



THE
DARKEST
MARK

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MAY DAWSON

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BOOK ONE



MAY DAWSON

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A Note From May

Also by May Dawson

Content Notes

Amelia's story contains domestic violence, on- and off-page sexual assault, and her attempts to protect her young son. Her future harem is never the cause of that suffering. Amelia will find healing, love, and the protection she deserves but please be kind to yourself if this is not the right read for you.

CHAPTER 1





*A*melia

AS ALWAYS, I worried my husband suspected that *our boy* wasn't *his son*.

Today there was something off about Nathan's behavior when he swaggered into our kitchen. He rested his hand on the back of Dylan's chair but didn't touch him.

"Morning, blue eyes," he told me when he leaned in for a kiss. He was a big man, someone who filled up the room, the house—hell, he filled up the whole pack. But then, he was the alpha.

"Good morning." I made myself kiss him, even though I felt stiff as a wooden puppet.

Blue eyes sounded affectionate, but it was cruel. My soulmate, Brennan, used to call me *blue eyes*. Nathan stole that nickname, the same way he stole my life, my son, my *self*.

Even as I kissed him, my gaze darted toward Dylan, who sat up on his knees on the chair to reach his bowl more easily. Dylan was quiet, his big blue eyes shadowed by his russet-colored bangs. He spooned his oatmeal into his mouth and didn't look our way, but I knew he was watching Nathan out of the corner of his eye. He always was.

Nathan frowned as he straightened, looming over me, as if that kiss hadn't been convincing. He always loomed. Maybe he couldn't help it; he was six-foot-three, broad-shouldered, and carried a layer of what my brother had dismissively called *prison fat* once, when Nathan was in an entirely different county.

I looked up at him and tried to lie with my eyes, my body, my smile that felt too much like a grimace. "What are you doing today?"

“I’ve got a meeting with the Hessey pack. I should take Dylan.” He rested his hand on my shoulder, a weight that felt too heavy. “Give you a break for the day.”

Quiet panic scratched at my chest. “Oh, I wouldn’t want him to distract you.”

“He’s four. He can sit in a meeting quietly. Can’t you, Dyl?”

Dylan looked up at Nathan and didn’t answer.

Nathan hated when he ignored him.

Snorting at the lack of response, he said to me, “Time for him to start learning the family business. My son will be alpha someday.”

“Of course,” I replied.

“As long as he’s strong enough.”

“I’m sure he is.”

His resulting silence was the kind of silence that prickled on my skin like a rash. I got up from the table and poured his coffee, taking it to him as he settled into the chair next to me, opposite of Dylan.

“You can play until it’s time to go,” I told Dylan, picking up his cereal bowl. He nodded and slipped from the table, then ran back to his room.

As I rinsed the bowl, Nathan asked, “Shouldn’t he be talking more by now?”

“You know how it is. Kids all blossom in their own time.”

“He’s not a flower. He’s a wolf.”

“It’s just a metaphor.”

“I know it’s a metaphor, Amelia. That’s not the problem.”

The problem was that Dylan seemed too much like me.

Or maybe, really, the problem was that Dylan seemed too much like *Brennan*. The man Nathan had murdered.

I snapped on the gas burner at the stove to fix Nathan's eggs. I watched the stainless-steel pan heat and listened to the soft sounds of Nathan shifting behind me, sipping his coffee, shuffling his phone. The screen door banged shut, and small feet flew across the back porch. Dylan had gone out to play.

I'd assumed the conversation was over, was silently breathing a sigh of relief, when Nathan spoke abruptly. "You baby him."

"I don't mean to."

"He is your baby," he muttered. Then he stood suddenly and moved behind me. He pressed up against me, and my lower stomach met the metal handle across the oven door. His cock, even through his jeans, rubbed against the curve of my ass, hard and unrelenting. His breath was hot against my throat as he whispered, "We need to make a new one. Maybe then you'll let Dylan grow up a little."

"We can try."

"We're going to do better than *try*." His hand massaged across my stomach, and although he might've meant it affectionately, his touch felt bruising. "I'm going to fill you up with baby batter tonight."

I forced a smile in answer. If I never heard the words *baby batter* again, it would be too soon. And if he ever found out I was taking birth control pills, the odds were fifty-fifty that he'd kill me. He'd come close before.

Reaching over my shoulder, he snapped the knob on the stove. The flame under the pan flickered and died. "Or maybe ... we've got time now," he breathed into my ear.

I glanced out the window. Dylan was on the swing set in the backyard, pumping his legs single-mindedly. He'd just mastered the motion. Nathan hadn't waited to make sure Dylan wouldn't see anything. He never did. His hands were already delving down my jeans, hot and possessive.

I turned to face him, causing him to move back a step. "Race you to our bedroom."

He scooped into my underwear, grabbing a handful of my ass cheek. “Maybe I want you right here.”

I managed to press him back another step, out of sight of the window. “Whatever you want.”

He would take what he wanted from me, anyway. I wasn’t going to fight it anymore. My body mattered less than my life. Less than Dylan’s.

Yanking me close, he pushed at the band of my jeans. As he shoved my pants down around my knees, I clung to his shoulders to keep from being knocked over from the force. He pushed me onto the kitchen table and thrust into me without fanfare. He was big, big enough that it always hurt when he shoved inside me like this. His hand was heavy on my lower back. I bit my lip as my hips slammed against the hard edge of the kitchen table over and over. Knowing it would make him happy, I breathed heavily as if I was close to orgasm. I faked orgasm just like I faked my heat each month, pretending Nathan met my need for a mate.

His hips continued hammering into mine, his hand knotting in my hair—hard enough to hurt—as he dragged my hips back toward him. He let out a roar as he came, and when he pulled out, his seed spilled down my thigh, hot and sticky. The feeling always made me sick.

I pulled up my jeans knowing he’d left bruises, and I was happy for the mottled purple and blue that would spread across my thighs. The evidence of pain was better than the lie that I wanted to be here, wanted *him*. I pretended to stop him from hurting me worse. But I kept the truth close to my heart. Once, I had been loved and cherished by a good man, my true mate, and I had loved him with my whole being. My life with Nathan was nothing compared to that.

Two things kept me alive. My past with Brennan. My future with Dylan.

Nathan grabbed the kitchen towel from where it hung on the stove, wiped himself clean, then dropped it on the floor. He settled his junk back into his pants, still half-hard. “I’ll be thinking about you today.”

“I’ll be thinking about you too,” I promised.

He seemed to be in a better mood after fucking me. He often was.

“Maybe I’ll leave Dylan with you today after all.”

The scratching in my chest subsided, although the weight there never let up. “Whatever you want.”

I followed him to the garage, kissed him goodbye, and watched as he got into his truck and backed out. All the while, I could feel *him* wet and clinging in my panties, making my thighs itch like I had to scrub him off my skin.. I didn’t exhale completely until he was finally down the road.

I’d been praying for Stockholm Syndrome to set in for a long time, to make this situation survivable. But I couldn’t make myself love Nathan.

So, I’d decided to kill him instead.

CHAPTER 2





*S*tone

THE SUN WAS JUST BEGINNING to burn away the mist in the mountains when I paced across the grass between the alpha house and the pack house. My lieutenants, Cole and Teresa, were already waiting in the library that functioned as our command center.

My eyes skipped over them, even though I knew my younger brother wasn't hiding among the shelves. He wasn't exactly the type to get lost in a library. "Where's Shaw?"

Cole hesitated.

I raked my hand through my hair. "Would you drag him out of whoever's bed he's in?"

Cole nodded and rose, heading out the door.

"Don't worry about being gentle," I called after him.

"He usually isn't." Teresa propped her chin on her hand; she was curled up in her desk chair like usual, her legs folded beneath her body, her elbows resting on the tabletop. Despite all her dangerous skills, she sat like a second grader. No one outside our pack took her seriously, but Teresa didn't seem to mind.

I glanced at her skeptically. "Are you comfortable contorted like that?"

"I'm always comfortable," she promised, and she did seem like she was comfortable everywhere she went. Never fazed or hurried or stressed, no matter how bad the situation. Her frame was petite, feminine; other packs never expected her to be part of my leadership team. They never saw Teresa coming.

"We'll wait for them."

"You don't normally wait on Shaw." There was a curious note in her voice.

Other alphas didn't allow their subordinates to question them, but I didn't mind it. I knew they meant no disrespect.

"I don't," I admitted. "If I waited on Shaw to grow up, we'd never get anything done. But this is his revenge too."

My father, as alpha, might not have gotten his throat ripped out if he'd allowed a few more questions. Then again, there were a few shifters in my pack who would rip out my throat if they ever got the chance. Most of the pack treated me with the respect I'd earned when I killed my way to the top. But I had enemies.

And I had brothers and a sister in my pack too, so while I knew they had my back, there was a distinct lack of appropriately respectful behavior on *that* front too.

Teresa nodded. "It's almost the five-year anniversary of the Longroad pack murdering Brennan. Do you think the timing will make them suspicious? On higher alert?"

"I don't think Nathan Longroad ever expects to be held accountable."

Held accountable. Those were some abstract words for the bloodbath we planned for the Longroad pack.

She nodded slowly, still looking thoughtful. "I'm sure you're right. They don't know how strong our pack has grown over the past few years."

There was a subtle compliment there, since I'd become the alpha when Brennan died. I'd hated my brother for leaving me alpha, as much as I'd loved him too.

Since Teresa never gave compliments for free, I asked, "What's bothering you, Tee?"

"That nickname, for one thing," she said dryly. Then she glanced at the eight-by-ten photos hanging along the target wall.

Most were of enemies or leadership high in the Longroad pack who we had to be sure we killed when we went in. Nathan Longroad was tagged as *mine*. Then we would kill anyone who resisted.

But Amelia's photo was marked. She wasn't to be harmed, not by anyone from my pack. I wanted to have a private conversation with the woman he'd obsessed over...the woman he'd been with the night he was murdered.

"What are you going to do with the girl?" Teresa asked, though she usually only asked questions when she already knew the answer.

I'd heard stories from our spy in the Longroad pack that Amelia was being treated badly in her pack. Those stories made me wonder if she was villain or victim in the story of my brother's death.

In the footage of his death, she'd looked unharmed, so I leaned toward villain. When I thought of that damned video, my hands curled into fists. "If she betrayed Brennan, I'm going to gut her myself."

"So, this isn't a rescue mission."

I was five years too late for a rescue mission. If I'd arrived at the motel in time, when Brennan and Amelia ran, I could've saved my brother. "This is revenge, Tee."

She nodded, her gaze worried, but she didn't argue with me.

"Please spare me any nonsense about de-escalating shit. I hear enough of that from Liam." My brother was crazy in more ways than one, but his pacifism was the weirdest kind of crazy. No one knew better than Liam that the world was brutal. "I prefer to de-escalate conflict by creating dead bodies."

Teresa raised her hands in a placating gesture. "I would never. I love an ambush as much as the next girl."

The Longroad pack ran a mining operation, and they'd be transporting their cargo to the other side of the mountains. There was an empty stretch up in the mountains where we should be able to target them without taking civilian casualties.

"Do you have the assignments and locations for our machine gunners?" I asked, glancing over at the map.

“You know I do.” There was an amused glint in Teresa’s eyes. “They’ve all been informed of their positions, and they’re happy to take on the role.”

I nodded. “Good.”

We could have invaded the Longroad pack’s territory, but their convoy would certainly include Nathan, and this way we wouldn’t have to wade through women and children to slaughter the pack’s leadership.

“This will be payback for both Brennan and Liam,” I mused.

My asshole father had handed Liam over to the Longroad pack as a hostage in exchange for their alliance. And yet, if he had been alive when they met, he never would’ve accepted a marriage alliance between Brennan and Amelia.

Brennan had challenged our father to bring Liam home. I’d thought he would always put our family first, but once he met Amelia, she’d been his top priority. She’d certainly been the only one Brennan gave a damn about when he abandoned us for her.

Guilt prickled in my stomach. It hurts to be angry at the dead. “Where the fuck is my useless little brother?”

“So hurtful,” Shaw drawled as he wandered through the library doors. He was barefoot and shirtless, wearing only jeans, his dark hair tousled. Some of Shaw’s many piercings and tattoos were on full display.

Cole came in behind him, looking exasperated.

“You couldn’t convince him to get dressed?” Teresa demanded.

“You get him out of Cynthia’s bed next time,” Cole shot back, dropping into the seat across from Teresa.

Shaw winked at Teresa. “Don’t pretend you don’t like the show, sweetheart.”

Teresa leaned across the table toward him, smiling. “Call me sweetheart again, and I will knife you in the groin.”

“With what knife?” Shaw shot back.

Cole groaned, rubbing his face with one hand. “Don’t encourage her. Teresa, don’t encourage him.”

Teresa had already pulled two blades seemingly out of thin air. I reached over and smacked her wrist, and she looked up at me with faux hurt written across her face before the blades vanished as swiftly as they’d been drawn.

“What are my rules for the library? No fighting and no fucking.” I glanced at Shaw, the reason for both those rules.

He offered me a beatific smile and leaned back in his chair, propping his bare feet on the tabletop. “You’d make a wonderful librarian, Stone. You missed your true calling when you became alpha. But I think Teresa is the one who would look sexy in a bun and glasses.”

“Shut up, or I’ll let her stab you.”

“Cynthia?” Teresa mused, looking slightly put out. “I thought you were sleeping with Lucy.”

“I have an open mind,” Shaw said airily.

“And a diseased dick.”

“Stop thinking about my dick, Teresa.”

“Enough,” I growled, letting some of my alpha power bleed into my voice.

Teresa leaned back, her cheeks coloring slightly as her gaze dropped to the table, and she nodded respectfully. Shaw smirked, but even he couldn’t meet my gaze and glanced away.

“Let’s get down to business,” I said, smoothing it all over. “We have people to kill.”

CHAPTER 3





*A*melia

THAT MORNING, I hurried to wash a load of laundry, clean the kitchen, vacuum and mop our enormous first floor. Nathan couldn't stand a dirty house.

I dumped the mop water into the toilet of the guest bathroom and turned around to find Dylan standing in the doorway, still wearing his mud-streaked sneakers. Anxiety closed around my chest—the anxiety that felt like rage, that felt like being choked—and his eyes widened.

The flash of fear across my son's face woke me up. He hadn't caused my simmering anger and terror.

“Let's remember to take your dirty shoes off before you come inside, buddy,” I said, pulling him against my side into a hug. I'd been rushing to get the house ready so we could leave for the library and playground, but it wasn't worth making him scared. “Maybe you can help me mop.”

“Okay.”

He clung to me a little too tightly, the way he always did after I'd scared him. I wondered what my face had looked like when the thought of redoing all that work, and the consequences if Nathan came home to filthy shoe prints, hit me. The possibility he might hurt Dylan—worse than my scolding ever would—made my throat close up.

I dropped to my knees and hugged Dylan tight. I wanted to tell him he was safe, but I was always scared to make promises to him, because Nathan made me wonder if I could keep them. Instead, I just murmured, “I love you so much. You're the best, kindest boy in the world.”

If Nathan killed me before I could kill him, I hoped Dylan would remember those words, that he'd be a kind boy who

grew into a kind man, despite the toxic men who surrounded him.

“You’re the best mommy,” Dylan whispered into my ear, and I stood with him, hugging him tight.

He wrapped his legs around my waist, and I carried him as I put the mop bucket under the tap and began to fill it again, then added the suds. I gave him a ratty towel, and as I mopped, he followed behind me with the towel, drying the floor.

When we were done, I changed into a dress and ballet flats and checked that my hair and makeup looked fine. Nathan had lost his mind once when Dylan was a baby because the pack had seen me with a messy bun and spit-up dribbled over my shoulder.

I grabbed my brown-and-camel Louis Vuitton bag from the white lockers in the mudroom, threw it over my shoulder, and took both of our jackets out to my new, top-of-the-line minivan. I liked the car, but I hated that Nathan thought we were going to fill it with our children.

Dylan was enough. Dylan was perfect.

And I could barely protect him, anyway.

The thought pressed against my chest like a stone weighing me down, and for a second, I could barely breathe.

“Mommy?” Dylan asked, and I realized I’d frozen in the middle of fastening his car seat straps. I had panic attacks sometimes, and I was terrified of having them in front of Dylan.

Strangely enough, being panicked by the possibility of a panic attack was not super helpful.

“Yes, honey?” I asked, pretending I had no idea what he was asking, and kissed his forehead. I inhaled the clean scent of his shampoo as I breathed in, breathed out, trying to ground myself in the moment.

It looked like I had everything. A beautiful home, an expensive wardrobe, a powerful husband. But I had nothing except Dylan.

And Nathan thought Dylan was his, just like he stole everything else.

No one would feel sorry for me. *Poor little rich girl. Ungrateful bitch. Weak manipulative lying wife. Failure of a mother.* The voice in my head shouting about my worthlessness wasn't mine, exactly, but it wasn't *not* mine either.

"We're going to have fun today," I said brightly, kissed Dylan's forehead one last time before I slid into the smooth leather of the driver's seat.

"Are we going to see Grandma? Uncle Aiden and Aunt Rose?"

"Maybe." I was glad he couldn't see my face. "But we're definitely going to the park."

He cheered from the back seat, and I smiled in the rearview mirror at him. I rolled through the Starbucks drive-through and bought an iced coffee, then we pulled into the parking lot at the playground.

"Fifteen minutes of Mommy, then I get a break," I reminded him as we got out of the car. Fifteen minutes of Mommy, then it was my chance to plot.

I pushed him on the tire swing until it was the end of my shift then headed to a park bench. I was sipping my iced coffee when someone touched my shoulder from behind.

I choked, feeling like icy fingers had run up my spine, as Lawson stepped to my side. "Hey, Amy."

"Lawson," I said, unable to stop my heart from pounding. I was irrationally angry with him. "Keep your hands to yourself."

He stared at me, abashed, his deep brown eyes widening. The sight took me back to when we were both kids. When Lawson was my wide-eyed, freckled-faced best friend, and we ran barefoot down to the creek or played in his treehouse for hours. When we were together, my childhood had felt carefree.

"Sorry," he said. "You're right."

He didn't come sit beside me on the bench like he would have once upon a time. Instead, he stuck his hands into his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels.

Lawson's nieces, five-year-old Molly and eight-year-old June, ran to hug Dylan. Dylan grinned as he dove and wound around the swing set, avoiding their hugs, which only caused them to try harder. I smiled at the sight. He wasn't avoiding touch for the same dark reasons I was. Hopefully he never would.

"You shouldn't be here, Lawson," I said.

"I promised Mom I'd take them for a while. They're getting in her hair. Just like we used to." He grinned at me.

"You know I come here on Tuesdays with Dylan."

His jaw worked once. "I'm not trying to do anything. I know you're married. I just miss my best friend."

"You don't get to be friends with me." My words came out too sharp, and he winced. More softly, I added, "No one does."

Nathan was even jealous of my handful of female friends, but at least I could sometimes get away for an hour or two to see my old friends like Liza.

"Nathan can't take everything from you," Lawson said. "Not my friendship, not me. I'll always be here, Amelia."

His words tore at my heart, but I made my voice cold. "Yes, he can. He can take everything from me, and even if you don't care about your safety, you're putting Dylan and me in danger every time you come around."

He raked his hand through his hair and turned to face me. "Let me help you."

I let out a laugh.

"Come on," he said softly.

"I ran before, remember? I ran, and I'm lucky to be alive."

The memories pressed too close to the surface, a tangled blur of images. Fastening baby Dylan into his car seat with shaking hands. The pine trees flashing by. Nathan's face

through the window when he pulled up alongside me, the rage and cruelty in his eyes before he sideswiped me. Dylan screaming as the car rolled, as I dangled upside down ...

“You were alone then,” Lawson said. “You don’t have to be alone.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Don’t let him win.”

I swung around, studying my former best friend’s handsome face, all rugged good looks under tousled, dark hair. For a second, I was too shocked to speak.

“I don’t let him win.” My voice was taut as a high wire. “You absolute asshole.”

I played a game every day to stay alive, to protect Dylan, a game with deadly stakes. And so far, I’d won every round, even if I choked on my own blood or limped downstairs at two a.m. to hold a bag of frozen peas against my battered face.

I was almost intact.

Dylan was almost happy.

I was strong as hell to make that happen, no matter what it looked like to anyone else.

Lawson raised his hands in apology. “Just tell me how to help, Amy.”

His eyes were begging me.

I softened. I always did for Lawson. But there was one question that always haunted me, that kept me from ever quite trusting him the way I used to before Nathan.

“Are you the one who told Nathan where to find me?” I asked quietly. The words hung in the air, making me wish I could take them back. I’d been afraid to ask them all these years, but I didn’t dare trust him if he’d betrayed me before. I’d always thought I wouldn’t believe him, anyway, but I had to try.

“Are you the reason he ...” I broke off. I couldn’t even speak of the way Nathan and his enforcers had broken down

the door to the motel. The sight of Nathan holding that cocked gun to Brennan's head. The explosion of blood, the scream that had ripped out of my lungs.

"No!" Lawson looked horrified. "No, Amy. Of course not."

"Aiden and you were the only ones who knew."

Had my brother betrayed me? Or my best friend?

Both of them had helped me escape.

Then, one of them had ruined me.

Lawson's jaw ticks. "Did you ask him?"

I turned away, the wind tugging at my hair. Dylan and Molly had climbed to the top of the dome and were sitting close together, their feet kicking as they talked seriously about little kid stuff. With their heads so close together, they were the picture of innocence—the kind of innocent that Lawson and I had been once.

"Sometimes, I think I couldn't bear knowing," I whispered. "And sometimes, I can't bear not knowing."

Lawson looked stricken. "I promise you, I didn't tell Nathan where to find you."

I couldn't bear the weight of that night. "If I'd stayed away from Brennan, he'd be alive. He'd be happy."

"He never would have been happy without you."

I shook my head. There was a lump in my throat. I'd never had the chance to grieve Brennan. My tears after that night had made Nathan vicious, so I'd locked them deep inside. In the shower, with the water streaming in and the pain I carried like pressure in my chest, I would press my hands against the tile and try to cry. But I couldn't. I didn't know how to cry anymore.

It felt like all that grief was a pool of misery and bitterness and pain that was about to open under my feet. Like I was always one slip away from drowning.

Suddenly, Lawson said, “Shit.” His tone changed completely, and so did his presence. He crossed his arms, drawing himself to his full height. His warmth had radiated toward me, but it was gone in a heartbeat, replaced by ice.

I followed his gaze.

Cliff Hegski stalked across the playground toward us, not noticing the children running happily around him. His truck was parked haphazardly on the side of the road; he must have seen us and decided he needed to torment us on Nathan’s behalf. He was Nathan’s sixth-in-command, and if *sixth*-in-command sounded ridiculous, it was. No one cared but Cliff. Cliff thought that being sixth was a big deal, and he thought *he* was a big deal.

