? What if he had also attacked Declan?

I crossed my arms over my chest, trembling with worry. I must have looked genuinely scared because James's expression softened.

"Look, I'll check in on him later. Just promise to stay here with Oliver, okay?" he said.

He patted my shoulder but gripped it tight, looking at me pointedly, as if making sure I wouldn't do anything rash.

He nodded goodbye to Oliver and left the room. Once he was gone, Oliver grabbed my hand and pulled me closer, sitting up despite the evident pain in his side.

“Cliff, I need to tell you something quickly,” Oliver said urgently, reaching for a key hung around his neck and pressing it into my hand.

* * *

I drove to the magic shop as fast as I could, the empty streets in the middle of the night allowing for a speedy drive.

Sorry, James, but I can't keep my promise.

The bad feeling I'd had since earlier was growing bigger and bigger, and the conversation with Oliver kept replaying in my head.

According to Oliver, he had discovered some information about the jinn. They came in pairs, but we didn't know where the other one was since we had only encountered one so far.

Oliver was worried Declan might have done something rash, but Oliver didn't know exactly what or where Declan was once the ambulance arrived.

Oliver said he had already passed out by the time the paramedics put him on the stretcher.

That meant Declan could still be at the shop, sifting through the books and parchment that Oliver had left.

Oliver also mentioned that he had managed to obtain a box that could potentially help trap the jinn.

However, since this was some kind of variant, he wasn't sure if the box would work, but it was still worth a shot. Oliver explained that there was an incantation inside the box.

It had to be recited when we caught the jinn. But since the jinn was a variant, to increase our chances of capturing it, we had to weaken it first.

I wasn't sure how we were going to do that, because so far, the jinn had always been one step ahead of us.

We needed to find a way to expose its vulnerabilities. Maybe there was some kind of pattern we could figure out, something we could use to our advantage, to understand its motivations.

We couldn't afford to wait for another attack to happen.

Okay, the creature had clearly attacked me because I was close to Declan; that one was a given.

But what about James and Shane? Why had it gone after them?

Was it because they were my brothers and, by extension, close to Declan? Was it trying to target Declan through me?

And then there was Oliver. He was a friend, but not an especially close one, at least not to me. So why had it targeted him?

Was it because he was helping us? But Declan had only met with him a few times.

I just couldn't figure out its exact purpose or why it struck us when it did.

There were many other opportunities for the jinn to attack us. So why now? Or was it simply on a murderous rampage?

I couldn't shake off what James had mentioned offhandedly earlier: that the creature didn't seem to be directly targeting Declan.

That thought left me feeling a little guilty because a small part of me hoped it was true, that the jinn really wouldn't attack Declan.

As I waited impatiently at a red light, the bad feeling I had been having intensified, and I decided to take a risk, moving forward even before the light turned green.

When I finally arrived at the magic shop, I headed to the back room, which was in complete disarray. My heart sank when I couldn't find Declan anywhere.

"Declan?" I called out desperately, but there was no response.

I checked my phone; no messages. I sniffed the air, catching his scent. It was faint, barely there. That meant he had left some time ago.

Did he really go after it on his own? Surely not. Inside, I hoped he had just returned to the motel. Still, the fear that something terrible had happened gnawed at me.

“No, Cliff, focus. Don’t go down that road and imagine countless worst-case scenarios,” I told myself.

I needed to calm down. There was no reason to panic for now.

I looked around and quickly found the books that Oliver had mentioned. I flipped through them hastily, but Oliver had already given me enough information.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the key, and located a lockbox under the cashier’s counter. Just like Oliver had described, inside the lockbox was some cash and a small ornate wooden box.

This must be the one Oliver mentioned we needed to trap the jinn.

A sudden thought occurred to me. Everything was here, laid out neatly. But why hadn’t the jinn taken anything or destroyed the information?

A cold realization hit me. The reason why it attacked Oliver. It might have been a trap for Declan. The jinn could finally be going after him.

“Declan?” I shouted again, this time more desperately.