Cliff stopped and glanced between the two of us, a smile on his lips. “Well, well, what do we have here?”

“The kids are playing.” Lawson swept his arm toward the playground. “Don’t be weird, man.”

Cliff stared him down. Tension rippled between them, an electric hum like a downed power line—lethal, but not unless someone touched it.

“It was nice talking to you, Lawson, but you should get going.” I smiled at them both, trying to defuse the tension.

“Didn’t you two date when you were teenagers?” Cliff mused.

There was no point in denying it, no matter how damning it would sound to Nathan that I was talking to my ex-boyfriend from when I was fourteen. “For about five minutes, yes.”

Lawson smirked, and my heart dropped. “You just live for drama, Cliff. You should try watching *Grey’s* with my grandmother. Get your drama without being such a pain in the ass.”

Cliff stepped close to Lawson. “I could kick your ass into next week.”

“At a children’s playground.” Lawson agreed. “Real badass over here.”

“Lawson,” I hissed. “Think of Molly and June. *Go.*”

I didn’t want any of the kids to witness violence. At least if we hid it from them, maybe they wouldn’t absorb it, wouldn’t be poisoned by it like we all had been. I wanted to believe the future could be better.

“You heard the lady,” Cliff told Lawson mockingly. “She doesn’t want you, Lawson. Never did. She had Brennan, she has Nathan ... real men. Alphas.”

“The kind of men you aren’t,” I muttered under my breath.

I’d meant to think the words, not say them, and my breath froze in my chest. Cliff froze, too, for a second.

“I’ll get the kids,” Lawson said, finally trying to ease things.

“Get Dylan.” Cliff gave me a nasty smile. “I’ll walk Amelia to the car, make sure she doesn’t meet any other old friends along the way.”

When Lawson was out of sight, Cliff grabbed my arm, his grip painfully tight. He yanked me toward the car.

“Cliff, you’re hurting me,” I said as calmly as I could as he tried to jerk me off my feet, pulling me toward the car. “Nathan won’t appreciate that.”

He let out a short, ugly laugh, and my heart dropped. He didn’t believe my lie.

Sometimes, Nathan liked when other people hurt me.

I was afraid of what would happen when the whole pack realized they could please him by punishing me.

“You’re a real whore, aren’t you, Amelia? Nathan will just be glad I was around to keep you under control.”

He reached around me to open my driver’s side door. As he swung it open, I moved to get inside, but he suddenly stepped behind me and shoved me forward. My head slammed into the side of the doorframe. Stars exploded in my vision and the world reeled. I desperately gripped the steering wheel, trying to keep myself upright, trying to get him to stop.

Cliff looked at me as though he wanted to hit me, but he stopped, his hand braced on the doorframe, his ugly face too close to mine. He snarled, “Tonight, I’m going to lie back and think about what he’s doing to you, and I’m going to ...” He reached down and gripped himself through his jeans. “You fucking deserve it, bitch.”

I didn’t meet his eyes. After a second, he slammed my door and stormed off.

But he didn’t go far. He stopped and watched Lawson, who was carrying Molly on his hip. Junie and Dylan walked beside him. Lawson’s posture was tense, but he was smiling, making some joke with the kids. Junie laughed, but Dylan’s head was down. I had a feeling my boy already picked up on danger far too well for a child.

Lawson put his hand on Dylan’s head, ruffled his hair, and pointed to my car. Dylan ran across the parking lot to me, and I got out of the driver’s side. My head pounded with the movement, but I forced a smile on my face.

“Come on, buddy, time for lunch!” I said brightly, pretending that I wasn’t hurting as I swung the door open for him.

By the time I gingerly climbed into the front seat, Lawson and Cliff were both finally gone. The playground looked peaceful, swings swaying in the breeze, sun shining brightly.

But I knew the damage they’d caused was just beginning.

CHAPTER 4





S *haw*

I STOOD AT THE WINDOWS, looking out from the ready room, listening to Stone as he reviewed the plans for the ambush all over again. I knew what we had planned. But Stone was relentlessly prepared. He was *endlessly* relentless.

“I’ll cut off Nathan’s car,” Stone said. “Cole, you’ll coordinate the assault overall from the command vehicle. I’m going after Nathan.”

I sauntered back to the table and took a seat. Stone’s gaze cut over to me, then away. He knew what I was thinking.

We had to pay back the Longroad pack. But Stone needed this too much, as if it would bring Brennan back.

And nothing would change that our brother was rotting somewhere.

Teresa looked doubtful. “Alpha ...”

She only used the honorific when she wasn’t sure how to broach a subject. I leaned back in my seat, prepared to be amused.

“I’m taking an armored car, Tee. I’ll be fine,” Stone assured her.

I had a feeling Teresa had a little crush on my stone-cold brother—pun not intended. I pitied her; I’d never known anyone to crack through his many layers of walls. Loving Stone was hopeless.

“We’d be in trouble if anything happened to you,” Teresa said. “Our pack can’t lose another alpha.”

She glanced at me, not bothering to hide her lack of enthusiasm over the idea of me being the new heir. And if Liam took the job—even though he was the oldest brother—we’d all be dead within a week. The Longroad pack knew

firsthand how weak he was; they were the ones who had broken him.

“Trust me,” I said. “I don’t want the job. Otherwise, the unhappy shifters in our pack probably would’ve nominated me already.”

“That’s not funny,” Teresa replied crisply.

“It’s a little funny. As funny as a rebellion composed of crybabies and dumbasses can be.” There were only a handful of dissidents in the pack. Most of the pack adored Stone. But I was surprised Stone had left the rebels alive this long.

“Not everything is a joke, Shaw,” Stone said.

“Only because you don’t try hard enough.”

There was a knock on the door. Cole was on his feet before I even saw him move, and he crossed to open the door. He held a whispered conference with Reynolds, one of the older shifters who had served under our father too.

“What?” Stone asked without looking up from the tactical map as Cole strode back across the room.

“Jenny Havens claims that Peter West raped her early this morning.” Cole delivered the words flatly, but then, his demeanor was always flat.

“Claims?” Teresa’s eyebrows rose.

“I’d like to see them both,” Stone said, his voice chilly. “Now. Teresa, can you finish up the logistics?”

He was protecting Teresa. She’d come with us if Stone didn’t give her a more important assignment.

“Of course, Alpha,” she said, her voice cool and neutral, as if there was nothing else beneath that cold presence.

But I knew a little bit about what Teresa had been through, a long time ago.

The three of us headed out, leaving Teresa bent over the maps and plans. The dozens of times that she, Stone, and Cole went through every minute detail would help our people come home alive and ensure the Longroad pack wasn’t as lucky. But

I still didn't want to be part of it when they were so very good at the job.

"Well, I guess I'll be heading back to Cynthia." I yawned and stretched.

"You can come," Stone said. "In case Peter needs to be ... persuaded ... to answer questions."

I didn't bother to argue with my brother. As much as I liked to pretend otherwise, no one ever truly won an argument with Stone.

The three of us strode down Main Street, then hooked a left and traversed the quiet road that led to the small jail. When we walked in, Laurence, Cole's second for pack security, rose to his feet from behind the desk. Jenny sat beside him, her eyes red from crying. Stone's demeanor shifted the second he saw her, his jaw tightening with anger.

"Stay here," Laurence said to her kindly, then walked us back into Cole's neat-as-a-pin office. He said, "I've got Peter waiting in mine. It's all he-said, she-said. They went out last night, and she claims he wouldn't take no for an answer after he walked her home. Hard to tell what happened, exactly. She doesn't look banged up."

"That doesn't mean anything," I pointed out, not that any of them were listening to me.

Stone nodded. "Louisa can help us sort out exactly what happened last night."

"Take him," I said, and Stone glanced at me, his brows rising, probably because I so rarely took an interest in the pack's governance. "Not her. If she's telling the truth, she shouldn't have to see it again."

"You're right," Stone agreed, which were words that always surprised me coming from my big brother.

When we walked back out, Peter leaned over Jenny, speaking quietly and intensely. Jenny looked up at Stone, wide-eyed and desperate.

“What the fuck?” Stone asked, his voice a dangerous rumble. “Who told you to go anywhere, Peter?”

His mouth fell open as Stone’s words had wounded him. “I was just trying to talk to Jenny, tell her that maybe I messed up last night, but I never meant to hurt her ...”

“I’ll see about that,” Stone promised.

He didn’t even have to gesture. Cole always seemed to know what Stone wanted—as though the two of them shared some kind of psychic bond—and as Peter took off running for the door, Cole fell on him. He slammed Peter against the wall the first time to get him under control, and Peter’s head slammed into the drywall with a sick thud. Then Cole did it again, and that was just punishment. Cole wouldn’t brook disrespect of his alpha.

No wonder Stone liked him more than he liked his own baby brother.

“Send for Louisa,” Stone said briefly to Laurence. “We’ll meet her at the rocks.” To Jenny, he said, “You’re free to go.”

There was no escaping the pack, anyway. Stone hesitated then as if he wanted to say something else to her, maybe something comforting, but he didn’t manage it. Instead, he turned back to a silent statue, larger than life and not quite human. His natural form.

She looked wide-eyed and terrified of him, edging around the room and slipping through the door. Stone sighed under his breath to himself.

We dragged a still-babbling Peter through the forest to Louisa’s Rock. That was what we had come to call the place where the witch walked through people’s minds.

Louisa arrived a few minutes later, breathing hard from running through the woods, her cheeks almost as pink as the streaks in her hair. I was always surprised by how young the witch looked, all round cheeks and wide eyes for Stone. I was pretty sure she also had a ridiculous, pointless crush on Stone.

“Do you want to do this or should I?” Louisa asked.

“I’ll do it,” Stone said flatly. He always shouldered the worst burdens grimly, as if that were expected of him as alpha.

Cole forced Peter against the rock and bound him to it. Stone lay down on the other side and grabbed Peter’s hand as the man fought. Louisa’s voice intoned steadily, the sound drifting up like the incense that I was pretty sure she only lit to set a mood.

When Stone rose, his face was furious.

Cole unstrapped the man’s hands and feet.

“Run,” Stone commanded.

He waited as Peter scrambled through the woods.

Then Stone ran after him, already forming into his wolf.

He ripped the man’s throat out right before they reached Main Street.

“I’m surprised you didn’t wait to do that in front of the entire pack,” I drawled as he wiped blood off his hands. “In case there was anyone left here who wasn’t terrified of you.”

“If they don’t do anything wrong, they have no reason to be terrified,” Stone answered, almost managing to sound reasonable.

But I worried about my brother, maybe even more than he worried about me.

CHAPTER 5





*A*melia

I DROVE us to my mother's house in the middle of pack territory. It wasn't a mile from my own house, but I didn't go there often. Lawson still lived next door, and it was dangerous for me to see him.

And seeing my mother had its own issues.

"We're at Grandma's house," I told Dylan brightly.

"We're seeing Grandma today? And Uncle Aiden and Aunt Rose?"

His happy excitement made me smile too.

"Maybe! We'll see if they're home."

As I opened the door, he was already unbuckling and scrambling out of the car. My mother opened the front door and rushed out onto the porch, scooping him up into a hug. The two of them shared a long, tight embrace before she set him down again.

"Hello, Amelia," she said, her smile dimming when she looked from Dylan to me.

She'd looked at me that way my whole life, but somehow, it never stopped hurting.

"Hi, Mom." I hugged her briefly, the briefest ceremony of patted backs and shoulders barely touching. "Mind if we stay for lunch?"

She always played the proper hostess. "Of course, I'd love to have you. I have soup on the stove."

When I was growing up, my mother always had a full cookie jar, soup on the stove, bread dough rising on the counter. My childhood had been chilly but well-fed, and my

friends had been jealous. It had made me so furious when they acted like I was lucky to have her as my mom.

Someday, I'd figure out why she'd never loved me like she loved Aiden and Rose. I couldn't help thinking that something about me must be broken, something that made everyone want to hurt me, punish me, break me.

But then I remembered the way Brennan had looked at me, starry-eyed and smiling, and the way Dylan curled up in my arms or stared up at me like I hung the moon. I could cling to those memories and think maybe, maybe, I wasn't the broken one.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee, soda?" my mother asked.

It was strange to be treated like a guest in the home where I'd grown up. "I'll just get myself some water, thank you. I've got my coffee already. Is Rose home?"

"She's out shopping." My mother smiled slightly, secretly.

"Okay." I didn't press the subject. My mother was always strange and secretive. It made her feel powerful.

She and I made small talk, the kind strangers do, while we ate. Dylan eased the awkwardness, talking about nothing.

Rose came in halfway through lunch, carrying handfuls of shopping bags, a grin written across her face. She seemed to be rushing toward eighteen, her makeup heavy, her long, dark brown hair woven into an elaborate fishtail braid. The girls of the pack did each other's hair all the time; my arms would've ached too much if I'd tried to recreate that style on myself. Funny that a stupid braid could make me feel small and unwanted. I used to braid her hair, and my friends used to braid mine.

She froze for a second when she saw me, then smiled and dropped the bags, coming over to hug me. I hugged her back, wondering what that pause was for.

"Hey, stranger, nice to see you for once," Rose teased.

"Big shopping trip?"

"Just picking up a few things."

She'd dropped a garment bag along with the other purchases, and I hung it on the back of the chair so it wouldn't wrinkle. It was a long, silver gown. Expensive. "Special occasion coming up?"

"Just a date." Rose couldn't resist smiling, and I had a feeling it was more than a date.

"You should tell her," Mom said. To me, she added, "You're out of the loop, since you never stop over unless you need something."

That was rude but also true.

Rose looked hesitant, then grinned as if she couldn't hide it. "I think someone's going to ask me to marry him soon. He told me to get a really nice dress, one I would want pictures in."

My heart froze. My baby sister was too young to get married. A wedding hadn't exactly brought me a life of bliss. But she looked so happy, I managed, "Who?"

"Cliff Hegski."

I stared at her, shocked. "I see."

She frowned at me, but I already wore the most neutral expression I could summon.

Behind Mom's back, she mouthed at me, "What's wrong?"

"There's a big world out there. You could do anything with your life, but you're going to make yourself into a *Hegski* and have his babies?" I mouthed back.

She frowned, but then my mom turned around again, and we both dropped it.

When Dylan ran out of the kitchen to the toy chest Mom kept in the living room for him, I asked, "Do you mind keeping him overnight?"

"Why?" Mom asked.

Rose nodded at me jerkily and walked past me into the living room to play with Dylan. She was a great aunt, always happy to play board games or tag. When she played with

Dylan, I caught glimpses of the sister I remembered; for the last five years, she'd been cold and weird with me, and I didn't know what I'd done or how to repair the rift between us.

"Just want to spend some extra time with Nathan tonight," I said, the lie like oil, clinging to my mouth.

"That sounds good," my mom said, then gave me a hard look. "Marriage is important."

"I'm aware."

"Are you?" she asked tartly. "Sometimes, I don't think you're really trying to make things work with Nathan."

"What do you want from me, Mom?"

"I want you to not ruin things for Rose," she hissed. "You always ruin things. She's happy."

I let out a disbelieving laugh. If only it was that easy to ruin Cliff for Rose. I'd have to talk to Rose later, but I didn't know if she'd believe me about what a monster Cliff was. Still, I had to try. She was my sister.

He idolized Nathan and enjoyed knowing Nathan would punish me. Sooner or later, he'd hurt her.

"I'm not going to ruin anything," I said bitterly. "You still have an extra toothbrush and clothes for Dylan, right?" A familiar, obstinate look had come over her face, and my heart sank. "Mom. Come on."

"You need to work things out with Nathan. You always drop Dylan over here when you two are fighting."

"*We're not fighting,*" I said. "*He's beating the shit out of me, Mom.*"

She put her hands over her ears, as though she refused to hear I was in trouble. But all she said was, "I hate when you use that kind of language. You're so crass."

"Don't you care? Don't you care about me? About Dylan?"

"Of course, I do. Don't be ridiculous. That's why I'm trying to help you do the right thing. I'm not getting involved."

You need to work out your issues with Nathan.”

“I’m not asking you to get involved. I’m asking you to take Dylan, so he doesn’t see—” I broke off. She’d pressed her hands over her ears again, and I grabbed one wrist, jerking it away from her ear. She gave me a startled, affronted look, but I went on. Maybe I couldn’t make her listen, but I was going to try. “So Dylan doesn’t watch Nathan murder me!”

“You’re always so dramatic,” she sniffed.

“And you’re always so selfish.”

But I couldn’t make my mother love me, take care of me.

In the end, Dylan and I went home together, to that big, beautiful, dangerous house.

CHAPTER 6





S *tone*

TWILIGHT WAS FALLING as Shaw and I headed across the open yard toward our house. The sun seemed to brush the pines, casting long shadows across the grass, and the night felt peaceful.

“Liam is going to have questions when we all disappear on this mission,” Shaw said.

No matter how peaceful the night *seemed*, there was usually little peace when my siblings were involved.

“Liam doesn’t need to know about any of this,” I replied.

“I think he’s going to figure it out. He’s crazy, not stupid.”

I whistled. “Don’t let Karissa hear you say that. You’ll wish she was the pacifist.”

Our oldest brother was a pacifist, which was weird as hell for a shifter. But he was generally weird as hell, even by human standards. On the other hand, our sister, Karissa, was definitely not the non-violent type.

“What don’t you want me to hear?” A feminine voice drifted out of the shadows from the front porch.

I jumped despite myself. I wasn’t afraid of much, but my mother and my sister had always been the exception to the rule.

As I strode up the steps to the expansive front porch, I glanced around. “We were discussing protecting Liam from the raid on the Longroad pack.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me before turning on her heel. Her long, dark curls tumbled over her shoulders. “You didn’t answer my question, oh mighty alpha.”

“It’s been a rough day, Karissa. Could you not?”

“Aw,” she crooned. “Don’t worry. I made a nice dinner. Take off your shoes and I’ll bring your slippers.”

“I need a wife,” I muttered, heading for the door.

“I’d tell her she didn’t need to take your shit, either,” she promised me.

But when I walked in the front door, the scent of a fresh-cooked meal hit me.

“You two are late,” Karissa groused.

The lights of the house felt bright against the falling of the night, until I reached the dining room, where the lights were off and candles glittered across the table. Karissa loved to set a nice table.

“Sorry,” Shaw said. “Stone was busy killing a man before supper.”

Liam glanced up from the end of the table, his stormy gray eyes narrowing as he took in the three of us. “Cole and Teresa aren’t coming?”

“It’s just us tonight.” I tried to make my voice quiet, soothing. Liam hated any change.

Liam looked at me with his vaguely unfocused eyes, a slight frown creasing the skin between his brows. Liam also hated when I was condescending. But I didn’t know how the fuck to talk to my brother, no matter how much I wanted to help.

Shaw took the seat across from Liam. “It’s the eve of the night that we lost Brennan, Liam. We wanted to take some time to remember him. Privately.”

Apparently we were done talking about the rapist’s death. Good.

Liam rubbed his hand through his hair, his eyes fixed on the table. He had the fewest memories of Brennan, and I wasn’t sure what he remembered, because he barely talked to any of us.

When the Longroad pack requested a human face to our peace treaty, my father had been all too eager to get rid of the son he considered an embarrassment. Maybe if he had sent Brennan, Stone, or me, the Longroads would've treated us decently. My father hadn't valued Liam, and so they hadn't either. I didn't know what they'd done to him in the years while Brennan and I plotted to get him back, but it had left him not just different, but broken.

After Liam returned to the pack, Brennan hadn't lived long enough to watch Liam come back to life.

"I made his favorites," Karissa mused. She reached out and touched Liam's shoulder, smiling at him encouragingly, but he didn't meet her eyes to see. "Liam helped me cook."

The table was spread with Brennan's favorite foods. Corn dogs. Roast chicken with stuffing and gravy. Mashed potatoes. Glazed carrots. Kettle popcorn. A chocolate ganache layer cake *and* ooey gooey butter cake. It was a ridiculous selection of food, Karissa's love displayed with sugar and salt.

"I'm getting a beer, Shaw. You want anything?" My brother had driven me crazy today, showing up late, and I'd chewed his ass out privately once I sent Cole off. But I'd forgive him now.

"Yeah, I'll take a Blue Moon. Thanks." Shaw's tension visibly released.

The four of us only had each other. I led the pack, and that was relentless. This was the only place where I could just *be*. My house was a refuge, even if every one of my siblings was a pain in the ass in their own way.

Throwing a handful of popcorn in my mouth, I headed through the kitchen to the second fridge in the four-car garage. We always had to be prepared to entertain, even though I hated for non-family to enter our house. I tolerated it only to be the alpha the pack needed.

When I came back in, I tossed Shaw the bottle, and he caught it against his chest, not breaking his conversation at all. My little brother could *talk*.

“So Brennan said, ‘I thought there was no one here,’” Shaw finished.

Karissa laughed. “He was *so* unobservant sometimes. Remember that time he ducked under you when you’d climbed to the top of the doorway, and then Mom asked where you were, and he didn’t know?”

“He was too lost in his book. Always in his own world,” I mused, but I had fond memories of my brother walking with a book open in his hands.

Our father hadn’t wanted a bookish, intellectual son. He’d teased Brennan for being too deep in his own head all the time. But our brother’s smarts had been enough to take down our father when Brennan challenged him for alpha. He’d been determined to rescue Liam.

“He wasn’t lost in his own world,” Karissa said, her eyes suddenly growing sad. She glanced at Liam, involuntarily. “He always had the right idea.”

“Why are you looking at me?” Liam demanded, his eyes still on his plate. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“No one said it was.” Karissa sounded confused.

“It’s the Longroad pack’s fault,” I said, anger simmering under the surface.

Liam rose from the table, so abruptly that he pushed it away from him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I demanded, reaching to grab his shoulder. “It’s okay, Liam.”

He twisted away, keeping me from touching him, and I didn’t push it. His gaze meeting mine, he snapped, “You look just like Dad when you’re angry.”

Anger twisted through my gut, a sudden swell of rage that touched the corners of my vision with red. But I always controlled that fury. I took a step back and let him pass, raising my hands dramatically.

“He didn’t mean that,” Shaw told me quietly.

“No, Liam always means what he says.” There was no point in denying it. “When he bothers to talk.”

Normally, he didn't bother to talk *to me*.

Karissa pushed back her chair. “I'll go.”

“Give him some time alone,” I disagreed. “He barely got to know Brennan again before we lost him. None of us understand what this is like for him.”

Karissa patted the table. “Sometimes, you're wise, oh mighty alpha.”

“I don't know why I keep you around.” But I took my seat at the table.

“Because I'm very good at baking.” Pulling the chocolate cake closer, she picked up the knife. “Come on, let's eat dessert. Life is short.”

Depending on how our ambush of the Longroad pack went tomorrow, it might be very short.

After we ate, Karissa went hunting for candles. Shaw rolled his eyes but stayed behind to help her. Whatever she needed to do to make our memorial to Brennan pretty, we would humor. It was part of how Karissa grieved.

When I stepped out onto the porch, Liam sat on the steps, his arms folded around his legs. It drove me crazy when he slept outside, but I knew he would tonight. He might even take to the woods as the wolf all night long.

Something must have reminded him of all those years of captivity. Maybe that *something* was me, and a feeling that was hard and flat pressed into my chest at the thought. I couldn't help that I looked like our asshole father; as I got older, sometimes my own face in the mirror was jarring to me. Brennan and I had looked alike, but Brennan had died young, and I kept getting older. More like Dad.

I leaned on the porch railing beside him. “You want to go up with us to the grave?”

“He's not really buried there.”

“No,” I agreed. We’d never recovered his body. No one survived a headshot, though, so we knew his corpse was rotting somewhere; I’d just failed to bring him home. “But it helps to have someplace to go. To remember.”

“What if he didn’t really die?”

Wishful thinking.

“No one could have survived that.” If Brennan had even survived the beating Nathan Longroad had given him before he squeezed the trigger. My hands flexed into fists, then relaxed.

Nathan had sent me the cell phone footage he’d taken of beating Brennan, and my brother had appeared as if he might be dead even before Nathan put the gun against his temple.

With that message, Nathan had signed his death warrant. But I’d bided my time for the past five years, waiting for the right moment to serve it.

I’d caught a glimpse of Amelia in the background of the video. She’d looked wide-eyed and terrified, but she’d been unhurt, unbound. I’d stared at her face a thousand times, wondering what was happening in her head in that moment.

If she betrayed my brother, she deserved to die.

“Brennan was strong,” Liam muttered. “Stronger than any of us.”

I raked my hand through my hair, remembering how Brennan had changed in the years after Dad took Liam away. He’d always loved to read, but over time he’d forged himself into a weapon, into a son Dad was proud of, into an alpha.

His only weaknesses had been Amelia, and us, his siblings.

But mostly Amelia.

“Yeah, he was,” I said quietly. “I miss him.”

“Me too.” He spoke so softly, I wasn’t sure I’d really heard it.

Then Karissa came out with the candles, and she passed one to each of us. I gripped it as the four of us climbed the

long, switchback trail to the side of the mountain where we'd buried my brother's too-light casket. The ground was treacherous and dark, and my candle tilted to one side, spilling hot wax across my knuckles.

Karissa stumbled, and I reached for her, but Liam got there first. He gripped her arm to steady her, then wove it through his. The moonlight shone across their dark hair as the two of them exchanged a quick glance of understanding. I wasn't sure Liam talked to Karissa any more than he talked to me but the two of them still seemed to have a special bond.

We reached the cross, crowded by rose bushes. The vines were barren right now, and thorns caught at the bottom of jeans as we stood around the grave. The flowers were obviously Karissa's idea, but Shaw had been the one with dirt under his fingernails. Karissa was a fucking superhero in her own way; she was the only one who could coax some work ethic out of Shaw.

"It looks wild up here," I said.

"Like Brennan." Karissa balanced her candle carefully, then reached out and wove her arm through mine too, linking me with Liam on her other side.

It wasn't how I'd meant the words, I didn't know why we had to stand up to our knees in thorns, but I felt a rush of relief now she'd taken it that way.

"Like Brennan," I agreed.

"I feel left out," Shaw muttered, then he looped his arm through mine. The little fucker. But I just shook my head and let him be... Shaw.

The four of us stood over the empty grave. All I felt was cold, boiling rage when I looked at that damned stone cross, looped with thorns since the roses hadn't bloomed yet. I should have buried my brother. I'd failed him.

But I couldn't fail *them*, the siblings I had left. So I pushed all that anger down so that it boiled through my blood, and I just listened as they told their stories about Brennan.

Then Karissa twisted, looking up into my face. Expectant silence hung over us all.

“I have nothing to say.” I growled.

There was a door deep in the back of my mind, and all the memories of Brennan were shoved back in there. My pack needed me to protect them, and they had since the day he left. I hadn’t had time to grieve him then, and I didn’t have it now. When we found the blood-splattered, empty hotel room, Shaw had cried openly. Karissa had buried her face in his chest, the two of them sobbing together. The two of them felt all their pain so openly, wore it on their skin, in their damned faces that never hid a feeling.

I couldn’t imagine being so vulnerable.

“Stone,” Karissa said, and her voice was full of concern.

“Did you want to sing?” I didn’t know why she liked to sing a hymn—none of us had grown up going to church—but I’d sing a fucking song if it made her feel a little less sad.

She hesitated, then squeezed my arm. “Will you sing *You Can Close Your Eyes?*”

Christ. But she was looking up at me with a wet sheen in her eyes, and even though I fucked up the emotional side of things all the time, maybe this was one more way I needed to take care of my family. “Yeah, fine.”

I sang the words, distancing myself from the place where we were, barely hearing my deep voice rolling out the words. Karissa was sobbing by the end of the song. She and Shaw both pulled their arms away from mine as Shaw stood in front of her, pulling out a handkerchief—my fucking brother, who owned a handkerchief—and she wiped her eyes with it before he folded her into a hug.

I blew out Karissa’s candle before she set herself on fire, because she was waving it around haphazardly. She looked up at me with a dour expression, but I didn’t care.

Brennan was dead, and none of this would bring him back.

The bloodshed coming wasn't going to raise any ghosts either, but seeing Nathan Longroad's head explode into red mist was going to be fucking grand for my mental health.

When we were coming back down again, Karissa steered close to me and asked quietly, "What are you planning?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

Karissa glared at me with eyes that held a glint of the wolf, and Shaw said, "I want no part of this," before walking ahead.

"Everyone's arming up," she said under her breath, glancing at Liam down the path. "Come on, Stone. You're not going to solve anything by starting a war."

"I'm not starting anything—I'm finishing it. I'm getting revenge for Brennan."

"First of all, you're stupid to think that's going to be the end of it. And second of it all, why are you keeping secrets from me?"

"I don't want you to have to lie to Liam. I'm just trying to protect him." He couldn't handle the truth of what would happen tomorrow.

"No, you aren't." She shook her head. "I want revenge as much as you do, Stone. But not war. Find a way to take Nathan out quietly."

"He's not the only one with blood on his hands."

"And soon you'll join him," she snapped. "You're going to invade their pack? How many people will die tomorrow that had nothing to do with Brennan's death?"

"Don't drink Liam's koolaid," I warn her.

She shook her head, again.

"Feel free to challenge me for alpha, then." My voice came out cold, but I knew she never would. "You lead the pack, if you think you can do a better job."

Her face tightened as if I had slapped her. I'd gone too far, and I knew it; she'd already watched Brennan and our father

rip at each other. Even though our father had been an asshole, seeing our big brother rip his throat out had been unpleasant.

“You’re not above criticism just because you’re the alpha.”

“Not around here.” The village lights twinkled up at us from our place on the hill, and no one there would’ve bitched at me. Down there, the pack treated me like I was a fucking god.

But here, I was just their brother.

Liam had turned around and come to a stop, staring at both of us. His eyes had the faint manic glint they got sometimes, too wide, the whites too visible. An unnerving sense drove through my body like a stake. Shaw stood beside him, and he ran his hand through his hair, staring at Liam like he didn’t know how to help him. I understood that feeling all too well.

Karissa and I both fell silent and headed down the trail to join them.

By the time we re-entered the pack village, the four of us looked like one united front again.

Even though we were meant to be five.

CHAPTER 7





*A*melia

I MADE Nathan's favorite dinner that night. In the long, quiet afternoon, I read to Dylan, built DUPLO constructions and helped him knock them down with rampaging plastic dinosaurs, and turned on KIDZ BOP music and danced with him. I could barely focus on his games or the soft prattle of his voice, but I smiled, anyway, even though the effort of smiling made me feel like I would rather die than keep pretending. If I made sure Dylan's bucket was full, hopefully he wouldn't protest being sent to his room after dinner.

I made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sat him at the big marble kitchen island to eat it while I wiped down the counters again. He drank his chocolate milk and chattered to me and I tried to listen.

The front door slammed open, and I grabbed a paper towel and wet it at the sink to wipe his messy face. He squirmed away as I reached for him.

"Dylan, just let me wipe your face. Then you can go play on your iPad in your room."

He pushed my hand away. "I'm not done eating."

"Dylan, come on," I urged. Nathan hated when he looked messy, and the chocolate milk mustache above his lip made him look like he'd stepped out of a western. "Real quick. Just help me."

"Listen to your mother," Nathan said from the doorway, his voice a deep rumble, and my stomach swooped with the danger.

"I don't want to," Dylan said stubbornly.

As my heart beat a wild warning, I dropped the wet paper towel on the countertop and smiled at Nathan. "It's no big deal. How was your day?"

Nathan ignored me, his gaze fixed on Dylan. “Wipe your face.”

Dylan stared back at him and didn’t answer.

“I said wipe your face.” Nathan’s voice had gone quiet and dangerous, which was worse than when he yelled. He picked up the wet paper towel and held it out to Dylan.

“No.”

That one word sent my heart beating violently. I stepped in front of Nathan, smiling, hoping it would seem completely unintentional that I was blocking him from my son. “I guess he knows little boys are supposed to have dirty faces—”

Nathan grabbed my shoulders and moved me aside, all in one quick motion. He dwarfed me, and by the time I could dart toward him again, he had already grabbed Dylan’s collar and snatched him off the stool. The plate went flying, shattering into pieces on the floor.

Dylan’s feet kicked two inches above the floor as Nathan wiped his face, too hard, then set him on his feet. He shoved Dylan as he released his collar. Dylan fell onto his bottom, his face screwed up as if he were going to cry.

“Go to your room,” I told Dylan firmly, and he scrambled up and ran away, his feet slipping on the hardwood floor down the hall until he reached the stairs. Sobbing, he glanced back over his shoulder at me, a look of betrayal written across his face, before his little feet pounded up the steps. A sick sensation of guilt and failure and dread settled into my stomach.

Nathan stared at me, his eyes cold.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.” My voice shook. So much for pretending everything was fine and wishing for it to be true. I hoped that hadn’t sounded as desperate to him as it sounded to me. “Chicken parm is in the oven.”

My own simpering voice made me despise myself. I couldn’t imagine what other people thought.

What kind of a waste of a mother can't protect her own little boy?

"Do you think I'm that easy to manipulate?" he asked me, and his voice was even quieter than it had been with Dylan. "That you can make my favorite dinner, and I won't care that you're sneaking around with Lawson behind my back?"

"I wasn't, I promise. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Oh?" He leaned close to me, his big hand braced on the island, not quite touching me. I froze, caught in his predatorial gaze. His voice still held that same deadly kind of quiet when he said, "Because you know if you did, I'd kill you."

For a few long seconds, I couldn't speak, but he was obviously waiting. Finally, I whispered, "I know."

"What am I going to do with you, Amelia?" he asked me. "I've loved you since you were a girl. Even though I could have had any woman in the pack, I waited for you. I've given you everything. I've been a good husband, haven't I?"

"Yes." The lie came too easily. Blame it on my motherly instincts or even self-preservation, but I would tell Nathan whatever he wanted to hear.

"And you keep disappointing me. Why can't you be a good wife? Don't I deserve a good wife?"

"Yes. Of course, you do."

"You still love him, don't you?" His upper lip lifted in a sneer. He didn't need to say the name.

Brennan was my ghost, but he haunted Nathan too.

"No," I said, a second too late, because even after all these years, it killed me to deny the way I felt for Brennan. "And I promise, Lawson was just taking his sister's kids to the playground. He wasn't trying anything—"

"Why would I believe you, you little liar?" He stepped toward me, his reddening face too close to mine. His breath stank of old coffee. "You pretty little liar."

“Nathan, please.” My voice broke as if I were on the verge of tears. Pathetic.

“You embarrassed me in front of *Cliff*.” His lip drew back in a snarl.

“I’m sorry. You’re right—I shouldn’t have even talked to Lawson, but that’s all it was. We said hello to each other.”

“He still fucking wants you.” Then, suddenly, he grabbed my hair and yanked me toward him. I let out a startled cry then tried to swallow it. *Don’t let Dylan hear*. “Come here.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’m going to show Lawson you’re mine.”

“Nathan, please,” I begged. “We can’t leave Dylan alone. Let’s take him to my mother’s house and let her watch him overnight while we talk things out.”

She wouldn’t deny me with Nathan at my side. She’d be eager to please him.

“Maybe I *should* bring him with us,” Nathan agreed. “Show him what his whore of a mother deserves. Show him what’s going to happen to him if he keeps acting like a little bitch.”

He towed me through the house. My feet slipped on the expensive Italian tile as I tried to keep pace with him even as he pulled me off-balance.

He yanked open the door to the garage, then shoved me down the steps. I tried to catch myself, but my foot slipped off the step. My knee banged painfully into one of the wooden steps. Adrenaline had me up and moving, though, heading toward his truck, desperate to obey and pacify him.

“Get in the truck,” he barked.

I grabbed the door handle and scrambled into the passenger seat. As he got into the driver’s side, I wished desperately that I could still make myself cry. Maybe that would convince him I was sorry, would ease his anger.

“Please,” I whispered. “Please, Nathan, calm down.”

“I’m calm,” he told me, his voice icy. He was often pure volatile fury when he hit me, but suddenly, I realized this was different.

It didn’t leave me feeling any more likely to survive the evening.

And we were going to see Lawson.

I’d watched Nathan beat Brennan half to death, then blow his brains out. I couldn’t stand to watch him hurt Lawson. But Dylan ... what would happen to Dylan if I never came home?

I’d sacrifice Lawson—I’d sacrifice myself—to save Dylan if I had to.

He kept scolding me as he drove, his voice building, and I could tell he was working himself into a greater and greater rage.

When we got to Lawson’s house, he pulled into the driveway. As I climbed down from the truck, my knee stiff, my gaze drifted to my mother’s house next door. Lawson’s car was gone. I didn’t know if that should make me feel relief or even more terrified.

Nathan slapped me across the face. Pain exploded in my cheek, stars dancing across my vision. I might’ve fallen, but he had his hand on my shoulder, bearing me up, as he slapped me again. This time, he let me fall, and I slammed to my knees in the gravel.

“What, exactly, did you and Lawson talk about?”

“We just said hi,” I said.

He grabbed my hair, his fingers yanking out strands as he knotted my hair around his fist, and I winced. When he hit me, my head jerked to one side, and along with the burst of stars in front of my vision, my scalp burned as a clump of hair tore loose.

“Cliff said you were having a real deep conversation.” He waved his fingers through the air, letting the breeze catch the clump of my long hair, which drifted across the yard.

“No, we weren’t,” I promised. “We asked each other about the kids. That’s all.”

“Lawson,” Nathan shouted. “Come on out here.”

“I don’t think he’s home.”

“You know his fucking car, huh? Recognize it?”

He dragged me toward the porch. I caught a blurry glimpse of a curtain twitching in the window of my mother’s house. For a second, I saw Rose’s shocked face.

My mother pulled her away, and the curtain fell.

Nathan slammed his big fist into the door, over and over. I backed up until my back hit the porch railing. All I wanted was to shift and run, or just to run, but Nathan would be on me in a few strides. His wolf was so much bigger than mine, and then we would be out in the forest, and he might bury me under the swaying trees that used to fill me with a sense of peace.

There was no point in running. Instead I watched in horror as he slammed his enormous shoulder into the door again and again, until it crumpled inward. He reared back and kicked it, and it flew halfway across the living room. It landed on a pair of Barbies. He was already grabbing me, yanking me forward into the living room.

The house was quiet. Dark.

LAWSON—AND Molly and Junie—weren’t here, at least.

“How should we let Lawson know we were here?” he snarled, before he backhanded me across the face. Pain exploded across my jaw, my nose, and my vision went red. The world was all a blur as he hauled me forward and wiped my bloodied face across the couch.

That wasn’t the end of it. He dragged me with him as he opened the door to each bedroom, looking in at the childrens’ rooms before he found Lawson’s room.

“Strip,” he ordered, before he pushed me into Lawson’s bed.

I went somewhere inside my head, deep inside, somewhere Brennan smiled down at me. Back to the bonfire, the night we first met, when he leaned over me and whispered to me that I was safe.

But no matter how hard I tried, I kept surfacing back in that room, to the sound of Nathan’s heavy breathing, to the way the ceiling fan rocked back and forth, to the way the ground seemed to shake like I’d never find solid ground.



The world had gone dark around the edges. When we got home, the front door was open, and Dylan stood there, crying. He thought we had abandoned him.

I tried to smile at him, but he cringed away, and I realized my teeth were bloody. I must look like a monster to my own son right now.

“Go to your room, Dylan, it’s okay,” I murmured. “Mommy had an accident, and Daddy is helping.”

Dylan stared at me as if he knew it was a lie. But, this time, when I whispered *please*, he ran. Relief overwhelmed me.

I went to the room I shared with Nathan, paused at the door, wishing I could lock him out. But what if he went after Dylan instead, took his anger out on him?

I was standing at the door when Nathan came down the hallway. His gaze met mine and he stepped into the room with me.

At least when he closed the door behind him, he closed Dylan out from what would happen next.

CHAPTER 8





*A*melia

“WAKE UP, AMY.”

My head throbbed and waking up seemed impossible. But the voice wouldn't leave me alone, and the hand on my arm wouldn't stop shaking me.

“Come on. You're okay. Wake up.”

The voice had a desperate edge that cut through the pain. I opened my eyes to find my sister staring down at me, her gaze wide and horrified. Beyond her, the view out the window was of a dark night sky, the curtains drifting around the window with the breeze.

She pressed her hand to her mouth. “Oh my god, Amy. I didn't know ...”

“It's okay,” I whispered. “Is Dylan all right?”

“I didn't see him. I snuck in.” She gestured toward the open window, the oak outside. My sister has always been a climber. “I was afraid of what Nathan did to you after ...” She trailed off, shuddering. “But this is so much worse. I should have stopped him. I should have—”

“There was nothing you could have done.” My voice was a low, broken rasp. He'd choked me.

At the sound of footsteps downstairs, the two of us froze, staring at each other. He was still in the house.

“You've got to go,” I whispered.

He was on the stairs. Rose looked at me, wide-eyed with horror.

“Hide,” I said urgently. “My closet.”

She ran frantically for my closet off the bathroom. Since Nathan and I both had our own walk-in closets, there was no

reason for him to go in there.

Frantically, I peeled myself off the floor and staggered toward the bathroom. Nathan was only likely to rage more if he saw me all bloodied and bruised. He felt guilty afterward—he had to convince himself I deserved it—and sometimes, that only made him furious all over again.

The sight in the mirror made me want to puke. Dark bruises spread along my jaw, and my eyes were swollen and bruised. I looked broken, and I did my best to clean myself up without looking. The shaking woman in the mirror didn't look like a survivor.

Gingerly, but as quickly as possible, I washed off the blood and tried to smooth down my hair with shaking hands.

I turned to find him in the doorway.

“Always so vain,” he said. “But you are a very pretty girl.”

“Thank you,” I said, and he frowned at the rasp of my voice.

“Come here,” he said, gently. He held out a hand and drew me out of the bathroom, walking me to the bed. The two of us sat down together. “I hate hurting you. I just love you so much and sometimes I get a little crazy because of it. You understand, don't you, sweetheart?”

I nodded.

“You have to behave, Amelia.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“Tomorrow, I'm taking some of my men on a trading trip with the Pine Valley pack. I miss you so much when we're apart.” He brushed his lips over my forehead. “I'll be thinking of you during every minute of that convoy.”

My heart rose. The Pine Valley pack was a long drive. Two days and a night of peace. I could curl up with Dylan in the bed, watch movies with him while my body began to heal from this abuse. Making sure to hide my relief, I just nodded.

“I hope you heal up some tonight,” he said tenderly. “Get into bed, and I’ll bring you a bowl of ice cream.”

“Thank you.”

When he finally left, Rose emerged.

“You’ve got to go,” I whispered, pointing to the window.

“I will.” She stared at me, though, as if she had something to say. Finally, she murmured, “Why, Amelia? Why did you tell him you’re the one who’s sorry?”

“You don’t understand. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect Dylan.”

She knelt next to me, taking my hand. “Promise me you’ll let me help you. We’ll get you out of here.”

“Not tonight,” I whispered. I couldn’t drag my baby sister into this mess.

Not unless it was the only way to save Dylan.

I hated what Nathan had turned me into.

She looked at me, disappointed, but when I pointed to the window, she finally slipped out.

CHAPTER 9





*A*melia

LATE THAT NIGHT, I lay awake as Nathan snored beside me, debating the best way to kill him.

The convoy would take a lot of twisting, dangerous mountain roads. I knew enough about cars to understand that cutting brake lines only worked in movies. Cutting the line would cause an immediate failure of the brakes; he'd notice before he left the driveway.

But it would take a lot longer for tires to come off thanks to loose lug nuts. Loose tires could very well be fateful on those mountain roads. Nathan had so many enemies, inside and outside the pack, it wasn't likely anyone would pin me as the murderer. I was just the demure, whipped little wife, after all.

Sometimes, it's a gift when no one sees you as you truly are.

I slipped out of bed, listening to his rough breathing, then made my way across the room. My heart hammered as I padded barefoot down the stairs, adrenaline flooding my body; the fear of getting caught overwhelmed the pain that came with every step. I glanced down at my body, caught a glimpse of the deep blue-black bruises left by his hands and fists and boots, and refused to look again. When he had touched me, I found myself repulsed by my own body. He even took my body away from me, making it *his* and not my own.

In the kitchen, I opened the cabinet that held vitamins, pill bottles, and sunscreen and pulled out the Motrin. I filled a glass of water at the sink, my hands shaking, then stopped and listened for him.

The house was silent except for Nathan's snoring.

I set the glass down on the countertop a bit too hard, the noise seeming to echo through the kitchen. Then I ran quickly to the garage. If he found me, I would say I couldn't sleep, that I'd left my book in the car. There was always a pile of books on my passenger seat; I hated to get caught in a boring situation without a romance novel to lose myself in.

Hastily, I grabbed the right tool and set to loosening the lug nuts on his truck. My heart in my throat, I kept a constant eye on the door. After rushing to put the tool back, I leaned down and finger tightened them just a little, wanting to make sure they held until he was well down the road.

When I looked up for a second, I saw someone looming in the doorway. It only took a blink to decide my imagination had gotten away from me. He had me seeing shadows, seeing ghosts.

I felt like a ghost myself already. As if my early death had become inevitable the moment Nathan stepped into my path.

I retrieved a book from the car, just to have an excuse, and went back into the house. I was alone in the kitchen as I swallowed the Motrin and drank my water, but I couldn't help fearing that he would find me at any moment.