I clutched the dog tags and protective charm around my neck, a deep fear gripping me as I considered the possibility that Declan had taken the opportunity to go after the jinn.

I checked my phone, but there were still no messages. Where could he be? Panic began to set in. I had a feeling he did something reckless.

I rushed out of the shop, my senses heightened as I tried to trace any lingering scent of Declan’s.

Finally, I caught his scent in the air and followed it. Eventually, it led me to the park, but the scent was growing faint. It was too windy.

Then, I picked up another scent, one that was all too familiar – the smell of blood, earth, and rot.

I clutched the dog tags tightly once again, desperately hoping I was not too late.

Chapter 19

Declan

Chasing the jinn through the park and into the darkened woods felt like a journey into another world, one where only the two of us existed.

Time became a blur, and I couldn't tell if it had been an hour or two. Was the jinn leading me in circles?

The transition from the well-manicured park to the wild woods felt like stepping into a different realm entirely.

My senses sharpened, and every rustling leaf and distant bird call became more pronounced as I delved deeper into the wilderness.

The full moon hung in the night sky, accompanied by a net of stars to illuminate the way.

I couldn't help but feel a mixture of fear and determination coursing through my veins.

My heart pounded in my chest as I pushed forward, my footsteps faltering only occasionally on the uneven forest floor.

I was disheveled, my clothes marked with dirt and twigs from the chase through the park. Exhaustion hit me to the core but I couldn't stop.

As I ventured deeper into the woods, the thought occurred to me that I might be entering fox shifter territory.

A vague unease settled in my stomach, but there was no sign of any animals or other shifters.

It seemed as though the world had condensed itself to just me and the relentless jinn.

My racing thoughts echoed my heartbeat. Why had the jinn come after Oliver?

Had it been spying on Cliff and me during our visits? Did it discover that Oliver was helping us?

Oliver's cryptic note about the creature hunting with its mate echoed in my mind.

It was a chilling thought, one that drew me back to the haunting memories of my last mission.

My mind replayed the events with sudden and painful clarity. Two jinn had terrorized us, possessing the bodies of my fellow soldiers.

Captain Rodriguez, a powerful fire mage, had unleashed his magic to incinerate one of the jinn in a blaze of searing heat.

The creature's death had been swift, leaving little time for it to escape the body it had possessed.

But the surviving jinn, the one that now hunted us, had witnessed the destruction of its mate.

It had seen its partner reduced to ashes by the captain's fiery onslaught.

A pang of cold dread settled in the pit of my stomach as I realized the implications of this revelation.

I realised that subconsciously, I had blocked the image of the burning jinn from my mind.

The video Mike sent me didn't show the burning jinn because the soldier capturing the events on video was focused on the other jinn.

James once told me that shifters mated for life, that if he or she lost his or her partner, they usually went insane or ended up taking their own lives.

If Cliff was taken from me, would I have done the same?

The jinn now stalking me and the rest of my newfound family was driven by loss and vengeance.

Maybe the jinn did see the books on Oliver's table but didn't think much of the research Oliver had done. It was probably confident it would win.

I had no doubt that it would stop at nothing to avenge its fallen partner. And I had inadvertently led this monster the people I cared about the most.

I stood there, clutching at the protective pendent around my neck and gasping for breath, in the midst of a secluded clearing deep within the woods.

My chest heaved, and my body was drenched in sweat. As I caught my breath, I couldn't help but question my own sanity.

What had possessed me to come out here alone, chasing a dangerous jinn that sought to harm my mate and family?

A moment of self-doubt washed over me, and I began to second-guess my impulsive decision.

Then it hit me. I had lost sight of the djinn. The adrenaline-fueled chase had brought me to this isolated spot, but the jinn had eluded me.

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly at my own foolish actions. I thought back to that day when I left my motel room, walking away from Cliff, and I realized that I had repeated the same pattern once again.

Why was it that I never seemed to learn from my mistakes?

I pulled out my phone and, to my horror, saw that my text message to Cliff earlier didn't go through.

I typed another message to Cliff, telling him where I was, only to realize there was no reception in the woods.