While I climbed the stairs, holding the railing too tightly, as if I could haul my aching body up, I heard a creak in the hall. Panic fluttered through my chest, no matter how much I told myself to calm down. If anything, my nerves would betray me to him. This life of mine had taught me to lie.

But it was Dylan who stood frozen in the doorway of his room, a small, shadowed figure. He seemed to be stuck there like prey, as though he was afraid of being caught by Nathan too. He probably was.

"Where were you?" he whispered, his voice barely audible.

He probably meant where I'd gone just now, but I couldn't help hearing it as a question of where I'd been tonight when Nathan hurt him. When he realized he was alone in the house.

“Just getting a drink.” I knelt next to him, and the words froze to ice on my lips. What could I say to him? After all the lies I’d told, I still hated lying to my son. “I love you so much, Dylan.”

I couldn’t promise I’d always be there for him, that I’d always protect him, and that made me hate Nathan more than anything else.

Dylan merely stared at me, and I wondered if he still believed that I loved him when I didn’t protect him. The thought made something tear open in my chest.

Then he threw himself into my arms, hugging me fiercely, and even though every bruise throbbed where he touched me, I hugged him back tightly.

I carried him into his room and lay down beside him. I stroked his hair, watching his face relax into sleep. He was such a handsome little man; sometimes, he smiled in a way that was all Brennan, causing my heart to melt and terror to overtake me all at the same time. Surely, someone would eventually notice that he looked just like Brennan as a boy. What would Nathan, in all his fragile pride, do to Dylan if he realized?

Despite all the fear, all the anxiety racing through my blood, I felt myself soften toward sleep while watching him. Dylan was my only peace, but he depended on *me* to make the world peaceful for him. The most overwhelming thing about parenting is that kids think you can fix anything, and it’s an innocence that can’t last, but it still hurts to kill that innocence with your failures.

I meant to get up before I fell asleep, but sleep claimed me. The next thing I knew, it was morning. Bright sun streamed through the windows, and I sat up, horrified.

Nathan hated it when I slept in the same bed as Dylan. Since Dylan was a baby, Nathan had insisted that he go to sleep in his own room so Dylan couldn’t ruin his time with me. Nathan thought he deserved me all night, whenever he wanted me. The memory of Dylan’s feeble newborn cries from his crib while Nathan crushed me against the wall, then

covered my throat in his wet kisses, made my stomach twist all over again.

I rushed out of bed and headed to the bedroom, where I found rumpled bedcovers. No Nathan.

There was a rumble of tires outside, and I looked out to see trucks parking along the street in front of our house. The convoy was getting ready to roll out. Hastily, I pulled on jeans and a sweater, brushed my teeth, and smoothed down my hair gingerly; my scalp still ached. I stared at my bruised face and debated if there was even a point to caking makeup painfully over those bruises before deciding I couldn't handle it today. Then I rushed downstairs to make coffee for Nathan and the others. It wouldn't be too long before he'd be gone and I'd have a respite.

While the coffee steadily filled the glass pot, the front door opened. Nathan's boots were noisy on the floors.

When I turned to him, he drew back slightly at the sight of my face. "Good morning."

"Good morning." I got his thermos down for him. "Sorry I slept so late."

"It's all right," he replied magnanimously, squeezing me around the waist.

Dylan came down the stairs, his feet a slow *thump-thump* that indicated he was sleepy. He started to walk into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes blearily.

"Get dressed," Nathan said, riffling his hair with his hand. "Big day today, son."

I almost poured coffee over my hand instead of into the thermos. "Big day?"

"I don't want to miss the two of you. You can ride along with me." He kissed the top of my head. "It should only take you a few minutes to pack, now that you're finally up."

No, no, no. I said nothing, my mind reeling. I had to find a way to get out of this without making him suspicious. He was usually tender with me the day after. "I don't feel that great

today, honey. Maybe Dylan and I could ride along with you next time?"

My voice came out soft and level. He hated when I blamed him, so I did my best to make it sound like I might be sick instead of bruised and battered.

"I know," he said, wrapping his arms around my waist. I swayed into him, despite the way the odor of his body always overwhelmed me. To me, he carried a faintly metallic scent, with notes of nail polish remover. We were never meant to be mates; mates wouldn't smell like that to each other. "You'll be okay."

I had to make sure Dylan didn't get in the truck. I glanced at Dylan, who luckily chose that moment to run toward his stash of Legos in the living room. The sight of his russet hair and bright blue eyes filled me with a sudden burst of emotion; I couldn't stand the thought of orphaning him today. But his life would be better, safer, without Nathan, even if he was also without me.

"It'll be nice to spend some time together," I said softly. "What about sending Dylan to ride with Aiden? Dylan will love the time with his uncle, and you and I ..." I trailed off, twisted in his arms, and kissed his neck, since he was so much bigger than me that I couldn't easily reach his cheek. "Well, it's a long drive. I can use my mouth to make the miles fly by ..."

His laugh rumbled against my chest. "That sounds good," he admitted. "You're always so sweet to me after we make up."

His words made me freeze, but I just smiled.

"Yeah, send Dylan with Aiden," he agreed.

I got Dylan dressed and put some clothes and our toiletries in our bag. I took a few moments to hug him tightly, even though he was more interested in talking to me about his Batman T-shirt and his new Lego build. When he squirmed out of my grip, I led him downstairs.

Aiden was outside his truck, smoking a cigarette and looking more grouchy than any rumple-haired twenty-two-year-old should. His life of sleeping around and sleeping in must be exhausting.

His truck was one in a line of a dozen vehicles. The packs tried to stay away from outsiders as much as possible, protecting our way of life. He'd loaded his truck with lumber from the pack's forest that would be taken to another pack for their homes. They'd come back with mostly empty trucks but some guns taken in barter. Because not every other pack could be trusted, the trucks were accompanied by faster-moving vehicles filled with armed shifters. We would stay on highways—neutral territory—but there was still the possibility something would go wrong.

“Hey,” I said to him, crossing the yard with Dylan.

Aiden came off the side of his truck, his gaze widening when he saw my face. My heart stopped at the sight of his protective fury, knowing what Nathan would do to him.

He dropped the cigarette to the ground, then crushed it with the toe of his boot. His face had become instantly overwhelmed with fury.

“I'm fine,” I said hastily, touching my finger to my lips. I didn't want him to freak out Dylan.

I always wondered if Aiden had betrayed me to Nathan. It had to be either Aiden or Lawson; the two of them had helped me escape the night I went to Brennan. They were the only ones who could've known where to find me.

But both Aiden and Lawson seemed so protective, and they had to have known how Nathan would react. It didn't make sense. Still, one of them had sentenced me to a lifetime of cruelty that night, something I could never forget.

Aiden took a step forward, and I shook my head at him. The last thing I needed was to lose Aiden or Lawson to their own stupidity if they attacked Nathan.

“Can Dylan ride with you?” I asked. “Nathan wants us to come along.”

Aiden's face shifted, and he seemed to visibly master himself. "All right."

"I'll get his car seat."

It felt surreal to walk back into the quiet of the garage where I'd altered Nathan's truck the night before. Everything was in its place, his tools hanging on the pegboards, Dylan's bike and mine parked neatly at one side. But *I* wouldn't be in this place soon. Grabbing the car seat, I carried it back to Aiden's truck, fighting the lump in my throat. I couldn't stand to leave Dylan behind, but I didn't know how to protect us both at once. I couldn't find a way out.

As I straightened from Aiden's truck, I glanced around and didn't see Nathan. I hugged my brother with one arm, quick and self-conscious, and after a beat, he hugged me back. Nathan even grew jealous of my relationship with my brother.

"Amy," he said, his voice uncertain. "I ... "

"It's all good," I said lightly. "Love you, Aiden."

I didn't want to leave those words unsaid. Even if he had betrayed me, I loved him. He'd been seventeen at the time; maybe he'd made one stupid mistake that had damned me forever.

"Love you too." He pushed his hair back impatiently with one hand, revealing the long scar that twisted down his left temple from his hairline.

He'd gotten between Nathan and me, trying to protect me. Once.

I wanted to say more, but I never knew what to say to him or Lawson. The two of us stared at each other for a few long moments.

Then Nathan yelled for me. I hugged Dylan goodbye, kissing his forehead over and over, telling him to be good for Uncle Aiden.

Because I was trying to fake normal, I walked away from the two of them without looking back.

Even though it wrung out my heart.

CHAPTER 10





Liam

THE GIRL HAD BEEN SCREAMING in her dreams again. It was only when she woke up that I was finally able to catch a few decent hours of sleep.

My sense of time was always shaky, but she'd begun about five years ago. Those first nights, weeks, months had been the most brutal. I'd crawl under my bed, and Karissa would find me there, her eyes wide and horrified. I always felt guilty for what I put my sister through.

But I couldn't make myself be normal no matter how much I wished it. When I was a child, I'd thought that if I prayed enough, tried hard enough, one day, I'd be normal, I'd be good, and then I'd be free.

I no longer believed I had to be normal to be good, and I wasn't sure anyone was free.

I awoke to noticeable stillness in the house. They were plotting something. I knew my brothers better than they realized. They both had their secrets, and they thought they were wise, moving in the shadows.

Karissa was in the kitchen, curled up in one of the chairs, reading her book.

"They left you to watch over me," I said.

She looked up, her eyes widening. "You are so quiet, Liam. I didn't hear you come in."

She wasn't going to answer my questions, so I walked outside onto the front porch. I heard her scrambling behind me. When she came out, hopping on one foot to slip her shoe on, I was already halfway across the yard. Usually, our fighters would stage before they went into battle outside the command center, which was across from our house. Stone must have them somewhere else for my sake.

It was obvious my brother loved me, in his own stupid way. It was touching, despite the brutish way he so often acted.

“Liam, where are you going?”

“They’re going to attack the Longroad pack.”

Karissa didn’t try to argue with me. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“This isn’t what Brennan would want.”

Karissa chewed her lower lip, as if she were choosing her words carefully. “I think he would have. If someone had hurt you or Stone or Shaw or me, Brennan would have gotten revenge. Besides, all the packs will know that, sooner or later, we’ll come for revenge. That helps keep our people safe.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Which part?”

I rested my palm lightly on top of her head. “Everything. But I love you, anyway.”

She stared at me. “Great. *All* my brothers are condescending jerks.”

“I’ll tell Stone the same thing if he’ll face me.”

“Liam, he just doesn’t want to upset you.”

“I don’t get upset.”

She let out a soft, disbelieving huff, but restrained herself from pointing out all the times I woke up screaming or wolfed out for days.

She matched my stride, the two of us covering the ground until we emerged through the forest onto the road on the other side of our home. A line of vehicles snaked down the road, with Stone’s bulletproof SUV at the front.

Teresa and Cole were deep in conversation, and Teresa saw us first, abruptly stopping Cole with her hand on his arm.

“I expected better from you,” I told her as I headed past them for that lead vehicle. I didn’t, really; Teresa didn’t

hesitate to put Stone in check, but she shared his taste for blood and vengeance.

“What’s he doing here?” Cole asked Karissa impatiently.

“He can hear you,” Karissa scolded him. “Don’t talk like he’s an animal.”

Cole snorted. “Animals have sense. Pacifists don’t.”

Stone got out of the car. He wore a chest harness with a gun tucked into the side, his eyes hard in that unyielding face.

Sometimes, the past came up so strongly, it blurred the present moment. For a second, I saw Stone at five, tears sliding down his cheeks as he pushed at our father’s legs, trying to hold our father back from reaching me. He was my little brother, but he’d never stopped trying to protect me. I felt a rush of warm affection for him, as strong now as when we were little.

“Go home, Liam,” Stone said, his voice quiet.

That affection lasted until he opened his mouth.

Stone never cried now. He’d been better when he was five years old.

“If you insist on being a fool, I’m going with you.”

“You’ll be a liability out there,” he replied stoically. “Won’t carry a gun. Won’t fight. Won’t watch our backs.”

“Does it get tiring for you to say so many stupid things all in a row? Because it’s tiring to listen to you.” I climbed into the passenger seat.

Stone’s face was furious, and he crossed his arms over his chest, but I knew he wouldn’t pry me out.

He was afraid to touch me. Afraid to turn into our father, probably. It meant he never manhandled me, but he never hugged me either, as if he’d set rules for himself.

In the mirror, I watched Stone stare at Karissa, who shrugged. “I’m not going to peel him out of the car. I’m not sure even you can.”

“You’d better stay out of my way,” he growled before striding to the driver’s seat and getting in.

I smiled at him broadly, as if there had been no fighting, as if he weren’t in the grouchiest mood. “Good morning, brother.”

He gave me a long look. “Morning.”

His shotgun lay between us on the center console. I propped my head on my hand and watched the trees swaying in the breeze. I kept thinking about the girl from the night before. I never saw her; I saw glimpses of what she saw, and I heard the way she cried out. Heard her soft, feminine voice.

She lived with the same waves of anguish I did.

A car door shut behind me. Shaw rested his hand on my shoulder. “Good to see you joining us.”

“I’m just as much a member of this pack as you two are. Even if we don’t see things the same way.”

The two of them traded a look.

The pack thought I was useless. My siblings loved me, even though they thought the same.

Maybe, someday, they would realize how much they needed me.

CHAPTER 11





*A*melia

I STARED OUT THE WINDOW, trying to imagine that I might somehow survive this day. What would it look like if Dylan and I were free of Nathan? If we had a house of our own? I didn't need a big, grand house like the one where Nathan kept me caged.

My happiest days had been in the crappy motels where Brennan and I had stayed after we ran. And before that, in the cottage on neutral territory where we had learned each other's bodies, where he marked me.

I wished I could have a cottage like that one again. I could imagine a wide porch in front of the pines, a worn, sunny kitchen, and creaking bathroom pipes leading to a claw-foot tub. I could imagine reading to Dylan at night until he fell asleep with his head on my shoulder. I could imagine the way the two of us would relax into a life where we didn't jump at every noise.

I was startled out of my reverie as an explosion rocked the road. My heart leapt into my throat.

The car lurched to one side, and I slammed against the glass, my seatbelt tightening painfully on my shoulder a second too late. We'd lost a tire. I turned to look for the car Aiden was driving, but everything was a blur.

Nathan panicked, cursing up a storm as he turned the wheel desperately.

"What's wrong?" I asked, even though I knew. The second tire made a wild *womp-womp-womp* sound, then flew off, and the car slid out of control down the road.

We were both going to die.

I'd thought maybe my life would flash before my eyes. I'd thought I'd be panicked.

But warmth washed over me instead. I didn't see my whole life—just the highlights reel.

Brennan had the warmest smile, and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he looked at me. He'd loved the rain, and he'd always pulled me outside when it rained to dance with him until he wrapped me up in his arms and kissed me. Unlike what anyone expected from an alpha, he'd been romantic. The memories of him filled me with a glow.

Brennan's strength was helping me survive the last few moments of my life, just as he had helped me survive all of Nathan's torture. Even from beyond the grave, Brennan was still my soulmate.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Nathan roared, daring to take his eyes off the windmilling road in front of us, and I realized I had a dreamy smile across my lips.

I was going to be with Brennan again. That was my happily ever after. A long fall to an icy-cold grave. Peace. His arms waiting for me, beyond the edge of darkness.

The truck spun out of control, and the open edge of the mountain road loomed in front of us. The world appeared wide open beyond the edge of the road, the ocean glittering beyond the guardrail. We were going to flip right over the top of the guardrail.

Then, suddenly, another car slammed into ours. The truck was driven back from the edge, and the craggy stone that lined the road loomed large in our windshield. I closed my eyes and braced for impact. The car slammed into the rock.

My head hurled forward, my neck aching painfully. The airbags deployed, filling the car with white fabric and a smoky scent.

I couldn't see anything but white and panic, but I could hear Nathan's frantic voice.

“Get out,” Nathan roared at me. Beyond him, through his window, was gray rock. “We're under attack!”

I'd been so close to killing him. I was dazed, and not just by the accident.

He leaned over me and threw the door open, shoving at me. “Get out!”

I managed to get my seatbelt off and practically fell out of the car into pandemonium. I couldn’t even see the edge of the mountain anymore. Smoke filled the air—white and artificial smoke.

It was a coordinated attack.

Dylan.

I took off running. Nathan grabbed at me, but I broke away. He cursed when he couldn’t reach me.

I ran through the dense fog, covering my mouth with my arm, because the smoke made me cough. Constant gunfire split the air, but I couldn’t tell which way the bullets were coming from. Everything was chaos.

I reached Aiden’s truck and wrenched open the door to the back seat.

There was no one there. His car seat straps dangled loosely. His Hot Wheels cars littered the floor of the car, as if he’d dropped them.

I turned around and screamed, “Dylan!”

But the only sound that came back was the echo of gunfire crackling around the mountain and the screams of men fighting and dying.

CHAPTER 12





Liam

STONE THREW THE DOOR OPEN, casting a glare over his shoulder at me as he got out. “Stay here.”

“Why do you give orders that you know won’t be obeyed?” I asked.

Smoke drifted across the windshield. Everything had happened so fast, so perfectly. The smoke grenades had started to land, machine gun fire crackling between the cars as our men took out the tires, and Stone had slammed into Nathan’s car. Before the smoke completely obscured my vision, I’d caught a glimpse of Nathan’s face and his lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. It had jolted me to see him again. There’d been someone else in the car, but I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off Nathan.

A dark room. The toe of a boot prodding my cheek. “Get up, boy.” Those narrow, cruel eyes, staring down at me.

An abyss that swallowed my soul.

“They should be obeyed,” Stone snapped.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I stared at him in confusion, but he slammed the door shut.

A moment later, I remembered—he’d been talking about his orders. He wanted me to obey him.

Stone always wanted to be obeyed.

At dinner once, Shaw had called it his kink, which had caused Karissa to smack the back of his head. Shaw had twisted to try to smack her back as she retreated and accidentally put his elbow in his pudding. My siblings always made me smile. They were so funny, so loyal and well-intentioned despite their flaws.

Stone motioned to Cole, and Cole, on the radio, called something over. The machine gun fire died, leaving an eerie silence; the smoke seemed to dampen sound, leaving us half-deaf as well as half-blind. Now Stone's wolves darted through the smoke, gray and black fur barely a flicker against the constant darkness he'd created.

Stone plunged into the chaos. Gunfire started up again as the Longroad men fought back.

Why the hell had I wanted to come here? I couldn't remember anymore what had driven me out of my bed this morning.

Then I felt a stab of panic in my chest, right where it always opened up when I was seeing through her eyes. I gasped as smoke clouded my vision, pressing in my mouth and nose; she was gagging.

She was *here*.

I didn't know what bound me to the girl, but I had to find her. I'd come here for *her*. She needed me.

"I'm coming," I whispered, wishing I knew her name or if she even heard me, if our bond was one-sided.

I threw open the car door. Stone had pinned Nathan's truck against the rock; our armored vehicle didn't look any worse for wear, but Nathan's car was crushed against the wall, the passenger door standing open.

Where could she be? Despite our bond, I had no idea where to find her. I charged into the chaos.

Stone cursed and darted after me, grabbing my shoulder. "Where the hell are you going? There's gunfire everywhere."

"Yes, I know. That's your fault." I wasn't sure why he was so upset about it now.

"You have to stay with me."

"I'm looking for someone."

A dumbstruck expression momentarily replaced his murderous one. "Who?"

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Stone stared at me, looking lost, then gave up. He always did. “I’m going after Nathan. Stay out of trouble.”

“Fine.” Nathan was nothing to me now.

But when I pictured his face, I still felt the ground rock beneath me. As if I were back in chains, strung up against the wall.

I shook my head. Had to stay in the present.

Stone was staring at me with an expression I couldn’t read. “Stay close.”

I nodded. As soon as he headed through the smoke, his gun drawn and held confidently in front of him, I followed—for now. I couldn’t see her through the smoke. I couldn’t feel her.

If only I could call the magic. My visions tormented me when I didn’t want them and refused to come to me when I did.

Something made me turn to the right. I skirted the wall of abandoned cars, all crashed into one another or the guardrail or the rock face. The smoke blotted out the view of the glittering ocean and the bright blue sky above; it was bizarre to think that gorgeous and cruel nature was still there beyond man’s little tantrums and tirades.

Stone cursed somewhere behind me, and I strained my eyes to see through the smoke. An unfamiliar shifter emerged, his eyes red and angry. When he saw me, a panicked look darted across his face, and he raised his gun, already squeezing off a round.

I stepped inside his grip, repeating a move that Cole had made me practice a thousand times, and slammed his arm upward. The gun went off harmlessly, the sound so loud that it made my ears ring. I let out a yelp.

Stone was there the next second, kicking the man in the chest. The man flew backward against a blue truck. I could barely see him through the smoke as Stone raised his gun and sighted in on him, his movement quick and fluid.

“No!” I shouted, lunging for Stone’s gun hand.

But he grabbed me, rolling me against his body, squeezing off the shot, anyway. It went off right in my ear.

“I said to stay close,” Stone growled, letting go of me. He lowered the gun as the man’s body fell. “If you won’t protect yourself.”

“We’re all the same,” I said. “One wound is the same as another.”

“Not to me,” Stone said. His voice was muffled, barely audible, with the gunshot still ringing in my ear. “I need my idiot brothers to come home again.”

He released me, clapped my shoulder awkwardly as if he were sorry for what he’d said.

Then he moved on to the next target. “Keep up.”

I couldn’t stop staring at the body crumpled on the ground. Eyes staring toward the sky. Soul fled.

Such a waste.

CHAPTER 13





*A*melia

I WAS SEARCHING for Aiden and Dylan when someone abruptly grabbed my ankle. A new level of panic spiked through my chest.

I looked down as the smoke cleared enough to find Cliff sprawled across the road. He didn't wear that same gleeful look of power now, when his face was pale and contorted in pain. His clothes were soaked with blood, and his hands were pressed over a deep stab wound in his stomach which was pumping blood profusely.

"Help me." His voice was barely a rasp.

The bloodied knife lay nearby, the handle blood-slicked. I looked around, but Cliff seemed as if he had been disarmed in the attack; there was no firearm lying within his reach.

There was so much blood. It leaked through his fingers and pooled across the pavement. There seemed to be almost no chance he would survive.

"Cliff, you're going to die," I said softly. "Is there any message you want me to give your parents? Anything I can do to help you?"

I glanced around through the fog. Everything seemed muffled, even the cries of men and the harsh bark of gunfire, as if the smoke absorbed the sound and made it into nothing. The fog separated us from everyone else, as if the world beyond was just a nightmare.

Cliff and I were alone again.

"No, I'm going to be okay," he said weakly. "I'm going to get better. I'm going to get married. Rose and I—"

The handle of the knife was so slick with blood that it was hard to get a good grip. His gaze was focused on me, on trying

to scramble up, as he begged me to help him.

I dared one last look around, then drove the knife into his gut.

“Rose and you are *not*,” I muttered as he stared at me in shock, his eyes wide. I dropped the knife and touched him like I was trying to comfort him. Except, I was only trying to cover my tracks.

Rose and I didn't always get along, but I'd always do whatever it took to protect her.

His eyes were still wide and he was trying to speak when, suddenly, he slumped back against the pavement.

CHAPTER 14





*S*haw

I KNEW I'd found the woman of my dreams when I watched her stab a man.

One minute, I'd been moving through the shadows and smoke. The next, I saw her kneeling next to a bleeding man like Florence fucking Nightingale with a halo of reddish-auburn waves. They were both obviously Longroad pack. Her face might have been pretty except for the dark, mottled bruises that ran across the side of her face and surrounded swollen eyes.

She clasped the man's hand, her red lips moving as she spoke a few words. A prayer for the dying?

But, all the while, she was reaching for the abandoned knife by his side.

She looked up, and I melted into the shadows. When I stepped back, she was plunging the knife into his gut.

Holy shit. A surprised laugh came to my lips.

She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, even covered in blood and bruises.

Something deep and new opened inside me in that moment—a bond between us, a desire for her, that I couldn't even make sense of. I wanted to run my fingers through those auburn curls and tenderly kiss the bruises.

And then I wanted to find the man who had left those bruises and beat him to death.

I started toward her, as if being pulled by an invisible string. But as I strode toward her, another man materialized out of the shadows. He ran toward me, casting a wild-eyed gaze at the girl, who was already disappearing into the smoke.

He knocked into me. At the last moment, I sidestepped just enough to take his leg out from underneath him. He smashed into the ground, immediately rolled, trying to get to his feet, and I kicked him in the face.

The movement lifted him off the ground and he slammed onto his back. His nose streamed blood as he shook his head, trying to get himself up and moving again, even though he was dazed. I went after him again, but he managed to get to his feet.

He raked his hand through his dark hair, pushing it back from his face, threading blood through his hair. Even with his face half-masked by his own blood, the scar across his forehead stood out vividly. This might not be the first time this guy had lost a fight.

He faked left, got a punch in with his right. The force of the blow exploded across my torso, but it didn't slow me. I stepped in, grabbed the back of his head and pulled him in to meet my knee, kneeling him in the face and the stomach until I could drop him, unconscious, on the ground.

I looked around for the girl, trying to figure out where she'd gone. This guy had seemed like he was coming after her, or maybe he'd seen me as a threat to her. Either way, he was neutralized now.

I stepped over his body and went searching.

Stone appeared from the smoke, one hand gripping his handgun and the other gripping Liam's collar. Liam seemed apathetic about being dragged. No matter how strong Stone was, Stone wouldn't have been able to hold Liam if he weren't in a good mood about it.

"Take him," Stone growled, thrusting Liam at me. "Get him to safety."

Liam's head whipped around, his eyes widening, as if he'd seen something. But there was nothing anyone could see.

He darted off through the smoke.

"Fuck!" Stone turned on me as if losing Liam was my fault. "Your problem now. I've got a man to kill."

“Fucking Christ, Stone! Karissa will murder us both if he gets lost here.”

“Then, why don’t you go save our lives?” Stone was already striding back toward wherever his target was. “Liam’s fucked up my whole day.”

My siblings were always good for ruining a perfectly good slaughter.

CHAPTER 15





*S*tone

THE WIND CLEARED AWAY ENOUGH SMOKE to reveal Nathan standing in the center of the mountain road. He looked stunned. Around him, a half dozen of his men lay in various stages of dead or dying.

The fucking asshole really hadn't known I would come for revenge for my brother?

Nathan started shouting, trying to get his people to form into defensive positions, but they were scattered and lost. They'd been unprepared for the ambush on their convoy.

He was mine.

One of my men, Jake, honed in on him. Nathan saw him at the last second, a look of resignation coming over his face.

But Jake abruptly pulled up his gun, firing the shot over Nathan's head. He must have just recognized Nathan as mine. The crack of the shot split the air, but the bullet sailed harmlessly into the sky.

Nathan stared at him in confusion, then strode forward to kill him. Before Nathan could reach Jake, he ran into the fog, hunting his next victim.

"Over here, asshole," I called to Nathan.

Nathan turned to face me. When he recognized me, a sick smile spread across his craggy face.

"For a second, I thought I was seeing a ghost," he called to me across the battlefield. Curls of smoke drifted between us.

Brennan and I had always looked alike. My lip curled up in a snarl. I shouldn't give him the power to piss me off, but then, it didn't matter.

One of us was going to die today.

I stood my ground and let him charge for me. He tried to fake me out, twisting to punch me in the gut as soon as he'd hooked toward my face. I shifted out of his way and his fist sailed past me. But he was quick on his feet, already recovering. I jabbed out, but he dodged, stepped back.

The two of us circled each other.

"You fight better than your big brother," he sneered. "Not that he put up much of a fight."

He was unarmed and outnumbered. It wasn't a fight. It was murder. But I didn't waste words on him. He wanted to push me to be emotional, angry, out of control, and I wasn't going to buy into his bullshit.

Nathan Longroad just needed to be wiped off the face of the earth. He didn't belong on this fucking planet anymore.

I searched for my opening as the two of us circled each other. He was near the guardrail; a smoldering car was slammed up against it, the rail crumpled yet not broken. Mist hung over the mountains behind him. He gave me a brutish smile, then he lunged toward me.

I slipped away, realizing he was attempting to push me toward the guardrail too. He came after me, trying to knock me over the side. He threw a punch, and when I danced back, he threw himself into my body, shoving me toward the edge.

But I'd been waiting for this attack.

Instead of trying to escape him like he'd expected, I let us both stumble back. He tried to catch his balance, a sudden look of panic written across his face, as my calves slammed into the guardrail. For one wild second, I thought, *it's worth it if I take him out too.*

I rolled to one side, throwing him over my shoulder. *But it's better if I live and this asshole dies.*

He slammed into the narrow strip of hard ground on the other side of the guardrail. A look of horror swept over his face as he reached desperately out for me. The ground seemed far below, a lush, green valley in sharp contrast to this bloodbath high on the mountain.

My heart hammered wildly in my chest from how close I'd come to tumbling over the edge myself just to bring him with me.

I drew my gun, raising it to shoot him in the head like he'd done to Brennan. His eyes went wide with terror.

Then, abruptly, he stopped fighting to save himself. He threw his hands up and fell back, his eyes fixed on me creepily.

His body fell until he disappeared into the mist below.

I ran down the road to try to catch sight of his body. Maybe he'd slam into rocks all the way down. I wanted to make sure he was really dead.

But he had disappeared.

I let out a roar of frustration.

There was no way to reach him.

Until I had his body, until I put a bullet through his brain like he'd done to Brennan, I would never believe he was really gone.

CHAPTER 16





*A*melia

I FINALLY FOUND DYLAN. He stood shell-shocked and frozen with his back against the stone, so small that I could've missed him. The thought that I had almost overlooked him horrified me, and I hugged him tightly.

We still had to get out of here alive, but at least we'd found each other.

"Where's Uncle Aiden?" I asked him.

He stared away without answering. I grabbed his shoulders, wanting to shake him out of it. My heart thudded along wildly.

Then I hugged him instead. He was so small, and it took a second for him to wrap his arms around my legs. I ran my hand through his hair and looked down into his face. His eyes shone with tears.

"Stay with me," I told him, afraid I'd have to carry him the whole way. "I'm going to get us out of here."

His gaze locked on something behind me, and I turned.

A giant, hulking man emerged from the fog. He was moving toward us swiftly and a sudden sense of terror swept through me.

Until a familiar face, ruggedly handsome, and icy blue eyes under dark hair resolved out of the mist. I let out a gasp. Brennan? He was alive. Or he was a ghost, come to lead Dylan and me out of this horror show.

The next second, I knew it wasn't Brennan. His face was broader than Brennan's, and a few lines carved along those hard eyes; Brennan was perpetually twenty years old in my memory.

Stone. Brennan's younger brother. It had to be him.

The man started toward me with dangerous intent written across his face.

Out of nowhere, two of our wolves came flying from the fog. One tackled his legs, and the other crashed into his shoulders. He fell under the sudden onslaught of snarling fangs.

He landed under one of the wolves. The snarling wolf tried to savage his gun arm, but he managed to get the barrel against the wolf's throat. The wolf's head dissolved into a pile of aerosolized blood.

I let out a gasp, barely audible, and his gaze met mine. He looked at me as if he were coming for me.

"We've got to get out of here," I whispered to Dylan, pulling his face against my stomach so he wouldn't see the violence. "If I tell you to run, baby, you run and hide. You did a good job hiding before. Just come out if you hear me calling you."

I couldn't conceal the shake in my voice. I gripped his hand tightly so I wouldn't lose him in the mist and gunpowder and smoke. The two of us crept through it, trying to move silently, as if anyone could hear our footfalls on the gravel over the noise of screaming and gunfire.

The man tried to shoot again, was out of bullets, and tossed the handgun down. The wolf went for his throat, but he caught the enormous wolf, snapped its neck, let it fall.

His gaze locked on me.

Dylan and I ran. As I dragged him with me, I tripped over something on the ground—a body—but kept moving frantically.

I heard the moment Stone came after us, as though every part of my body was attuned to the predator. The faint movement of his feet over the ground seemed to shake me.

We couldn't outrun him. We had to hide. The road spread to either side of us, but the furious sounds of fighting surrounded us even though we couldn't see. The mountain rose steeply up away from us, and I tried to gauge if we could

climb, but we would be too slow. I wasn't sure Dylan could climb at all.

He was close. I could feel his presence crackling through the air.

I pushed Dylan into a crack in the rock. "Stay here, whatever happens, baby," I whispered.

He didn't answer me. He'd gone mute.

I wanted to get away from him, to lead the man hunting us away, but time was running away like sand beneath my feet. I whirled, trying to figure out where he was and if I had time to get him away from Dylan.

Suddenly, the man loomed in front of me. "Going somewhere, Amelia?"

His voice was cold and deadly. I couldn't help trembling as I stared up at him.

Chaos was still erupting behind him, a constant rattle of gunfire and screaming, but he seemed to have eyes for nothing but me. That icy gaze was fixed on me, watching, judging.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

With a scoff, he reached for me. His hand gripped my throat, and I sank my nails into his wrist, trying to wrench his hand away.

Lawson slammed into him, out of nowhere.

The two of them crashed into the ground. Lawson's face was desperate as he struggled to get the upper hand, but the man rolled them both over, slamming his fist into Lawson's face mercilessly. A terrible, wet sound came from Lawson, and I let out a sound that would've been a scream if I could've raised my voice.

I tried to lift Dylan to run, because he'd frozen. His arms and legs felt stiff and unyielding; he didn't wrap his limbs around my waist and cling to me like he normally would have. It felt like trying to carry a bag of rocks at a time when we needed to move.

The man suddenly dropped Lawson, his gaze locking on mine. I took a step back.

Lawson slumped to the ground and didn't move again, and I let out a strangled whisper of a cry.

"Where were we?" the man asked, mock-politely. He rose from the ground and moved with lightning speed.

The next thing I knew, he pinned me against the rock. Dylan buried his face in my shoulder, and I put a comforting hand on his back, rubbing it absently, automatically. I had a feeling we were about to die, and I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut so I didn't have to watch, but I had to look for any chance to escape with Dylan.

Then his gaze fell to Dylan, and his eyes widened. For long seconds, he stared at Dylan as if he'd seen a ghost, his fingers still pressing painfully into my throat.

"Is he Brennan's?" he demanded, emotion breaking through his voice.

I'd always thought the answer to that question would get us killed.

Now I realized it might be the only way we could live.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes, he's Brennan's."

His gaze finally left Dylan's and returned to mine, and the wonder in his eyes suddenly shuttered, changing to fury. "If you're lying to me, you'll suffer for it."

I met his gaze evenly, my chin lifting. How could anything get worse?

"Come with me," he said.

Dylan was staring at Lawson, his eyes wide and horrified.

"Lawson's going to be okay," I promised, even though I had no idea. There was a trickle of blood spreading from his body, and one of his arms lay at an odd angle.

The man who had attacked Lawson was a killing machine, and my stomach tightened with pain at the thought we'd be at

his mercy. I rested Dylan on my hip, afraid of the man's rage if I couldn't keep up.

But I still tried to kneel quickly to check on Lawson, to see if he was even alive.

My oldest friend, my first love, my protector at the end, and maybe my betrayer. But I didn't have time to find a pulse before the man grabbed my arm and yanked me up to my feet.

"I said come with me," he barked, and he towed us away into the fog.

The world around us was growing quiet. No more gunfire. Just urgent voices. The other pack, checking for their casualties ... and our survivors.

I cast a glance back, searching for Aiden and Lawson.

But it seemed as if Dylan and I were alone.

CHAPTER 17





*A*melia

“STONE?” I whispered, trying to figure out if it was really him... and trying to connect with him.

He didn't look at me, and yet, I had the strange sense he was keenly aware of me. He hesitated, as if he didn't even want to trust me with his name. Then he growled, “You can call me Alpha.”

What a dick. “You already know my name, apparently. But this is Dylan.”

He glanced at Dylan. Dylan, who had just saved both our lives by virtue of existing. His face softened. “You're fine,” he told Dylan, patting his back awkwardly. “You're safe.”

Alpha pushed me toward a tall, rugged looking man in his early twenties as he barked, “Take her!”

I glanced around at the fighters of their pack, who were assembling after the fight. They all appeared so young.

The man looked confused but stared at me with dark eyes. “Amelia. My name is Cole,” he said, his voice perfunctory.

How did he know my name?

“Am I supposed to say it's nice to meet you?” I asked. “I've never been kidnapped before.”

He looked me over, his face a blank mask, even though his eyes seemed to miss nothing. I wondered what he was thinking. “Get in,” he said, pulling open the door to a car.

Their alpha looked back from the edge of the road. “Get her out of here. Take an escort.”

“We need to move,” Cole called back. “We've got a countdown here, boss. The cops will be on the way.”

Cole didn't call him *Alpha* like he'd told me to. Though he sounded respectful, his deference wasn't excessive, the way everyone danced around Nathan.

The alpha waved him off.

Cole swore as he turned back to me. His gaze caught on Dylan's face, and when I'd bundled Dylan into the back seat, he stopped with his hand on the door and leaned in. "Is he okay?"

"No," I said. I didn't owe him comforting lies. "Your *boss* just beat someone... someone who tried to protect us.... in front of him." I swallowed the words *to death*, in hopes that Lawson was alive back there. If their pack enforcers hadn't come along and ended his life, anyway.

Cole stared at me as if he had no answer, then shut the door.

"It's going to be okay," I promised Dylan, although my hands were shaking as I reached over and buckled his seatbelt.

Cole jumped in the driver's seat and navigated carefully around the obstacles their pack had set up in the road.

I looked back to find Stone at the side of the embankment, one foot planted on the road, staring after me. His eyes smoldered, but I couldn't tell if the emotion in them was rage.

Then we turned the corner, and the scene of bloodshed faded. Dylan leaned into me, his eyes still wide and glazed. I stroked my fingers through his auburn hair, murmuring soothing nothings.

"Who was he?" My voice shook. I needed to know if that was truly Brenna's beloved little brother. Dylan cuddled into my side.

Cole shot me a look in the rearview mirror that I couldn't read. But he obviously knew who I meant because he said, "Our alpha. Stone."

Stone. The perfect name for a man that seemed hard and unyielding and unfeeling as stone.

"What does he want with me?" I demanded.

Cole didn't answer for a long, chilling moment. Then he asked, "Does he look familiar?"

I didn't want to lie to him, but my voice grew sharp. "Why? Should he?"

Cole didn't answer.

He was Brennan's family ... Brennan's brother... and suddenly his callous treatment struck me as hard as a fist. It felt like I couldn't draw a breath. How could Brennan's family treat us like that?

"Cole," I said, and I could've sworn he winced at his name. "What's going on? Please talk to me."

But he fell silent. After a few moments, he pulled out his cell phone, dialed, and held it up to his ear. "Shaw? Did you make it out of there already?"

I strained my ears but couldn't hear the other side of the conversation.

"He can't have survived that fall." Cole raked his hand through his hair, looking exasperated. "They have to get out of there. There's no time to waste searching for the body."

His voice dropped, though obviously, I could hear his whole side of the conversation as he added, "Yeah, I've got the girl. And her kid. Where do you want me to take them?"

A beat, then, "I'll tell you later."

He tossed the phone back into the center console.

"Where do they want you to take us?" I demanded, leaning forward.

"To our pack's territory."

"Why? Why didn't Stone just—" I broke off, needing to keep Dylan calm, to make him feel as safe as possible.

I had to keep playing the same game I had while I was raising Dylan in Nathan's dark shadow. I had to protect his body and his heart. As much as I wanted to know what was coming next, I couldn't ask if Nathan was alive or dead. Not yet.

Maybe Stone had at least managed the small favor of killing Nathan for me. He had certainly been on a bloody rampage.

Dylan looked up at me with wide eyes, and I hoped he wouldn't ask me about Aiden or Lawson.

“What are you going to do with us?”

The silence hung for a few long seconds before Cole replied, “Lady, I've got no idea.”

His tone was curt, then he glanced at me in the rearview mirror again. His gaze seemed to hang on the bruises on my face. “But you'll be safe. I promise, you two will both be safe.”

Liar. I didn't believe him.

But I still hugged Dylan to my side, ignoring the way his bony shoulder pressed into my bruises, and gave him an encouraging smile.

Cole was a liar, but I was one too. No one lies like a mother trying to keep her child's innocence alive a little longer, trying to convince him the world is a beautiful place.

CHAPTER 18





*A*melia

COLE PARKED in front of a sprawling, white farmhouse. A porch swing, with a few pillows and a quilt, rocked back and forth in the breeze, and potted red and yellow flowers hung over the railing. It seemed too pretty for a prison.

He held open the door for me. I got out, then turned back for Dylan. He was already scooting across the car's seat, a worried look on his face, like he thought I might abandon him. Jumping out, he attached himself to my leg.

"It's all right." I looked up to find Cole staring at me with that same tight expression on his face, as if he didn't know what to make of the two of us. I brushed Dylan's hair back with one hand and tried to summon a smile. "We're going to be staying here for a bit. A new adventure, I guess."

Dylan still wasn't talking. Hopefully, once I got rid of Cole, Dylan would talk to me. And then I hoped I could get a minute alone with Cole, to talk to him plainly and figure out what was coming next. I had to plan how best to protect Dylan.

At least, from the way Stone had looked at Dylan, my son was safe. Stone had looked at him as if he were a miracle, his eyes lit with wonder. It was unexpected, given how cold and terrifying Stone was.

Cole went up the stairs to the front porch. I watched him go, surprised not to be guarded, then looked around at the surroundings. A large green lawn stretched in front of me. Pines in the distance stood like green spires punching toward the sky, and a few paths led into the woods, but I didn't know where to run.

There was nowhere for me to go. Not yet, not when I had no car, no friends, no map off their pack territory. They'd find

me before Dylan and I could run far. No wonder I could have some degree of *'freedom'*.

“Come on,” I told Dylan, and the two of us headed across the grass to the house.

A young woman with long, dark hair and green eyes stepped out of the front door. Karissa? Brennan had told me funny stories about his headstrong little sister.

When she saw me, her eyes widened, then she rounded on Cole. “What the hell did you do to her?” she hissed, fire in her eyes.

Cole raised his hands as if in surrender. “I didn’t do that! I would never.”

“Did Stone?”

Cole looked at me before mumbling, “I don’t know. I don’t think so ...”

She shot him a look that seemed like it should lead to his immediate death, then hurried down the steps. “I’m sorry, Amelia. It’s Amelia, right? Or Amy?”

“Amelia is fine.” If this was all about Brennan, if they always planned to take me—or kill me—then what would come next?

“Come on. I think I have some clothes that will fit you.” Past me, to Cole, she said, “Go buy her son some clothes. The two of them smell like smoke grenades and masculine stupidity.”

“I can’t leave you here.” Cole glanced at the two of us as if we were dangerous.

She gave him a withering look. “I can take care of myself.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a long look right back, appearing to plant himself.

“Fine,” she conceded. “Go to the garage and get one of the boxes of hand-me-downs that my mom kept. I might have to apologize for calling her a weirdo hoarder.”

She shrugged at Dylan. “Sorry, little dude. You’re going to have to wear the finest nineties children’s fashions until we can get you something better.”

Then she stuck her hand out to me. “I’m Karissa, by the way.”

I shook her hand, which felt surreal. This morning, I thought I was going to die. Now I was being greeted by a very chipper member of the pack that just murdered my husband—or at least, I hoped they’d murdered my husband. That was the one good thing that could come from this nightmare.

She crouched in front of Dylan, aiming that bright smile his way. “Hi. What’s your name?”

Dylan just moved behind me, hugging my knees. My heart sank automatically; Nathan would have been furious if he’d seen “his son” cower. But he was gone now, and my heart lifted again at the thought.

“Dylan.” I prompted him. The more they got to know my son, the more mercy they might have. But Dylan just stared at her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dylan,” she said seriously, then stood. “Come with me.”

She headed toward the wide stairs that led to the second floor. I caught glimpses of other rooms: honey wood floors and potted plants and cozy couches. Candles flickered on an end table, sending a nice smell through the air, before Cole caught me looking and blew them out. Apparently he didn’t trust me.

I went up the stairs behind her, holding Dylan’s hand. Art hung on the wall alongside the stairs, along with family photos. Brennan grinned out at me from one of them, and I bit my lip at a sudden surge of emotion that spiked through me.

These people were the only ones I’d ever met who might have loved Brennan too.

Too bad they hated me.

For now, I had to focus. We had reached a long hallway, lined with wooden doors, all closed.

She seemed to hesitate, then, impulsively, pushed open a door and led me in.

“Karissa,” Cole said warningly behind me. Then he sighed as if he already knew she wouldn’t listen.

A warm, musky scent washed over me. Brennan’s scent. For a second, I thought he was still here in the room with me, that he had survived, and I gasped. My heart lifted, then crashed down all over again as sense won out.

I’d watched Nathan’s enforcers drag away Brennan’s dead body.

She wheeled around, looking at me with knowing eyes, but said nothing. The next second, I had to wonder if I’d just imagined the scent at all.

We were in a large bedroom with windows that overlooked the creek behind the house. Bookcases lined one wall, with a window seat built between them. Several guitars hung on the plain white wall, though there was an empty spot. He had brought his favorite guitar with him when we ran.

The room was bright and clean, and a door led into a private bathroom. We were at the back of the house, and French doors led to a small balcony. Through the doors, I glimpsed a small bridge over a creek, and just beyond the creek were the woods.

“You should be comfortable here,” Karissa said. “Let me go get you some clothes.”