My heart pounded in my chest, and a shiver of fear raced down my spine as I heard the rustling of bushes nearby.

I had Oliver's necklace firmly in my grip, a reminder that I would be safe. The jinn was closing in, and I knew I had to be cautious.

Suddenly, the jinn emerged from the underbrush, brandishing a gleaming combat knife.

Shock coursed through my veins as I watched the blade flash in the dim light of the woods.

Before I could react, the jinn lunged at me, and I felt the searing pain as the blade cut into my flesh.

I stumbled backward, barely avoiding the next vicious slash.

It was then, as the jinn closed in for another strike, that a horrifying realization dawned on me—the necklace Oliver had given me wasn't working.

The protection charm I had relied on had failed me.

In that moment of terror, I couldn't help but recall Oliver's warning that the necklace might not be effective against the jinn.

Questions raced through my mind like a whirlwind. Had Oliver been right all along?

Had the jinn targeted James and Shane to antagonise me?

My trust in the necklace had crumbled, and I was left defenseless.

I refused to let fear paralyze me any longer. I might not have had the protection of the necklace, but I still knew how to fight.

"You wanted me, here I am!" I yelled.

The creature, wearing Parker's face, grinned maliciously.

"I knew guilt would wear you down," it taunted. "But I won't stop with you. Once I'm done with you, I'm going after those you love. Your sweet mate and his brothers are next. I'll finish off that mage, too."

I took a deep breath and tried to maintain my composure.

"You left Oliver alive on purpose," I retorted, my voice steadier now.

"And you fell for my trap," the jinn finished.

"You did all this for your dead mate?" I asked.

A flicker of anger crossed the jinn's face at the mention of its deceased partner. It sneered and lunged at me once again.

I managed to side-step his attack. The jinn was relentless, its movements graceful and calculated.

I knew I couldn't match its supernatural agility, so I relied on my training and instincts. I dodged its slashing attacks, narrowly avoiding the razor-sharp edge of its combat knife.

My heart pounded in my chest, and my muscles screamed in protest, but I couldn't afford to falter.

With a quick jab, I managed to land a solid punch on the jinn's chest, sending it stumbling backward.

This gave me a brief respite to catch my breath and assess the situation. I had to disarm him somehow.

If I stabbed him and somehow prevented him from leaving Parker's body, maybe he would perish, just like his mate.

It lunged at me again, but this time, I was prepared. With a combination of dodges and well-timed blocks, I managed to outmaneuver it.

In a daring move, I aimed a swift kick at its legs, attempting to knock it off balance. The jinn stumbled, and I seized the opportunity, lunging forward and disarming it in a flurry of motion.

The combat knife clattered to the forest floor and I seized it. Triumph filled me as I wrestled with the jinn.

I drove the knife into his chest, only to reveal a horrifying truth. No blood flowed from the wound because the jinn had been inhabiting a lifeless body all along.

Despair clawed at my heart, threatening to consume me. I was so arrogant I thought I could take care of this jinn on my own.

"Declan!" A familiar voice yelled, shattering my momentary paralysis.

Cliff entered the clearing and for a moment, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Cliff, no, run!" I shouted.

Every fiber of my being urged him to flee, to save himself. I couldn't bear the thought of him being hurt because of my recklessness.

Cliff, tenacious and brave, ignored my warning and charged forward.

His eyes blazed with fury as he berated me, his voice cutting through the chaos of our confrontation.

"You idiot! I can't believe you went after the jinn on your own!"

Cliff had every right to be angry, I thought. Underneath his anger, I could sense his concern.

He followed me, because he was worried. Because he loved me. I loved him too and didn't want to lose him.

The jinn seized the opportunity to break free from my hold, throwing me off its deteriorating host body.

It laughed, its voice echoing with sickening delight.

"How convenient that your mate is here," the jinn taunted.

"I wonder how it would feel, being strangled by the one you love," the jinn mused aloud.

The creature's words sent a shiver down my spine as I realized what it intended to do next.

Cliff didn't know the necklace he wore wouldn't protect him from the jinn.

"NO!" I screamed, but it was too late.