As soon as she had left, Dylan raised his face to study me. His eyes were wide, and I stumbled for something to say.

I didn’t want to tell him everything was fine. I didn’t want to lie here any more than I had when Nathan was the threat. Instead, I swept him into my arms and sat with him on the edge of the bed. “The creek outside is pretty. It would be nice for us to explore.”

I wanted to tell him that his father had listened to the same burbling creek, that he used to sleep in this bed, that he had played those guitars. But something tight pressed in my chest.

I'd never been able to talk to Dylan about his father. If he'd said something childish and innocent to Nathan... I shuddered, turning my mind away from what Nathan might have done.

She returned, her arms heaped with what had to be half her wardrobe, which she dropped on the foot of the bed. "There's still some old clothes in the closet, but they won't fit you. All my brothers are the size of monsters. I'll get Cole to take them out and make space."

"That's okay," I said quickly. If those clothes might carry more of Brennan's scent, I wanted to put my face in them and breathe in the smell I'd missed for the last five years.

Heavy footsteps behind me startled me, but it was just Cole carrying a storage tote. He looked at me as if he'd seen the way my terror spiked, and his jaw worked once, but he didn't say anything.

He dropped the tote on the rug and left, returning with another one. I tried to smile as though I hadn't just reacted like a frightened wild bird, but I caught Karissa watching me.

She jerked her gaze away from my face and knelt to open the tub. "Come on, Dylan, let's see what we've got here. Ooh, Christmas sweaters, you don't want any of that. I remember when Mom went through this smocking phase. You should've seen big scary Stone as a kid dressed in a little smocked onesie ... In fact, I might have some photos I can rustle up later."

Some of my tension eased at her prattle. She was overwhelming, but I liked Karissa already.

Cole appeared with another tub, and he crouched to set it down while giving her a pained expression. "Karissa ..."

"Oh, you're always so loyal, Cole, it's adorable." She patted his cheek. "But Stone is my brother, and I'll embarrass him if I wish to, thank you. That's just family."

Cole shook his head and sat down on the floor, pulling his legs up crisscross. He patted a strip of masking tape: TOYS was written across the top in Sharpie. To Dylan, he said, “This tub claims to be toys. Want to see what’s inside?”

Dylan just stared at him, but Cole seemed undeterred. He took the lid off the box. “Oh, wow, toy cars! This kind is my favorite. I like how you can pull it back ...” He raked a car backward along the carpet, then let it go, and it sped toward Dylan. “And then it zooms!”

He sounded genuinely delighted, and despite myself, a part of me softened.

Cole slowly drew Dylan out of his shell; even though Dylan wasn’t talking, he edged closer to look as Cole took toys out of the box.

“I have to know,” Karissa said quietly, with a stormy edge to her voice that startled me. “Did one of my men do that to your face?”

I touched my cheek absently and found the painful swelling there. “One of your men?”

“My brothers. Or Cole ... he practically counts as a brother, he annoys me so much. Or anyone in the pack. If they hurt you, they’ll be punished.” She sounded surprisingly fierce, given I was nothing to her, and I stared at her in confusion. Her apparent kindness made my stomach ache, wondering if it was a trick.

“I was in a car accident.”. *An accident I caused. An accident that could’ve killed Dylan too.* The thought pressed into my chest, sharp as a blade. I’d come so close to losing the one person I lived for.

She looked at me like she knew the bruises on my body weren’t from the accident, but all she said was, “As long as they didn’t hurt you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “So, they aren’t going to hurt me later?”

“No,” she said, sounding furious at the idea. “Of course not.”

“Because Dylan is Brennan’s son?”

“Because these brothers of mine are dickheads, but they aren’t those kind of dickheads,” she promised. “You’ll ... see what you’re dealing with soon.”

Even though she was trying to be comforting, my stomach curdled. I needed to know what I was dealing with *now*. I needed to figure out how to protect Dylan. And I needed to figure out how to escape.

My mission had been freedom for Dylan and me; that hadn’t changed, even if my circumstances kept shifting.

Cole lifted a metal airplane in the air, pretending to ignore us, but said, “Karissa,” in a warning tone.

She shrugged. “Hey, let me know if you find my Lite Brite. I miss that thing.”

“There’s more toys to bring down,” Cole said. To Dylan, he added, “You’ll have to keep giving me an excuse to play with this stuff, okay? Cause if I don’t have you around when I play cars, the guys will just make fun of me.”

Dylan’s lips twitched, almost like he was considering a smile.

Karissa squeezed my arm and said, “I’m going to get some sweet tea and lunch together and let you and Dylan get cleaned up. Come downstairs when you’re ready.”

“Okay,” I said, finding it hard to believe they were giving us the run of the house. I expected we were prisoners, but I hadn’t figured out where the bars were just yet. I didn’t want to make a mistake and bring rage raining down on us.

Karissa touched Cole’s shoulder. He nodded and got up, smiling at Dylan. Cole was enormous too, six-foot-two, broad-shouldered, and lean, but even though he towered over Dylan, he didn’t seem intimidating right now.

I took Dylan into the bathroom and gave him a bath, trying not to look at my face in the mirror. One of my eyes was so swollen that I couldn’t open it all the way, and dark bruises ran

down that side of my face. I didn't look pretty anymore, that was for sure.

"I want to go home," Dylan whispered when I was getting him dressed in a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts, the best we could do from the bin.

"Me too, honey." I longed for home, but I wasn't even sure what home looked like anymore. Not my house with Nathan, and not the house where I'd grown up. I longed to go home to somewhere I felt safe and loved, the cabin in the woods where I'd been happy with Brennan. But it wasn't there anymore.

I squeezed Dylan in my arms. "But when I'm with you, home is wherever we're together."

He gave me the most side-eye I'd ever seen from a four-year-old. "Home is where my Lego bricks are."

I laughed, delighted that he was talking again at all.

I took a long, hot shower while he played with toys in the next room, leaving the door open between us. His little feet padded to the tile floor and he asked, "Mommy?" several times while I showered, checking in when he couldn't see me, and my heart twisted even as I answered him cheerfully each time.

My stiff, aching body felt better under the stream of hot water, but I had to find out what was going on. Reluctantly, I got out of the shower and put on the soft terrycloth joggers and T-shirt Karissa had lent me.

I looked in the closet. There were rows of men's hoodies and dress shirts on hangers. Brennan had loved his hoodies. I touched the soft gray fabric of one, then pressed my face into it, searching for that hint of scent I'd first caught in here.

Brennan.

Breathing into his sweatshirt took me right back to being a girl, meeting a boy, not knowing that our romance was dark and fated. I remembered him wrapping his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close. Curious, scarcely daring to believe it, I ran my fingers over the left sleeve until I found a little scorched hole. Brennan had been wearing this sweatshirt

the night we met at a bonfire. When an ember from the fire had floated up and burned his arm, he'd taken off his sweatshirt, and I'd played nurse, pretending to check his broad forearm for burns. I'd looked up and found him watching me with those gorgeous blue eyes, bright in contrast to his dark hair and tanned skin.

There was a strange, broken sound, and it took me a second to realize it was my sob.

Dylan came to the closet door and looked up at me. I was holding the sweatshirt to my face, and it must have seemed like I was coming unhinged. I pulled the hoodie over my head, feeling transported for a split-second back to a happier time, and tried to smile.

“Let’s go talk to our new friends,” I said to Dylan, holding out my hand and hoping like hell that they really would be new friends.

They might blame me for what Nathan had done to Brennan. I was still a member of the Longroad pack—their sworn enemies. They had no more reason to trust me than I had to trust them.

Dylan and I padded downstairs, both barefoot and nervous.

When we walked into the kitchen, Cole and Karissa were there, setting the table by the windows.

A new, tall man leaned against the window, looking out at the creek, his hand in his pocket. He looked so familiar—tousled dark hair, that strikingly graceful and athletic silhouette—that, for a second, I thought he was Brennan.

Then he turned around, and my heart broke all over again.

If anything, he was even more conventionally handsome than Brennan had been, with high cheekbones and a chiseled jaw covered with dark stubble. Bright green eyes met mine, and he frowned as if he realized he had disappointed me somehow.

“This is my little brother, Shaw,” Karissa said.

“Little brother?” He crossed his arms over his powerful chest, calling my attention to his tall, muscular body. His dark T-shirt hugged his biceps, which were covered in tattoos that ran down to his wrists.

She gave him a look I couldn’t read, and he turned to me and offered his hand. “Nice to meet you, Amelia.”

“It’s ... nice to meet you too,” I managed.

Cole scoffed. When the three of us looked at him, he said, “She just yelled at me when I introduced myself.”

Karissa’s bubbly laugh filled the room. “She yelled at you? Oh, I love you already, Amelia.”

I didn’t know what to make of that, but Karissa was already sitting down at the table, patting the seat beside her. Dylan settled into the chair next to me while Karissa poured us tea from the kettle. “Do you want milk or juice, Dylan?”

Dylan didn’t answer. I was trying to get an answer from him when Cole set down two glasses next to his plate, a glass of apple juice and a glass of milk.

I glanced up at Cole, surprised to meet his dark eyes. The way he looked at me sent a sudden thrill through my body like rising on a roller coaster, but the next second, his gaze dropped.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” He was already retreating to the end of the table, as if he was scared of me.

Karissa had made a big lunch. Dylan’s eyes went wide at the sight of fried chicken *and* macaroni and cheese; when he tucked into the glazed carrots, Karissa smiled at him like it was a compliment, her eyes shiny.

Karissa’s gaze lifted to mine. I was confused by why she seemed so delighted—Dylan wasn’t *too* picky about vegetables—and her smile ebbed slightly.

“I feed people,” she explained. “It’s what I do. It makes me happy.”

I could feel Shaw and Cole watching me as I ate, and it made me uncomfortable. But no one said anything until Cole brought over another tub of toys from the attic and opened it with Dylan to discover it was full of Lego bricks. Then, apparently, he and Dylan became best friends—even if they weren't speaking out loud. Instead, they set to work making a city together across the floor, somehow communicating without words.

"I'm sorry he didn't answer you earlier," I told Karissa, jumping in to help her and Shaw as they carried the dishes to the kitchen island. "He's not usually ... like that."

"It's been a long day for everyone," Shaw said quietly.

"Speaking of making the days long and difficult," Karissa said. "Where is Stone? And Liam?"

"Stone and Teresa are still dealing with the damage," Cole said.

Karissa rolled her eyes. "Is he? Or is he hiding because he kidnapped Amelia and Dylan, and now he doesn't know what to do next?"

"I think Stone knows what he plans to do next," Shaw said, his voice terse in a way that set me on edge too. "He's just not sharing. You know how he is."

"Question for you," Karissa said to me quietly. "What really happened to you, Amelia?"

I froze, just like Dylan had earlier. I didn't want to try to explain anything that happened to me in Nathan's house.

"It's okay," she said finally. "You don't owe me anything." But there was tension written across her face, as if she thought it would be better if I talked.

Then she said, "Let me tell you about my brothers, since you're guests in our home now." She raised her eyebrows at Shaw. "And what's the rule about guests, Shaw?"

He rolled his eyes as he stacked plates in the dishwasher. "I'm not playing your little games, Karissa."

"We don't sleep with our guests, Shaw."

“You’re insufferable,” he told her, straightening from the dishwasher.

Cole checked his cell phone, then looked to Shaw. “I got a text from Stone. He wants to see us.”

The name *Stone* made my blood run cold.

Shaw looked over his shoulder at me, then he and Karissa exchanged a look.

“I’ll see you later, Dylan,” Cole said, and didn’t seem to mind when Dylan didn’t answer. Dylan was intensely fixated on his Lego tower. Cole unfolded himself from the plush carpet and rose to his full height, where he towered over me.

I liked him better when he was on the ground with Dylan. Then he seemed harmless. His tall, big body reminded me of how dangerous these men really were.

“You go ahead,” Shaw told Cole. “I’m going to live up to my slacker reputation and make sure Karissa doesn’t slander us all too badly in our absence.”

Karissa scoffed. “I’ll slander you to your face—you know that.”

Shaw had his arms crossed again, but he made an impatient gesture, telling her to go ahead.

“I’m going to make hot tea,” she said instead. “Amelia, you’ll keep me company, won’t you?”

I glanced at Dylan, playing contentedly. It wasn’t as if I would’ve rejected her offer anyway. “I’d love to.”

“Stone may seem terrifying,” Karissa said a few minutes later, settling herself on the sectional adjacent to the eat-in kitchen. She cupped her hands around her teacup. “But he’s a kitten if you know him.”

Shaw rolled his eyes as he leaned over the back of the couch, his broad forearms braced on its top. “I wouldn’t oversell it, Kar.”

“Okay, maybe he’s more like a tiger, all toothy and dangerous, but he’ll purr if you—”

He gave her a disbelieving look. “Tigers don’t purr.”

“You are killing me,” she mouthed at him.

The warmth and teasing between them put me at ease a little, and so did the sight of Dylan working intently to set up his Lego city. While we talked, he slowly became lost in his creation.

“It’s a scientific fact,” Shaw said. “Tigers are dangerous, and so is Stone. But he’d never hurt anyone just for the fun of it. He’s not like Dad.”

Karissa tucked her hair behind her ears and said, “I wish Liam hadn’t said that to him.”

Shaw scoffed. “He wasn’t wrong. Stone looks scary all the time. The man needs to get in touch with his softer side.”

“Just because Liam wasn’t wrong doesn’t mean he was right, either.”

I had a feeling they’d forgotten me. Then Shaw shrugged. “Well, there’s no controlling Liam. Where is he, anyway?”

“He’s been out there, running as a wolf nonstop, since he got back. He has a lot of feelings after watching all those men die on your stupid revenge mission. And after...” She glanced at me and fell silent.

Shaw glanced at me as he settled onto the couch beside Karissa. “Maybe it was a rescue mission.”

Don’t flatter yourself. The fear they’d put us through felt nothing like being rescued.

“Please,” Karissa scoffed, voicing what I was still afraid to say. Then she added, “Stone has the pack—and, apparently, even his own idiot brothers—convinced that he’s dangerous. That he’ll kill anyone who crosses him. But even though he’s a pain in the ass, he’s a better man than he knows. One of the best.”

“One of the best?” Shaw asked, an eyebrow raised. He leaned back into the couch, putting one of his boots up on the coffee table.

Karissa kicked his leg, and Shaw winced but refused to move.

“Yeah, Cole and Liam are both pretty decent too,” she said, then gave in and smiled. “Shaw here is a good guy. As long as he keeps his pants on. He’s slept with most of the pack.”

“Always looking for my fated mate,” he replied lightly.

“He’s looked everywhere. Even though we keep telling him that’s not how you find your fated mate.”

“Don’t slut shame me.”

I’d talked to Brennan long ago about what it was like when mates found each other in his pack. It varied a little by every pack, but long ago, Brennan had marked me. My fingers rested on the spot that Brennan had marked, just where my neck met my left shoulder.

Nathan had tried to obliterate that mark with a tattoo. When that hadn’t worked, he’d branded me. Some of his men had held me down while I screamed. But even that burn mark had faded, leaving Brennan’s mark still vivid against my pale skin. Nathan had hacked it off next. I’d screamed and screamed, both of us slipping in my blood, and I’d finally passed out from the pain. I’d woken with my throat raw, covered in my own blood, a tattered wound hacked out of my shoulder.

And yet, when the wound finally healed, leaving a dimpled scar at first, the mark had slowly formed across that new pink skin.

He’d tried half a dozen times, and every time, it took months to heal, to return.

But Brennan’s mark was always on me.

I’d learned to hide it from Nathan. But there was comfort in still carrying something of Brennan’s.

“Tell me about Liam and Cole.” I couldn’t bring myself to ask about Stone, as if saying his name would summon him, but

I was curious about these men who might control what happened next to me and my son.

Although I had a feeling Karissa might have a say. Which was interesting, give how powerless I'd felt as a female in my own pack.

Brennan had told me about his siblings, of course. I remembered him leaning back in the booth at the diner where we'd had some of our secret meetings, talking with his hands as he described Karissa, Shaw, Stone, and Liam. One of them was always driving him crazy, but his eyes had lit up with love when he was talking about them too. They had seemed so close knit. I'd been jealous. I loved my little brother and sister, but our love was fractured, ground beneath the wheels of our own survival.

It was hard to reconcile the Stone that Brennan had talked about, with bright eyes and exasperated love, with the terrifying man who had haunted me through the smoke.

Karissa tilted her head back as if to make sure Cole really had gone out the front door. "Cole is Stone's second in command, although sometimes I think he and Teresa are elbowing each other for that role. He's one of the most loyal people I've ever met." She shook her head, smiling faintly. "He acts more loyal to Stone than any of us, that's for sure."

There went Cole as an ally, then. From the way he'd been so tender with Dylan, I'd dared to hope he might become one.

"And Liam?" I hadn't met the other brother yet and I didn't remember Brennan talking about him much.

She hesitated. "Liam is complicated. Don't let him scare you."

"Scare me?" I demanded.

"He's not scary like Stone," she rushed to assure me. "He's just...different."

"Aren't we all?"

She bit her lower lip. If I was reading her right, she felt protective of Liam, and I was curious why. "Ever since Liam

was a kid, he's been odd. He seems like he exists in a parallel universe than the rest of us. Sometimes it overlaps, sometimes he's in a world of his own."

"I see." If it would keep my son and I safe, I'd try to like Liam no matter what universe he was in. Clearly, he was important to Karissa.

"You never met Liam—" Shaw began, a question in his voice, then broke off. He turned on an easygoing smile on me. I wanted to ask him what he'd been about to say, but he was already going on. "I can tell you all about myself."

"And probably will at length," Karissa said.

Shaw shot her a faux-wounded look. Then he told me, "I'm the youngest son. Liam's the oldest. Then Brennan, then Stone, then Karissa, then me. So I grew up in the shadow of —"

Karissa cut him off. "You grew up shining a spotlight on yourself just like you're doing now."

I grinned at the two of them. Feeling braver, I dared to ask, "And...what about Stone?"

Shaw snorted. "He acts like he can bring Brennan back if he can just do everything right."

Hearing *Brennan* sent a shockwave reeling through me. They talked about him so casually, and it made me ache as if I were feeling old wounds I'd tried to ignore.

Shaw went on, "Ever since we were kids, he and Brennan tried to protect Liam, but losing Brennan drove him off the deep end—"

Karissa rested her hand warningly on Shaw's arm. He'd gone too deep into their family problems for her, and he gave us both an apologetic smile. But I wished he'd keep talking. I'd have to find the chance to talk to him, just the two of us.

"Speaking of Stone, I have to talk to my brother," Karissa said. "I'd ... stay in the house just until we get everything cleared up."

"Like I'm a guest?"

She smiled. “You *are* a guest.”

I wondered if Stone knew that.

I was heading up the stairs with Dylan when I heard the front door open. Another woman’s voice said, “Stone wants a report on the girl. I’m taking her with me.”

I beckoned Dylan to go ahead to Brennan’s old room, but he stopped on the stairs and refused to budge. Since I wanted to eavesdrop, I just had to hope he wouldn’t say anything.

“Teresa, you know she has a name.” Karissa sounded mocking.

“Don’t get attached,” Teresa answered. Something icy settled in my stomach, and I gripped Dylan’s shoulder, hoping he’d stay quiet. I needed to hear.

“What kind of report does my brother want, exactly?”

“He wants me to take her to Louisa for interrogation.”

My heart bottomed out.

Karissa laughed. “I see.”

Teresa moved to the bottom of the stairs. I was startled to come face-to-face with her as she looked up at me. She was a tall, athletic woman around my age, with long brown hair. I was terrified of what interrogation meant and what would happen to Dylan while I was gone and if I would be hurt when I came back and it would scare him.

Then Karissa stepped into view, blocking Teresa from me. “Tell my brother he can fuck all the way off. He might need to make besties with Elon Musk, so he can fuck off the entire planet.”

“I am not telling our alpha that,” Teresa retorted.

“Then I will,” Karissa said. To Shaw, she added, “Look out for Amelia. If anyone takes her out of this house, I’ll cut your nuts off.”

“You don’t have to threaten me.” Shaw shook his head. “Jesus.”

“Maybe I just like to,” Karissa said with a slightly psychotic smile. She waved up at me. “Teresa and I are going to talk to Stone. You stay here.”

She hustled Teresa out, and then it was just Dylan, Shaw, and me, standing awkwardly on the stairs.

CHAPTER 19





Cole

STONE, Teresa, and I had gathered to debrief that afternoon, along with our troops. As we were winding down, Stone signaled to Teresa, then sent her to fetch Amelia. Once the pack's fighters filed out, the room was quiet, and I finally had the chance to process everything that had happened.

"What's bothering you?" Stone asked roughly.

I hesitated, but Stone didn't want us to lie to him. He hated having anyone kiss his ass. "The girl."

"We'll figure out what she knows," Stone promised.

"And then what? There's the kid."

"The kid'll be fine."

"The kid won't be fine if you hurt his mom, Stone. Even if she did have something to do with Brennan's murder."

That was the worst-case scenario. Did we keep her alive to soothe Brennan's son until we could arrange an accident or something? Did we hope she was a shitty mom, and we had an excuse to drag her into the woods and put a bullet in her brain?

The image was too concrete in my mind. Those large, pleading blue eyes. How frantic she would look with my hand on her arm, pulling her out into the night... the thought made my hands curl into fists at my sides.

Did we let someone complicit in Brennan's death live, because he would want the best for his little boy?

"I know that," Stone said savagely.

The doors swung open again.

Karissa strode in, her chin raised high. Teresa trailed her, looking tired; she always looked tired around Karissa.

Liam followed after. I didn't expect to see him; he'd been wolfed out since we got back.

"Shit," Stone said. He rose to his full height, gearing up for a fight. "Karissa, what? It's been a long day."

"You know who's had a long day? Dylan." She pointed her finger at him. "Why did you kidnap a *kid*?"

"What did you want me to do, leave him there alone in all the carnage?"

"Maybe we should've had less carnage in the first place," Liam sing-songed. He was always so helpful.

Karissa stepped up to Stone in a way no one else would have, as if she might slap him. Stone eyed her warily. If anyone else had looked like they wanted to punch Stone, I would've already been on my way—to protect Stone and to keep *them* from the beating Stone would give to any rebel. But Karissa versus Stone was an entirely different fight. Stone would never hit her.

Karissa settled for stabbing her finger toward his chest. "Stone, you are not going to hurt either of them."

"No fucking kidding," Stone ground out. "I don't want to hurt either of them."

"You keep Louisa away from them," Karissa warned. "So help me god, Stone, it's vile enough you brought that witch here to use against your own pack. I will cut your balls off, deep fry them, and make you fucking eat them if you hurt her, do you understand me?"

Stone stared down at her, then glanced around the room, his brow furrowed. I stared up at the ceiling, pretending I'd seen none of this family drama. I was close enough to be almost family ... but not quite.