From Parker's corpse, a murky black mist began to seep out, swirling and coalescing into a sinister force.

In an instant, it slammed into Cliff with a force that sent him sprawling.

My heart froze in horror as Cliff was enveloped by the ominous darkness, his body contorting in agony.

"Cliff, fight it!" I screamed, desperation coursing through me. "Don't let it win!"

But my words seemed to be lost in the chaos.

As Cliff wrestled with the supernatural force that had possessed him. Something tumbled from his pocket—a small wooden box.

In the heat of the moment, I couldn't spare it more than a passing thought.

Rushing to Cliff's side, I gripped his hand and told him not to give up. My heart sank as I watched my mate, the man I loved, succumb to the darkness.

Cliff wrapped his fingers around my neck. The jinn was making him strangle me.

And then, a glimmer of hope. Cliff's eyes began to change, shifting from their usual color to a deep amber.

His fingers loosened their death grip around my neck.

Fur sprouted from his arms and shoulders, and I realized, with a surge of wonder, that Cliff was shifting.

The jinn hadn't realized there was another entity sharing Cliff's body—the fox spirit that resided within him.

I leaned in, kissing Cliff with a fierce passion, hoping to reach the man I loved. Cliff's grip on my arm tightened, and for a moment, it was just us.

“Dec, the box,” Cliff gasped, his voice strained. “Trap the jinn...read the spell in the box.”

With that urgent plea, Cliff shoved me away, and I watched in helpless horror as his features contorted in agony.

I remembered Oliver's note again. He also mentioned some kind of box.

An agonized scream escaped Cliff's lips, and I knew that the battle inside him was far from over.

I scrambled to my feet and retrieved the small wooden box that had fallen from Cliff's pocket earlier.

Fingers trembling, I pried open the lid, revealing a spell inscribed on a piece of parchment within.

My heart pounded in my chest as I began to read the incantation aloud. I probably messed up the pronunciation. At least it wasn't written in some kind of ancient script.

As I recited the incantation, I couldn't tear my gaze away from Cliff, who continued to writhe in pain, the battle raging within him.

As the final words left my lips, a brilliant light erupted from the box, casting a blinding radiance that engulfed Cliff and the jinn.

The black mist that had ensnared Cliff entered the box.

As I watched, the wooden container seemed to pulse with a fierce, otherworldly heat, making me drop it in surprise.

The box lay there on the forest floor, radiating an eerie warmth.

My attention shifted from the box to Cliff, who had collapsed to his knees, gasping for breath as his amber eyes slowly returned to their normal hue.

"Cliff, are you in there?" I asked tentatively.

My heart was still pounding.

Cliff launched himself at me without warning and I pulled him in a fierce embrace. Both of us were laughing and crying at once.

"Did I miss the party?" a voice suddenly interrupted our moment of joy.

I glanced up, surprised to find James standing there.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, taken aback by his presence.

"James probably felt guilty about how he treated you after Oliver got hurt," Cliff explained.

I turned my attention to James.

"How's Oliver?" I asked.

"He'll be in the hospital for a couple of days, but he'll make a full recovery," James replied.

James looked at both of us, then down at the box by our feet.

“You guys did it?” he asked in disbelief. “You trapped the jinn?”

Oliver had probably updated James about what Cliff planned to do in the hospital.

We both nodded. I released Cliff from our embrace and approached my best friend. Despite everything that had transpired, James had come to our aid.

“I’m sorry for everything that happened, truly,” I said. “For bringing this nightmare here.”

James gripped my shoulder firmly.

“And I’m sorry for letting my temper get the best of me,” James said.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I assured him.

I noticed Cliff rolling his eyes in the background.

I couldn’t help myself; I approached my mate. Then I leaned in and kissed Cliff right there. I didn’t care if James was watching.

“Let’s go back,” I said to Cliff.

“Let’s,” he agreed, smiling.

Chapter 20

Cliff

One Month Later

The sun hung high in the clear blue sky as Declan and I drove to the military cemetery.

We were both in a relaxed mood, and I couldn't resist fiddling with the car's radio, finally settling on a country music station.