"I'll do what I need to protect this pack, Karissa." Stone's voice was ice.

"And so will I. I'm serious. If you won't do the right thing, I'm gone."

“No.” Stone lowered his face toward hers, so the two were almost nose to nose. He was a foot taller than her, but that in no way detracted from the ferocity she carried, from her electric dark hair to her slender pointer finger that she shook in his face. “It’s not safe out there.”

“So don’t make me fucking leave. You already took her, fine, that can’t be undone. But if you hurt her, I’m done with you. I’m done with this pack.”

“Karissa, be reasonable.”

She scoffed, throwing her arms up. “I’m not listening to tips on *how to be logical* from a man who nuked an entire road today and came home with a traumatized, beaten woman and her terrified child!”

“I didn’t hurt her!”

“Yet.” Karissa’s tone was just as icy. “But Louisa will.”

“She’d survive.”

Karissa still looked as if she wanted to slap him. For long seconds, tension hummed between them. Then she said, more gently, “I don’t think that woman has a lot of life left in her, Stone. Don’t ruin what’s left of her.”

Stone’s eyes widened in surprise. He hesitated before he promised, “I won’t.”

Karissa held his glance for a long second. “You know what Brennan would think of you, if you did.”

“Karissa.” I rose to my feet, knowing she’d hurt Stone, even if his face was coldly stoic. “That’s not fair.”

“Nothing’s fucking *fair*,” she spat, and then she was gone.

I looked around for Liam, but he wasn’t in the room. A howl went up from outside. He’d spent only a few moments as a human, and I wondered, after the trauma of today, what had been so important it had pulled him away from being the wolf.

We all liked to shift when we were hurt—physically or emotionally. It felt like healing to be the wolf. But Liam practically lived as a wolf, and he never seemed to heal.

I wondered if Amelia was even capable of healing after everything she'd been through.

Stone still stood at the head of the table looking furious and dazed—a combination Karissa often inspired—and Teresa had her arms crossed over her chest, fuming as though she wanted to slap Karissa but had missed her chance.

“I didn't bring Amelia,” Teresa said tightly. “Karissa was feeling ... protective. Of the *Longroad pack*.”

Then she added, “I can get her now, though. If you keep your sister under control.”

Stone turned toward her with a harsh look as if he didn't appreciate her criticism of Karissa, though God knew Stone had plenty to say about her himself.

“There's no need. Louisa will be here any time.” I tried to ease the tension that crackled through the room. “We can find out what Amelia has to say for herself through other means.”

Stone nodded. “We can try that first.” He turned to Teresa. “Teresa, make sure they're safe. We don't know if the Longroad pack will realize we have them in our possession and come for them.”

Teresa looked as though she were biting down so hard on her tongue that she was about to draw blood. But she nodded.

Unlike his siblings, Teresa and I would do whatever Stone needed from us. He was my closest friend, but in the end, he wasn't my brother.

He was my alpha.

Even if I couldn't get Amelia's face—her wide eyes and her lips parted in horror and her hair blowing around her face in the mist—out of my mind.



Later that night, I walked out of the command center from our debriefing, determined to clear my head. I shed my clothes and went for a run. I could've sworn I scented something different out there, something that shouldn't be, but when I walked back out of the forest dressed in my jeans and carrying my other clothes, I saw her.

Amelia.

She was leaning against the balcony railing. The breeze teased her hair around her face. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. From what I'd observed today, as she stayed cool and determined for her son in the midst of all that carnage, she was strong too.

No wonder Brennan had been willing to throw away his position, his pack, to possess her.

When I looked at her, I didn't feel like my head was getting any clearer.

Her gaze fell and then met mine, her eyes widening as she realized I was staring at her. I could've sworn heat flared in her eyes, just for a moment.

I covered the ground between us, standing closer to the balcony, but once I'd strode nearer, I didn't know what to say. I didn't dare make this woman any promises, even an unspoken promise of comfort or protection. My loyalty was to Stone, and Stone still hadn't admitted what he wanted to do with her.

She leaned against the railing, watching me. The air between us felt charged. I wanted to say something to her, but for the first time in my life, words failed me.

Then Stone emerged from the woods too, and the spell that stretched between Amelia and me was broken. She stared at him, her eyes widening, then turned and fled from the balcony back into Brennan's old room.

"What the fuck?" Stone stared up at the balcony. "Did Karissa put her in Brennan's old room?"

"She said it would soften Amelia up, make her more likely to tell us the truth about what happened with Brennan."

He snorted. “Karissa, the queen of mind games. Because she learned them practicing on all of us.” He looked toward the house. “Where’s Liam now?”

Of course, he always expected me to handle his siblings, even though I’d rather be the one who fought and led the pack than deal with the mess that was the King siblings. I was an only child. I was ill-equipped for all their drama.

“He’s been wolfed out since he got back, except for when he and Karissa staged their protest. He didn’t like your run at revenge, and he doesn’t like having Amelia here.”

“Yeah, well, neither do I.” He was still staring at the door she’d shut behind her with an expression I couldn’t quite read.

“Do you think that’s really Brennan’s son?” Dylan certainly looked like the King boys had when we were kids.

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s lying.” He went silent for a few long seconds. “Either way, he complicates things. Even if she was involved, I’m not in any rush to make the kid an orphan.”

“You think maybe she didn’t betray Brennan?”

Stone gave me a cold look. “You’re starting to get as chatty as Shaw.”

I looked away, my jaw hardening. So, he didn’t want to talk.

“Get some rest,” he said finally.

I nodded, glad to be dismissed, and started to walk away.

“Cole,” he called before I could go far. “We never found Nathan’s body.”

We’d covered that in the briefing, but it was obviously weighing on his mind. A chill ran down my spine. “That fall shouldn’t have been survivable.”

“Shouldn’t have been,” he agreed. “But still.”

“We’re ready for a counterattack,” I promised. “I’ll be checking on the extra patrols myself. So will Teresa. She already went to work.”

“Let Teresa take the patrols,” he said. “Stay close to Amelia.”

“You think she’s in danger?”

“She’s in danger. Or *she’s* the danger,” he said. “We’ll find out.”

Those three words sounded like a bleak promise.

My loyalty was to Stone.

Which meant I had to avoid Amelia and the feelings she stirred for me.

CHAPTER 20





A melia

WHILE DYLAN and I were out of the room at dinner, someone else had slipped in. At first, I found it chilling to discover two Target bags full of supplies on the bathroom counter and the basket of snacks on top of a newly set up mini fridge in the walk-in closet. This had felt like a safer place and it was terrifying to have it invaded.

I crouched down and opened the fridge to find bottled Starbucks drinks, water, juice and milk in single-serve containers. The basket above contained granola bars, chips, and cookies. It took me a second to realize someone had wanted to make sure that I wouldn't go hungry, and I wouldn't have to ask for anything. I almost tripped over the box next to the fridge, then realized it was full of old picture books.

I dug into the Target bags. They contained toothbrushes, toothpaste, socks, underwear, and a wide variety of personal hygiene items. They also contained bubble bath for Dylan, which was a sweet touch.

Hot tears stung the back of my eyes, surprising me. I hadn't cried in so long, and at times I'd longed for the release of crying. But the next second I'd blinked, and the tears didn't come, and then I wondered why I'd even come so close to crying over toothbrushes.

But it wasn't really about the toothbrushes. Those people were my captors. Stone despised me, and I was sure much of his pack did too. And yet ... they were kinder to me than anyone in my own pack.

Their kindness was for Dylan's sake, I reminded myself fiercely. And it was for Dylan's sake that I had to get away from them and start a new life, far away from any of these insane packs. Brennan and I had dreamed of escaping to neutral territory and living a quiet life.

For the past four years, I hadn't dared to unpack that dream, knowing how easily it could lead to a pair of graves in the woods. But maybe... maybe I'd have a chance to escape everything now, to live Brennan's dream for us, to hear Dylan's laughter fill a peaceful house that was just *ours*.

I brushed Dylan's teeth and changed his clothes, into a Care Bears T-shirt and a pair of striped shorts. I always read to him at night, so I was glad to have the books someone had gifted us. As I carried a pile of dusty books toward him, he climbed into the middle of the bed. It was a king, and it dwarfed him, making him look small.

"How long are we going to stay here?" he asked, his voice soft and almost inaudible.

I climbed onto the bed beside him and held out my arms, and he folded himself against me. "I don't know, honey. But we're here tonight, and we're safe, and I'll be right here when you wake up in the morning." I kissed the top of his head.

It wasn't a lot, but it was all I could promise. I couldn't tell him that he was safe. I could only tell him that we were safe for tonight.

I pulled out the first book, only to spy a familiar cover, and my heart almost stopped.

Brennan and I had been wandering around the city one day and we'd gone into a bookstore. There had been a display of picture books, and Brennan had tapped a copy of *The Gruffalo*. "That was my favorite when I was a kid. My mom used to read it to me," he'd said.

After Dylan was born, I'd bought him a copy and read it through tears that blurred the cute little illustrations. I couldn't help imagining Brennan holding our infant son on his chest, stopping to kiss his sweet-smelling newborn head. I imagined him reading to Dylan every year as he grew into a quiet toddler and then into a sturdy, tenderhearted preschooler.

I read him the books and then turned off the light, and he nestled down in bed, fitting his little body tightly to mine. I closed my eyes. Wrapped in the cool crisp sheets, my body

relaxed in a way it hadn't in years. I didn't have to make sure I stayed awake, because Nathan wasn't going to rage at me if I fell asleep with Dylan.

Of course, I couldn't imagine there was any way I'd fall asleep in this strange house when I still had no idea what would happen. Dylan didn't need to worry about what would come in the morning, but there was no way I could avoid it.

His breathing relaxed into soft, even sounds, and I marveled at the fact he could fall asleep here. But then, if I shifted, he shifted against me, searching for me in his sleep. I was his comfort, no matter where we were. And he was my comfort too in a way, even though protecting him felt overwhelming.

I wondered if my mom had ever held me like this, nuzzling her chin on the top of my head. I didn't remember it. But then, kids forgot so much—fortunately. Dylan was young enough that childhood amnesia should set in to erase all of these memories from his conscious mind. Though I worried his body would carry the trauma.

My mom used to say, someday, I would understand everything she did when I became a parent myself. But I felt the opposite. I would do anything for Dylan. I didn't understand the distance my mom had kept between us from the time I was a child. She had always seemed annoyed by me, always impatient, always pushing me away.

I lay there for a long time but couldn't fall asleep. Finally, I shifted away from him carefully until I could roll off the mattress. His little arm reached across the bed, but then he fell silent again, his breathing soft and even. For a second, I just stared at him, taking in his round baby cheeks and the way his face looked so sweet and relaxed in sleep.

The love that welled up in my chest when I looked at him was fierce and unstoppable. I would do anything to protect him.

I stepped out onto the balcony and was surprised to see Cole lope out of the woods. My heart stopped in my chest. He was tall and handsome, the moonlight revealing dark and

bronzed skin over his chiseled muscles. But I didn't think that was the primary reason for the flutter of heat when I saw him. I couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd looked when he knelt to talk to Dylan, the easy warmth when he engaged him.

It seems surreal to think the man who was so kind with him had been so cold in the car and had helped kill so many members of my pack. I should have been scared of him.

So, as he stared up at me, why did I stare back, tension burning in the air between us?

Cole was bare to the waist, every muscle defined, but in the lean, understated way that suggested functional fitness rather than hours spent pounding protein shakes and working out in the gym like Nathan. He didn't seem to feel the cold wind, as if he were impervious to the weather. I wondered if his skin would have felt cool to the touch, or if he was as warm and comforting as he looked. Some crazy part of me ached to press myself against him and seek comfort from his body the same way Dylan had sought it from mine.

Well, not exactly the same way. Because it didn't take much for me to imagine not just drawing comfort from his body, but for his head to dip down, his lips nuzzling my shoulder. Something clenched low in my gut, tightening my core. He stared up at me with sudden fire blazing in his eyes.

Then, another figure emerged from the forest. He was so tall and commanding that my gaze was drawn to him unavoidably.

Stone.

When I shifted, my panties clung to my thigh. I was suddenly soaked with my own slick like I hadn't been since ... since Brennan. The citrusy tang of my desire mixed with the fresh clean night air, and both their heads seemed to rise in unison, their nostrils flaring as if the scent was being carried to them on the breeze, as if they were drinking it in.

I ducked back into my room and hastily closed the balcony doors between us. What the hell was happening? I had spent the last five years grieving with every molecule in my body. I

hadn't felt the slightest sense of sexual desire. Even my period had stopped, the cycle of hormones and heat fading completing for me.

But now, my body seemed to be awakening. In a place where I had every reason to be afraid, just like I had been in Nathan's house. So, why were my breasts suddenly tight, my core throbbing, and why did my mind keep playing a bizarre image of myself leaping over the side of the balcony, only to be caught in Stone's strong arms? Being lowered to the ground and kissed, held between him and Cole as their hands ran over my body and their lips swept over my skin?

It was madness.



I was still lying in bed, trying to fall asleep, when I heard a rumble of male voices down the hall. An instant pit opened up in my stomach, my heart racing. I'd been feeling safe, but that sensation vanished in a split second.

Since I couldn't hear what they were saying, I got up and went toward the door, easing it open just a crack. From down the hall, I recognized Cole's voice first.

"I smelled something in the woods. Familiar, but ... wrong."

"I'm going to patrol tonight. I'll find it." Stone's deep, rich voice was unmistakable, pure sex, and my core clenched despite the racing of my heart ... and my better judgment when it came to Stone. My core felt so tight it ached.

I was surprised Stone listened to his people. That wasn't what I was used to from Nathan. He treated all of us like we were stupid children, except for his drinking buddies.

"Watch over Amelia."

"Am I protecting her from herself or from the Longroad pack?" Cole asked.

I bit my lower lip, listening intently. Was Nathan alive? Did Stone know something no one was telling me?

"She might try to run." Stone answered.

Well, that didn't tell me anything. Of course I'd try to run if I could.

"She wouldn't get far, anyway. The pack is being patrolled. Teresa's got everyone on high alert."

"Yeah, but she'd bring Dylan with her, and I think an attempt to run would just fuck the kid up worse. I want you guarding her door, making sure she doesn't get any crazy ideas."

"I'll take care of it."

"I know you will. I'm going out for that run."

"You should take someone with you, in case it's not nothing."

I tensed, waiting for Stone's anger at this unsolicited advice, but he just said, "All right. Thanks, Cole."

Stone sounded so nice when he wasn't around me. But I guessed Cole was one of his best friends. It wasn't surprising.

Once Stone had gone, Cole turned around and looked directly at me, making eye contact through the crack in the door. I hastily closed the door, then winced, realizing how ridiculous it was. Reluctantly, I swung the door open again to find him standing in the hall with his hands in his pockets.

"You shouldn't eavesdrop," he said sternly.

"Am I supposed to pretend that you didn't want me to hear that? To know that there was no point in me trying to run?"

Stone had sounded like he genuinely worried about Dylan, but why? Was it because they wanted to take my son away from me and groom him to be the next alpha, since Stone hadn't found his mate?

Cole didn't say anything, just turned to go.

"What do you want from us?" I demanded.

He turned to look at me over his broad, powerful, bare shoulder. "I don't want anything from you."

But tension ran through every muscle of his body. I didn't believe him.

"Can you please just talk to me?" I whispered. "I need to know what's going on."

He appeared to hesitate, and then he walked down the hall away from me. I closed the door, breathing out an exasperated sigh of frustration. I needed to know what would happen next, no matter how bad it was. Not knowing was the worst.

But then I heard soft sounds in the hall, padding of feet, a faint rustle against the door. With my heart in my throat, I opened the door just barely and saw the wolf lying right in front of my door. As I was walking back to my bed, I caught a glimpse of an enormous wolf heading toward the forest under the moonlight. Stone. A smaller white wolf padded beside him.

I thought I would never go back to sleep, but I wrapped my arms around Dylan, knowing Cole was right outside my door and Stone was patrolling.

Somehow, sleep rushed up to wrap me in its soothing embrace.

CHAPTER 21





S *haw*

THAT NIGHT WAS the first time I couldn't come with Lucy Marie. It was the first time I couldn't come, period.

She came, shattering around me, raking her fingernails down my shoulders. Her breasts bobbed as she rode me, her dark hair flying.

I switched positions and got on top, hoping it would finally be enough to send me over the edge. But I kept picturing Amelia's face, her eyes watching me reproachfully. Then I'd think about how she'd been covered in bruises, and rage washed over me.

"Oh." Lucy made a small, surprised sound, and I realized I'd shoved into her too hard.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I said. "It's not you, it's me. I've got a lot on my mind."

Lucy pouted as she sat up. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, never."

"I can suck you off."

"It's okay." I leaned down and kissed her forehead, although the kiss felt awkward and stiff, as if I was politely greeting a distant relative and not someone whose body I knew intimately. "You're always amazing. I'm just stuck in my own head today."

I didn't know why I couldn't stop thinking about Amelia. It hurt to look at the girl with the ruined face. Her eyes were so bright through the swelling and bruises, but I still felt myself wince sympathetically every time I looked at her. And she'd been Brennan's. She still *was* Brennan's.

Maybe that was why. She was the last connection I had with my big brother.

“Shaw, don’t go,” Lucy murmured, her voice seductive. I’d almost forgotten she was there, and she ran her hands up my body, digging in her fingernails just hard enough to scratch my skin.

God, I was in her bed, and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Lucy hadn’t done anything wrong; she just wasn’t Amelia. I had to get over this damned obsession before my nuts burst.

“I’ve got to check on the pack,” I said. “Duty calls.”

“Check on me,” she suggested.

“I already know you’re perfect, Lucy,” I assured her. I kissed the top of her head and stepped away to pull on my boxers and jeans, ignoring the throbbing ache from getting so close but not being able to come. What the hell was wrong with me? Lucy was ready and beautiful and adventurous to a delightfully perverted degree. Maybe I should get Stone’s witch to check me for curses.

Lucy was lying back in her bed when I left the room, her arms tucked behind her head, which showed off the swell of her breasts and the moonlight falling across her dark hair and lovely face. She smiled at me as though she was trying to pull me back to bed. But I left, anyway.

I stopped on the front porch of her cabin. There were rows of cabins here for the single wolves. I should’ve moved into one, but Stone preferred for all of us to stay in the big house.

Losing Brennan had turned Stone not only into the alpha, but into a controlling asshole. He was trying to protect us the only way he could. One freshman psych class and anyone would be able to see through Stone’s behavior. But that didn’t make it any more bearable.

I sauntered back across the dark grass and through the house. It was dark and quiet now. When I stepped into the hallway, there was a wolf curled up at the door to Brennan’s

old room. The dark gray wolf rose to his feet, his lips curling back in a snarl.

“Tell me how you really feel about me, Cole,” I said. Our emotions were always closer to the surface when we were wolves. Frenemies who were perfectly polite to each other in human form squabbled and snapped at each other when they turned into wolves.

“If Stone were here, he’d pet your head. Good doggie,” I added, knowing Cole wouldn’t understand my words in wolf form, but he certainly might remember them tomorrow.

Then there was a cry from inside the room. Cole and I exchanged a look, and I reached past him to open the door and push it open. The two of us rushed inside.

Amelia sat up in bed. She whirled to face us, her lips parting in surprise. Her son was still sleeping in the bed, but she rubbed her hand across her face as if wracked by pain.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“Nothing,” she whispered. She rose from bed, and the sight of her in a baggy tee and leggings made me suddenly hard. I tried to push down the swell of desire and focus on what she needed now. She met me in the doorway, casting a glance back to be sure Dylan was still asleep. “Just ... a nightmare.”

“I hear those are going around,” I deadpanned. Between Liam’s nighttime screaming and Stone’s own moments that we were all supposed to ignore, it was amazing anyone got any rest around here.

She frowned at me, still looking confused.

“Go on,” I told Cole, holding the door open for him. “You aren’t any better at talking to girls in wolf form than you are as a human. I’ll take it from here.”

Cole gave me that bared teeth look once more, as if he were assessing whether I was a threat to Amelia or not, then slunk out of the room.

“Want a cup of tea?” I asked. “Since Karissa’s not around to mother you?”

The tension around her eyes relaxed slightly. “I don’t want to leave Dylan in case he wakes up.”

“He’s safe as can be,” I promised. I jerked my thumb toward the door. “We can drink it in the hallway, if you want. You’ll hear him if he stirs.”

“Do you drink tea?” she asked skeptically.

“Yes.” As of this particular moment in time, yes.

Amelia headed for the door. She was wearing Karissa’s clothes, which were a little too big on her petite frame; her tee had slid off one shoulder. She looked vulnerable and sweet, but I already knew that was a lie.

Then I saw the mark on her throat. She’d been marked as someone’s mate. The thought sent a strange pulse of rage through me, then my brain caught up.

Was that Brennan’s mark or Nathan’s?

I wanted to know so badly that it hurt, but she didn’t have any reason to answer my questions. She didn’t have any reason to open up to me. It could wait.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she found the kettle and carried it to the sink. I stepped up behind her, taking the kettle from her hand; for just a second, her ass brushed against me. That contact sent electricity flying across my skin.

“I’m not being a very good host if you have to make your own tea.”

She turned to face me, a spark in her eyes. “You’re not being a very good host if you have to kidnap me.”

“Do you *want* to go back to your old pack?” I asked bluntly. I stepped past her and turned on the tap to fill the kettle.

“It’s all I know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Isn’t it?” She twisted her hair behind her ear. “Is the Longroad alpha dead?”

“Wasn’t he your husband?”

She hesitated. “We were married.”

“Your answer says *yes*, but your tone says *no*.”

“I didn’t choose to marry him,” she said coolly.

“He forced you.”

She nodded.

I went through the cupboards and found a box of Thin Mints that Karissa had hidden from me, as if I would ever assume a box of Oat Bran in our house was anything but a gag. I opened the sleeve and offered them to Amelia, who shook her head.

“I have some questions I’d like to ask you,” I said.

“Oh? Will answering them save me from Stone’s interrogation?”

I had no idea, so I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Can I ask you questions too?”

“I’ll trade you.” I smiled at her, but she didn’t return it.

She looked almost frantic when she asked, “Is Nathan dead?”

I wanted more than anything to calm that look in her gaze. But I couldn’t. “He should be. But we didn’t find a body.”

Her shoulders dipped. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Did you want him dead? Or do you hope he’ll come for you?”

She chewed her lower lip. “That’s two questions.”

“Fine. Tell me what you want, Amelia.”

“I want my son to be safe.”

“Assuming that was a given, what else would you want?”

“I haven’t been able to assume that was a given since I realized I was pregnant,” she said crisply. “I don’t think I can start now. Anyway, it’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Please. Go ahead.”