As a familiar song filled the car, I couldn't help but sing along to the lyrics.

My voice wasn't anything spectacular, but it didn't matter. Declan joined in, and as the song came to an end, we laughed together.

After that showdown with the jinn a month ago, I couldn't have imagined we'd ever share a carefree moment like this again.

Nightmares haunted me, the memory of being possessed, feeling like a prisoner in my own body. But Declan, he was my ray of light.

On those nights when I'd wake up screaming, he'd hold me close, assuring me that everything was going to be alright.

And gradually, things did get better. I had taken over Cal's wilderness camp. Declan was currently looking for a job in town that would suit him.

I thought about Declan and James' relationship, I could see that while they claimed that everything was back to normal, there were still some issues they needed to work through.

After our visit to the cemetery, Declan and I were on our way to James' house for dinner. I knew that with time, they would

mend the rift caused by the jinn.

One thing did strike me as odd, though. James's reaction to Oliver's injury.

I had no idea he cared for Oliver so deeply. With a sudden idea, I sent a text to Oliver, asking him to come over to James' house later.

Declan and I still had the box where we had trapped the jinn, and Oliver had offered to find a secure hiding place for it where no one would ever find it.

Declan asked me who I was texting, and I replied that it was Oliver. He raised his eyebrows in curiosity, but I didn't elaborate further.

We stopped by a nearby flower shop, and Declan bought a bouquet of red roses.

Eventually, we reached the military cemetery. After parking the car, Declan didn't get out right away.

I knew he was likely taking a moment to remember his fallen comrades.

I gave him the time he needed, then leaned over to kiss his cheek and squeezed his hand.

"You ready?" I asked Declan.

Declan squeezed my hand back, and together, we got out of the car. I stayed by his side as he placed one rose on the gravestone of each member of his unit.

My heart ached as I watched him, but all I could do for now was stay by his side.

It was Parker's gravestone where Declan lingered the longest.

After setting down the rose, he murmured, "I hope you finally find rest, my friend."

I then reached into the pocket of my jacket and took out a small bag of cookies I had baked the night before, as per Declan's request.

Then I carefully placed it by Parker's grave.

We headed back to the car and drove back to Fox Haven. Night had fallen by the time we reached our destination.

After exiting the car, we rang the doorbell. Shane answered the door and greeted us.

“You guys arrived just in time. The ribs are almost ready,” Shane said.

The enticing aroma of barbecue wafted in from the backyard. Our stomachs rumbled in response.

Declan and I entered the kitchen, and he grabbed two beers.

“I’ll go ahead and hand James a beer; he might be thirsty,” he said with a smile.

I watched Declan walk through the back door leading to the yard, a sense of relief washing over me. Shane joined me in the kitchen.

“They’re going to be alright, Cliff,” Shane told me.

I met Shane’s gaze, and nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I replied with a soft smile.

He patted me on the back, laughing when I grinned at him. We then stepped into the yard to join Declan and James.

I grabbed a plate and piled it with food. Declan and I had only eaten a sandwich and chips for the entire day.

After more beer and grilled meat, the sound of laughter and conversation filled the air. Declan and James, once again, were sharing stories about their childhood.

The doorbell rang, breaking the cheerful atmosphere in the backyard. James furrowed his brows.

“Who could that be?” James asked.

I couldn’t help but feel a little nervous, but I tried my best to maintain a casual tone as I replied, “It must be Oliver. I invited him over. He’s picking up the box.”

Declan shot me a knowing look, and I could practically hear his thoughts. He was well aware of my intentions for inviting Oliver over.

I had a feeling that he knew I was trying to match these two up.

As I got up to answer the door, I couldn't help but wonder if this little plan of mine would work.

I still couldn't forget how worried James had been at the hospital when Oliver was attacked and how much he fussed over the mage.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door to find Oliver standing there.

"Thanks for coming over, Oliver," I said with a warm smile.

"You know," I began, scratching my head with a mock sheepish grin, "I actually left the box in my old bedroom. Silly me, right?"

Oliver looked hesitant, but I gently nudged him towards the kitchen, trying to be as persuasive as possible.

"Why don't you wait in the yard and get something to eat or drink first? We've got some great barbecue going on," I said.

He seemed unsure but didn't decline my offer, and I made my way to where the others were.

I wanted to give James and Oliver the space to start a conversation without feeling awkward.

"Look who stopped by," I announced as I re-entered the backyard, drawing everyone's attention.

Shane, ever the joker, chuckled inappropriately, making me roll my eyes. I turned to Declan, who had been eyeing me suspiciously.

"Declan, I might need your help searching for the box," I said, trying to sound casual. "Shane, maybe you could help too?"

"Nah, I'm good right here," Shane replied.

I gave my brother a murderous look as Declan ushered me back in the kitchen.

"Cliff, seriously," Declan said.

He grinned when I told him about my plan, and we headed upstairs to my old bedroom.

There wasn't actually much searching to be done. The box was just on my desk.

Declan and I ended up sitting on my old bed. I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"Today was a good day, wasn't it?" I asked him.

"It was," he agreed. "Thanks for coming with me to the cemetery. I wouldn't have been able to face them again on my own."

"Dec, you're stronger than you think," I reminded him.

"When you're with me, I feel invincible," he adds. "So you should never leave my side."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"That's a given," I said.

Declan leaned in close and gave me a long and tender kiss.

"I love you Cliff," he murmured.

"Me too," I said.

"Guys? What's taking you so long?" James called from outside my window. Declan and I parted from the kiss and laughed.

THE END

Want more MM paranormal romance? Turn the page to read a preview of Fel's release, *Crash*.

Want more of Declan and Cliff? Sign up for Kara's newsletter to get a FREE bonus scene [here](#).

A Preview of Crash

JARED

The intense headache hit me in the middle of my afternoon shift. One moment, I'd been flipping burgers at the fast-food joint where I'd been working for six months.

The next moment, my stomach heaved, and it felt like someone had stuck needles in both my eyes.

I dropped the metal spatula, took a few steps away from the grill, and rested my head in my hands.

Massaging my temples didn't work. The sharp pain in the back of my head persisted, and instinct told me this wasn't normal.

It had something to do with waking up in bed this morning, my entire body covered in sweat.

My throat felt raw from too much screaming the night before. Something bad was going to happen. I knew it in my bones.

My twin brother, Jace, and I came from a long line of seers. Jace and I felt an immediate sense of wrongness on the day our dad Reid took his own life.

Ten years ago, Jace had barged into my bedroom one foggy morning, ashen-faced and unable to speak.

Words weren't needed. Deep down, Jace and I knew the inevitable had come to pass.

The same dread coiled in my insides in the present.

Both our dads were gone. Ken died of lung cancer. Unable to cope with his death, Reid took his own life.

Jace was all I had, but Jace was living thousands of miles away from Fair Creek, our hometown.

I had chosen to stay and live in the house where we grew up. The moment Jace turned 20, he left Fair Creek, our haunted home, and never looked back.

I resented him a little for leaving me behind. No, that wasn't true at all. I didn't want to leave back then and now.

The familiar comforted me. Sudden change unnerved me, but I had a feeling change was about to visit me no matter what I wanted.

"Jared, you alright?" Ronda, my manager, asked.

Ronda looked at me with concern. I realized I'd wrapped my arms around my skinny frame.

I stared at the burning meat on the grill. Ronda followed my line of sight and calmly took over.

Finally, I remembered how to use my words.

"I'm not feeling so good, Ronda. Must be the flu that's been going around," I said, lying effortlessly.

Lying had been part of Jace's and my skill set ever since we were kids.

There were places in the world where paranormals and humans openly coexisted, but not in Fair Creek.

We had our share of supernatural residents, but they mostly kept to themselves.

The human denizens treated them with open fear and suspicion. They did not spare my family.

My family were outliers and didn't belong on the side of the humans or the supernaturals.

Jace and I spent our miserable high school years being treated like pariahs. While we never openly declared what we were, rumors traveled fast in small towns.

Visitors frequented our house during my childhood, seeking Ken to read their fortunes.

In the present, some of the older locals still appeared on my doorstep, begging for my aid.

Jace would have refused immediately, but I never had the heart to turn them away.

“Take the rest of the day off, Jared,” Ronda suggested.

I blinked at her, momentarily confused. For a moment there, I’d allowed myself to meander down memory lane.

“Thanks, Ronda,” I told her.

“Take all the time you need. You have my number. Get some medicine for that flu,” she called over my shoulder.

I made my way to the employee break room and grabbed the rest of my belongings.

Not bothering to change out of my uniform, I left the store. The moment my feet touched the pavement, I breathed in some fresh air.

The pounding in my head subsided a little, but the uneasy feeling in my gut lingered.

I tried calling Jace right after I slid behind the wheel of my battered blue Honda. No response.

The last time I heard from Jace was two weeks ago. He seemed happy, working an office job for a hot boss. Those were Jace’s exact words.

Jace drifted from one job to the next, before finally settling on this one a year ago.

He’d sent me pictures of his desk, of his fancy new apartment. Jace seemed happy. So what went wrong?

After texting him to call me back, I drove back home. Spotting the latest graffiti artwork sprayed on my porch steps, I sighed.

Cleaning that mess up would take hours and I wasn’t in the mood, so I left it for now.

I entered my quiet little home. Buster, my playful 5-year-old gray Ragdoll, immediately ran up to me to greet me.

Buster twirled around my legs, and I knew he wouldn't stop until I picked him up. He was such an adorable baby that way.

I hefted him in my arms and let out a dramatic groan.

"Did you gain some extra weight again?" I asked him.

Buster meowed in my arms. I carried him upstairs to my bedroom. Once again, I ignored the two empty bedrooms across the hall.

A co-worker once asked me if I ever got lonely, living in such a big house on my own. I told him I was fine because I had Buster with me.

That was another lie. There were nights when I came home, feeling completely wiped out from work, wishing I had someone to come home to.

Someone who would greet me with a warm smile and a teasing kiss. He'd make me dinner and ask me how my day was.

Maybe the mystery man I'd been dreaming of ever since I was a kid.

Jace always teased me every single time I brought him up. My Prince Charming had dark gold hair and vivid blue eyes that sometimes turned amber in certain situations.

He wasn't traditionally handsome but had a rough, rakish look to him. When he smiled, my heart completely melted.

When Jace told me to grow up and find a real man, I stopped mentioning my imaginary prince to him completely.

I never told my brother this, but some childish part of me still believed he was real.

My prince was out there, looking for me. Someday, our paths would cross, but until then, I'd continue dreaming of him.

Wanting to get the smell of greasy burgers off me, I took a quick shower.

After making myself a quick dinner, I checked my phone, but there was still no reply from Jace.

I hugged Buster close to my chest. He stilled, allowing me to use him as a fluffy pillow. It was as if Buster knew I needed the extra comfort.

“Jace, what happened to you?” I whispered to the empty kitchen.

* * *

I woke up crying. Buster licked my cheek, and I realized I’d fallen asleep on my lumpy living room sofa again.

The more I tried to recall the dream, the more it slipped away from my grasp.

I had dreamed of him again, my golden prince with the eyes that never remained the same. My prince with the hungry smile.

In that dream, I saw him clear as day, leaning against a black monstrous machine—a Harley.

Once he spotted me, he’d crooked a finger at me. I could still remember the words I said to him in the dream.

“You’re my past, present, and future, Crash,” I had said.

Crash. Was that his name? I’d always thought of my prince as nameless. Where did that even come from? What kind of name was Crash?

My phone buzzed, and it took me a few precious seconds to find it tucked under one pillow.

Jace’s name flashed across the screen, and I answered his call immediately.

“Jace, thank God you called me back. I was worried about you all day,” I blurted.

A quick look at the clock on my kitchen wall told me it was midnight. I arrived home at 3 pm.

Plenty of time had passed. Buster jumped on my lap, and I stroked him to calm my nerves.

“Jace, are you there?” I asked anxiously.

“There’s no time,” Jace said, sounding a little out of breath.

I pressed my phone closer to my ear and could hear shouting in the background, followed by a distinctive sound I’d only heard in movies or shows.

A gunshot? Was someone shooting at my brother? My heart thumped painfully, and I gripped the phone tightly in my hand.

“Jace, talk to me. What do you mean, there’s no time?” I demanded.

“I made a terrible mistake,” Jace said. Each word sounded strained. He panted heavily.

Jace continued, “I have so many things I wanted to tell you, Jared.” “Stop running and let’s talk this out like adults, Jace.” I heard someone saying.

Unlike my brother, who seemed to have trouble drawing air into his lungs, this speaker had a calm, velvety voice that made the hairs on my arms stand.

“Who are you calling?” asked that same voice.

“Run,” Jace whispered to me. “Get out of town. Do it right now or you’ll die in three days.”

Three days? Was Jace for real?

“Out of Fair Creek? Why? Jace, you’re not making any sense. Where would I even go?” I demanded.

“To your Motorcycle Prince. He’s real. I’m sorry I made fun of you all those years ago. Go to him. He’ll keep you safe,” Jace said. “I love you, Jared. I really wish we had more time.” Jace abruptly cut the call, and I stared at my phone for the next few seconds, stunned.

What just happened?

Jace told me to leave town, and I knew he wouldn’t just give me that advice without a reason.

Jace’s gift of foresight had always been stronger than mine. Did he see my death? I was about to call him again when my

hands started to shake.

The cellphone slipped from my fingers. Invisible pressure constricted my chest, making it hard to breathe.

My heart felt like it would burst from my chest. I knew in that instant that Jared was about to die, and there was nothing I could do to save him.

Terrible agony gripped my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing I was receiving a vision. A late vision, but something was better than nothing.

My head spun, and the world seemed upside down. Cold swept over my clothes, my trembling body.

I heard the crash of waves, and the smell of brine permeated my nose. I was on some sort of dock or marina.

Large and pale fingers circled my fragile neck, and a terrible face loomed above me, beautiful yet unnatural.

A croak slipped from my throat, but I wouldn't beg for forgiveness or mercy. That wasn't my style. It took me a moment to realize I was looking out of Jace's eyes and hearing his thoughts.

These were his last moments on this earth.

Despair filled me as the creature in front of me continued strangling me. My body, or rather Jace's body, started to grow limp.

"Tell me, Jace. Who did you call?" asked my brother's killer in that same eerie and calm voice.

Jace managed to blurt out two words. An impolite curse. His killer wore a disgusted look on his face.

Cold red eyes bore into mine. Jace's murderer wasn't the least bit human. Why wasn't I surprised?

"If you hadn't snooped around, then things would have still been peachy between us. I really enjoyed you in my life, in my bed, Jace. Here I was, thinking we were partners."

I detected a hint of sadness in the monster's voice, but it was gone the next moment. "Too bad I need to replace you."

The monster squeezed one more time until the fragile bones in my brother's neck broke.

My mind pulled me back to reality. I gasped, clawing at the fabric of my sofa. Sweat beaded my brow, and my heart galloped.

What was the point of having this gift, when I could only see my brother during his dying moments?

“This isn't a gift. It's a bloody curse,” I whispered to myself.

I burrowed my face into my hands. Hot tears filled my eyes. With Jace gone, I was the only member of the Church family left alive.

[Get ready for Crash, book 7 of Fel's Moon Burrow Bears series.](#)

Pre-order now!

About the Authors

Felicia loves writing sizzling MM romances with hot Alphas and happily-ever-afters.

www.felfern.com

Kara Kitt is addicted to sweet MM paranormal romance. When she's not busy writing, she likes to spend time with her White Labrador and tabby cat.

Kara's Newsletter: <https://sendfox.com/karakitt.writes>

Also by Fel and Kara

FOX HAVEN

[Hots For Mr. Fox](#)

[Finding His Fox](#)

Protecting His Fox