“Why is there a wolf sleeping outside my door? Does Stone think I’ll run, or does he think I’m in danger?”

“Both.” I considered her for a moment, then let the bomb drop. I wanted to know whether that was Nathan’s mark or Brennan’s on her skin, but first, I asked, “Why did you kill that man from your pack?”

Her eyes widened.

“Welcome to the King pack, where there is always someone watching,” I told her. “Anyway, I won’t hold what appeared to be a cold-blooded murder against you if you tell me why. Cookie?” I held the package out toward her again.

She leaned back against the counter, avoiding my eyes. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“Look at that, you really are gunning for that position as Karissa’s bestie. That’s what she always says too.” I dropped the cookies on the counter, then caged her in with my arms. I didn’t want to scare her, but I wanted an answer to my question. She looked up at me, her eyes only growing wider, but I could’ve sworn I felt an answering flare of heat from her body.

“Answer me,” I said, my voice soft. “Look at me, Amelia. I’m not going to hurt you. But answer me.”

We were standing so close that I could smell her scent, like pine and rain, even though she’d been inside all day. She smelled like the first run after the rain, my favorite kind of shift.

“I was afraid of what he’d do to my sister,” she said finally, looking as if the words were being wrenched from her lips. She stared up at me, and despite myself, I felt the strangest urge to lean down and brush my mouth against her soft, rounded lower lip.

I'd kissed plenty of women in my life, but I'd never wanted to kiss anyone quite as intensely, as desperately, as I wanted to kiss her. Usually, women chased me. They accepted the little crumbs of my interest.

Wolves mate for life, but I'd always been happy alone. I only liked to have someone warm my bed for a little while.

So why was my heart hammering in my chest like I'd die if she rejected me?

I had to focus. "What was he going to do to your sister?"

She shook her head. "My turn."

Then she put her hand against my palm and pushed, and I took a step back. "Why are you in my personal space?"

"Women don't usually complain when I'm in their personal space." I offered her my most charming smile.

She met my smile with a bright one of her own. "Then today is a special occasion."

Oh, she had a spark. The tea kettle began to whistle.

"I'm glad to see Nathan didn't beat all the spirit out of you," I said, taking a guess at who had left her black and blue.

She stared at me with her jaw clenching. "Don't. You don't know me."

"I don't," I agreed. "But I did know my own mom. Honey? Lemon? Milk?"

"Plain is fine. What happened to your mom?"

"Sweetheart, I don't think I'm any more ready to talk about who hurt my mom than you are ready to talk about who left all these marks on you." I touched her cheek lightly, my fingers hovering over the bruises; for some reason, I couldn't resist touching her. She didn't pull away at my touch. She looked up at me with heat flaring in her eyes, heat that surprised me, thrilled me, enthralled me.

But she was Brennan's, even though he was dead. My fingers dropped to the mark on her shoulder. "Or this one."

She pushed my hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

She didn’t sound as if she meant it, but I still let my hands fall to my sides.

“Is it Brennan’s or Nathan’s?”

“I’ve got a question for you,” she said, her voice quiet. “Brennan’s or Nathan’s, their son, their mark ... how much is my fate tangled in those answers?”

“The only thing that will decide your fate is you and your guilt.”

“Bull shit. I’ve spent enough time around the wolf packs to know no alpha will let me decide my own fate.”

“Maybe you don’t know ours.”

“Then I hope the King brothers prove me wrong, Shaw.” She took her tea and headed for the stairs.

“Make sure you don’t step on the wolf’s tail,” I called after her.

But I was the one who felt as if I’d stepped on a wolf’s tail and was waiting for a fight.

Amelia was exhilarating. I found myself smiling when she’d gone.

CHAPTER 22





*A*melia

MY CONVERSATION with Shaw was so unsettling. He'd seen me kill Cliff?

The thought was still haunting me the next morning when I got up and didn't know what to do with myself. I was afraid to be caught wandering around their house alone; I also didn't know how to be still. I'd spent the last five years afraid that Nathan would think I was being lazy, and now, I didn't know how to sit still.

When Dylan woke up, he desperately wanted to go downstairs to the Legos again. It made me nervous to think about them spread across the floor. We were already on thin ice here; I didn't need Stone stepping on a Lego and losing his few fragile fragments of good humor.

I opened the door and found a man sprawled in front of my door. Cole. His arm was thrown across his face to block out the light, but he curled to sit up the second I opened the door, blinking as if the movement had just woken him. He wore nothing but jeans, and his muscles rippled under his bronzed skin.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. It had been bad enough to have the wolf watching me—and it felt like, judging me—as I came up the stairs, but it was even worse to have the man there.

Especially when he was distractingly good looking, and a strange flutter in my pulse felt like butterflies.

He didn't bother to answer my question, just rose to his feet, drawing himself to his full, impressive height, and rolled his shoulders to get out the kinks.

Then he turned and walked away.

“Going to leave me unguarded?” I asked. “Aren’t you worried I’m going to steal the silver or run away or—”

“No.” The deep rumble of the voice down the hall startled me, and I whirled to face the owner, already knowing who I would find.

Stone.

The man took up too much of the hallway.

“No?” I asked, ignoring the way my heart thudded dangerously when he was around.

He stalked forward, his movements predatory. He really was a beautiful man.

“No, I’m not worried you’re going to steal the silver,” he said, stopping six feet down the hall but still feeling too close. “And I’m not worried you’re going to run.” He glanced me over, then added, “At least, not far.”

Then Dylan stepped out into the hall, and Stone’s posture changed, as if he didn’t want to scare my little boy. A sleepy-looking Karissa joined us, dressed in leggings and a crop top, and she pushed down on Stone’s shoulder. He glanced at her in confusion, then crouched the same way she had when she talked to Dylan.

“Hey,” he said awkwardly. “I thought you might want to see the village school today. Meet some of the kids in our pack. I bet they’d like to meet you.”

Dylan looked distinctly unimpressed by that idea.

Stone said to me, “We have a nice day care and school for the pack. It will give us time to ... talk.” He hesitated over that word in a way I didn’t relish.

“That sounds nice, doesn’t it, Dylan?” I asked brightly.

Dylan was quickly turning out to be the master of side-eye for a kid whose grasp of the alphabet was a bit shaky.

“Get dressed,” Stone ordered me brusquely.

“You know, you could just ask. Not everything has to be an order.” Maybe no one had ever told him.

“I like ordering.” Stone leaned close to me, and despite myself, a strange sense of desire squeezed between my thighs. “And I like when people obey.”

The air crackled between us. His gaze on mine was hard to tear myself away from. But I finally dragged my eyes from his, ushering Dylan ahead of me. The two of us quickly got ready for the day, then made our way back into the quiet hall.

Downstairs, the eat-in kitchen smelled of coffee, bacon, and maple syrup. Karissa still looked sleepy, sitting cross-legged on the counter and sipping her coffee. It was Shaw who was bustling around making breakfast for us all.

Maybe I could come to like him. If he resisted the urge to accuse me of murder again.

As we were finishing up breakfast, the door opened and yet another half-naked, overgrown man with dark hair and light eyes loped in. This one must be Liam. There was no mistaking the resemblance that Stone, Shaw, and Liam all shared with each other—and with Brennan.

But this one had tousled hair, a feral edge, and a deep sexiness that surprised me for even noticing it was there. I hadn't felt any desire for the last five years since losing Brennan. I'd thought that my ability to be interested, let alone to orgasm, had died with my mate. But it felt as if my body was coming back to life.

And I didn't know why. I didn't like these men; I didn't even trust them.

So, why did my body respond to them?

“This is Liam,” Karissa said into the awkward silence that was caused by Liam ignoring me.

“Nice to meet you, Liam,” I said.

He whirled and stared at me, his eyes wide.

“What is it?” I asked.

Stone cut in, “Nope. We don't have time for Liam's ...” He gestured at him but cut himself off from whatever he was going to say next, perhaps because Karissa was glaring at him.

“Say something again,” Liam demanded, staring at me curiously. He came over and shouldered Stone aside so he could get closer to me, his eyes blazing with intensity. “What does it sound like when you scream?”

Well, that was creepy. So much for the hot guy.

Voices rose around the table; Karissa shooed Liam off, and Stone reached for me as if he was going to grab my arm, only to stop abruptly. The two of us shared a charged look before he growled, “Come on,” before hustling Dylan and me out the door.

“I don’t have a backpack for him or lunch packed,” I protested.

“The village school has everything he needs,” Stone promised me. “Dylan will have a great day there.”

“Do I have to go?” Dylan asked.

I glanced at Stone.

“No,” Stone said, his voice softer and kinder than any time he spoke to me. “No, you don’t have to go. But your mother has work to do, and I think you’ll have more fun there with the other kids. I promise we’ll be back to pick you up at four o’clock.”

Dylan seemed to think it over, chewing his lower lip as we walked, but in the end, he let me kiss him goodbye and ran off into the school. He turned back and made eye contact with Stone. “Four o’clock.”

“We’ll be here,” Stone promised.

It was hard to reconcile the monster who had killed his way through my pack, silhouetted in fog and splattered with blood, with this man in a flannel shirt and rolled-up sleeves making promises to my son. He sounded kind, but I wouldn’t allow myself to be swayed by that small detail.

I turned to face him when Dylan had gone into the school and the two of us had started down the forest path that led back toward the alpha’s house. “Now what?”

His kindness seemed to dry up immediately, his face and posture changing. He drew himself to his full, intimidating height. “Now you’re going to tell me what happened to your face, to begin with. Who beat you?”

Those three words were so bald that it made me feel humiliated—and furious. “It’s not just my face, actually. My body’s in pretty bad shape too. Do you want to see? Since you think you have the right to anything you want?”

When I grabbed the hem of my shirt, staring at him defiantly, his gaze flared with heat.

“I think you’ve forgotten that you are my prisoner, and I do have the right to an answer to my questions.” All that alpha arrogance bled into the rumble of his voice.

“I might be your prisoner, but I’m not your bitch,” I warned him.

His jaw set as he faced me, folding his arms over his broad chest. Even though he glowered down at me, even though I’d seen him kill his way through half the fighters in my pack, I didn’t get the feeling he would hurt *me*.

“Answer the goddamn question, Amelia. This is the easiest it’s going to get.”

“Why do you want to know?”

Indecision warred on his face, the first emotion I’d seen besides fury or arrogance. He was trying to decide how to answer, and he settled on, “Because if someone hurt the mother of Brennan’s kid, I’d take great pleasure in destroying them.”

The thought of Stone facing Nathan sent a shiver down my spine. “Did you destroy Nathan?”

He went silent for a few seconds before saying, “That fall should have killed him.”

“But you didn’t recover his body.”

“I won’t believe he’s really dead until I see him,” Stone said.

“Me either.”

Stone nodded. “Look at that. We agree on something. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

For a second, there was a glint of humor in his gaze. Then he started walking.

“Where are we going?”

“You’re coming with me.” He didn’t bother to answer my question, and he didn’t bother to look back.

“It would cost you zero dollars to answer my questions, instead of doing this obnoxious power play.”

“I’m aware.”

I gave up and scrambled after him, because what was I going to do? Walk back to the house? Stone could easily pick me up and force me to go where he wanted, and I was terrified of being manhandled.

When Stone led me into a small white waiting room with simple blue plastic chairs and a receptionist sitting beside the door, I realized he must have taken me to the pack medical clinic. I glanced at him sideways as the receptionist jumped to her feet. Why hadn’t he just told me he wanted me to see a doctor?

“I need Doc to see her, now.” Stone told the wide-eyed blond receptionist.

“Of course!” she said cheerfully. “Just one minute. I’ll get her set up in an exam room.”

She headed into the hallway, but Stone caught the door and swept his arm, gesturing me through.

“I think she wants us to wait,” I whispered.

“Walk, Amelia.” He settled his hand on my lower back and guided me forward, then dropped his hand almost as soon as he had touched me.

But I could still feel the heat of his hand as I moved forward, feeling uncertain.

The receptionist came back out of one of the exam rooms, and the doctor—a woman in her fifties with a gray ponytail and exasperated expression—followed her.

“You can wait your turn,” she told me, pointing to an exam room. “I’ve got a broken arm to set. Melissa can take your vitals.”

She spoke to me, but she glared at Stone as if she knew who was really calling the shots.

Stone followed me into the exam room and lounged against the wall as Melissa took my blood pressure and temperature. She asked if I was taking any vitamins or medications, the date of my last period—so long I didn’t remember—and a dozen other questions that made me uncomfortable with an audience. Stone leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Even from a few feet away, Stone seemed to tower over me.

Melissa gave a long look at the bruises, then walked out. A few minutes later, Doc bustled in, wiping her just-washed hands on a paper towel.

“Wait in the hall please,” she told Stone. He peeled himself off the wall and stepped out, and she closed the door. I stared after him. Was it really that easy?

She checked me over, pressing her palms into the bruises on my side in a way that made me wince before she stepped back. “You’re badly bruised, but lucky enough to have no broken ribs or internal bleeding.”

“This time,” I said lightly.

She gave me a long look. “Your wolf’s power will help you heal. You should shift any chance you have.”

“I’m not sure if I’m allowed.”

She let out a huff at that thought. “You’ll be allowed.”

She followed me out into the hall, where Stone waited with a grumpy expression on his face. I wondered why he was so grouchy. It wasn’t as if I’d asked him to babysit me.

“Make sure she gets the chance to run,” she told Stone. “It’s good for healing.”

“Fine.”

When we got outside, I told him, “Thank you. That’s ... not what I expected.”

He scoffed. “If Nathan is alive, I assume he’ll come to find you.”

The thought was chilling. “Yes. He will.”

“Then I need you alive and well to lure him in.”

I stared at him, finding it hard to believe he’d really taken me to the doctor to make sure his bait was healthy before he squeezed the worm onto the hook. “Well. Thanks.”

“Mm.”

He walked me back to the house in that same stony silence.

On the green lawn that spread in front of the house, Cole and some other fighters were training in hand-to-hand, grappling and throwing each other. Cole was shirtless again, leading the training with his muscles rippling under his smooth, dark skin. For a second, I stared at him, until he turned and his gaze met mine. My stomach flip-flopped and I quickly walked toward the house.

When I headed up the stairs to the front porch, Stone stopped behind me.

“Did you know Nathan was coming that night?” he demanded. “The night he killed my brother?”

I turned to face him. Since I was standing on the porch and he hadn’t started up the steps yet, I looked down at him for once. “No!”

His gaze swept over me, measuring. “I wish I could believe you.”

“And I wish you weren’t a kidnapping sociopath, but here we are.” The words surprised me, as did the sudden flare of anger that accompanied them.

The two of us glared at each other. Stone watched me with something dark and intense in his gaze, as if he wasn't sure whether he wanted to kiss me or punish me. The way he looked at me made my knees go weak and the space between my thighs hollow, even though I was furious at him.

And for one crazy, wild second, part of me wanted him to kiss me.

My chin rose. "I need a way to get in touch with my family. To know if they're safe."

A disbelieving smirk spread across his face. "No. You are not making demands."

"Bait or not, I deserve to know who's alive or dead in my pack, my *family*."

"Your family?" he scoffed. "You have a family, and they let someone do this to you?" His hand rose, his fingers almost brushing my face, but he seemed to hold himself back. Rage dilated his pupils, and I took a step back before I realized his anger wasn't for me. "If I saw someone hurt you like that, I would break them into a thousand pieces."

I didn't doubt he meant it, but why?

His words summoned the image of the flickering curtain, of my family turning their backs when Nathan beat me outside Lawson's front door.

"They couldn't do anything," I said softly. "No one could stop him."

"I could," Stone said fiercely.

For a second, I could believe it, that Stone could protect me.

If Stone wasn't the biggest danger.

"Whatever they should have done," I said, "I need to know if they're alive or not. You beat my friend Lawson. I think you might have killed him."

"Your friend Lawson?" His eyes darkened with jealousy.

"Jealous? Don't you have friends?"

He laughed, but it was a hard, bitter sound. “You have no right to make demands.”

I laughed right back at him, high and forced. “You think you’re so much better than any of my pack. Would you have killed me if you hadn’t thought that was Brennan’s child? Would you have killed me in front of my son? Why do you think you’re any better than Nathan?”

I turned and stormed through the front door, only realizing then that we had an audience. Half his pack had paused their training to watch.

As I reached the front door, Stone said, “I’m granting you forgiveness today, Amelia. But do not push me.”

He had to save face in front of his pack, and I feared what he would do if he thought he’d lost it.

That thought was the only thing that kept me from slamming the door in his face.

CHAPTER 23





ole

“COME ON,” Shaw told me. “Stone asked us to check in on Amelia.”

“Why didn’t he tell me that?”

“My brother works in mysterious ways.”

“That’s god. *God* works in mysterious ways.”

Shaw feigned shock. “I won’t tell Stone you implied he isn’t nearly as powerful as he thinks he is.”

“You’re all exhausting. You know that?”

“And you growled at me last night.”

“My wolf must have thought you looked shifty.”

“I’m not sure it’s your wolf that doesn’t like me.”

I stopped, confused. “No. I’ve never said that.”

“Then why’d you growl at me? Your wolf feeling protective of Amelia?”

“Oh, knock it off.”

Shaw grinned broadly. I could see why my wolf had growled at him.

“Hey, did you call me a doggy last night?”

“What’s wrong with that? Everyone loves a good doggo.”

“If it wasn’t for your brother being the alpha, I might be tempted to kick your ass, Shaw.”

“Bring it. You know he’d thank you for it.” Shaw grinned at me again, walking backward toward the house. “If you can.”

He wasn’t wrong. For all Shaw’s pranking, playboy ways, the man could fight.

We found Amelia in the living room, reading. She scrambled off the couch when we came in, dropping the book on the sectional as though she were ashamed. There was an edge of fear in her eyes when she looked at us, like she'd been up to something, but I wasn't sure what kind of trouble the girl could get in while couch bound.

Shaw vaulted lightly over the back of the couch and sprawled there, picking up her paperback. "Is this what you were embarrassed to be caught reading, Amelia? Why's that?"

"I'm not embarrassed to be caught reading." Her nerves seemed to have passed.

Shaw flipped through the book, then whistled. "Are you sure you shouldn't be?"

He started to read aloud. *"His hand slid up my thigh, and when the back of his fingers brushed my clit, I jerked. He touched one finger to his lips, a small smile playing over them. He watched me as if he liked the effect he had on me. He began to work his fingers against my clit, and when my hips rolled, he pressed my thigh down with his other hand. He worked my clit expertly with his thumb, sliding two fingers inside me. When he pressed the secret spot on the inside of my channel, I let out a soft gasp, then crushed my lower lip mercilessly with my teeth."*

Amelia pressed her lips together tightly, her spine stiffening. I assumed she was uncomfortable and would order Shaw to stop. But then my nostrils flared, breathing in a honey-and-citrus scent that was enticing. I wanted to bury myself in that scent.

It was Amelia. She was aroused by Shaw reading to her, and suddenly, I wanted him to keep going. More than that, I wanted to sink to my knees in front of her and act out the scene, sliding my fingers, my tongue, through her delicious slick.

"I'd pleased myself before. But it had never felt as intense as when my core squeezed around his fingers, when I had to be completely silent and yet I wanted to scream. He watched me the whole time, his gaze heavy-lidded and

satisfied. The only clue as to how badly he wanted me too was the enormous bulge of his cock pressing through his unbuttoned trousers, but he paid no attention to it. I shattered around him, twining my fingers in my hair, trying not to move a muscle under the table. He withdrew his fingers. Still watching me, he licked them clean.”

Shaw fanned himself. “Is it just me, or is it getting hot in here?”

“You read that very well. And here I didn’t know you could read.” Amelia’s nipples were faintly visible through her shirt, even through her bra, as if they might be sharp with desire. They matched my cock, which was so hard it ached. Her gaze caught me watching before she folded her arms over her breasts. “Anyway, I just didn’t have anything else to do. I didn’t want to leave without permission. Even though the doctor said I should shift.”

“You want to go for a run?” Shaw uncoiled himself and jumped to his feet.

A stunned smile slipped across my lips. I’d never seen Shaw act so much like a good doggo himself; he resembled an exuberant young cub today. Usually, he was both smooth and cool with women. He made it pretty clear how little he was willing to offer them, and for some reason, they always took it, anyway.

But Amelia seemed to bring out something different in him.

“I’d love to,” Amelia said. “I just have to be back here before four, to pick Dylan up.”

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

Shaw flashed me a look, not even trying to hide his disappointment, and a surge of protectiveness flashed through me, so intense it made me want to punch Shaw in the face. He wasn’t going to use Amelia and discard her like he did to so many girls.

“We don’t need adult supervision,” Shaw told me.

“I think you do.”

“I might be a little rusty,” Amelia admitted. “Married women don’t shift very often in my pack.” She was looking at me closely, as though she was trying to figure out if it was the same here.

It definitely wasn’t. “Why?”

She shrugged slightly. “It’s considered more of a male bonding thing.”

No matter how blasé she acted about it, I didn’t feel blasé about it at all. Fury clutched my chest.

Keeping Amelia and their other women from shifting had been a way of keeping them from being fully in touch with the other half of their selves. It was such an unnecessary, controlling move. And I wondered if it started long before the reign of Nathan Longroad.

“What’s wrong with your pack?” I demanded.

Shaw shook his head, looking bemused, making me realize I probably sounded like an ass myself. Everything seemed to come out wrong when I was near Amelia. I sounded cold and impatient and angry in a way that she likely thought was directed at her. But I just felt nervous around her, not sure how to react when everything in my body longed for her, and yet, I knew I should keep all the distance in the world between us.

“I don’t know,” she said lightly. “I’m just saying, I might be out of practice.”

But when we walked out of the house and into the expansive front yard, she turned her face up toward the sunlight. A look of pure joy came over her face, reminding me of the way I felt at the best of times when I ran.

That look made my heart melt. It was nice to see her looking happy, if only for a few moments.

We walked into the forest and separated—not by much—so we could shift. I threw my clothes on the ground, forgetting to fold them neatly like I usually did. I couldn’t stop thinking about seeing Amelia as a wolf.

Something primal built up in my chest, and I couldn't have resisted the pull to shift if I had tried.

Then I darted back to the clearing where we'd just separated.

She wasn't back yet, and the forest felt eerily still. The strange scent I'd found in the woods the other day rose in my mind, and a vivid image of Amelia being dragged away rose in my mind. My stomach twisted. I raised my head, scenting her, then let out a howl.

As a wolf, she padded out to meet me. She had turned into the most beautiful wolf I had ever seen, a petite white wolf, her fur almost silvery. Thin stripes of black fur lined her striking eyes.

She looked at me with her mouth open and panting, a smile written across her face, and then she ran toward the forest. I chased her, not sure how she'd react, but she threw her head over her shoulder, still grinning. My heart sang. The worries melted away; I was here to protect her, and this run already felt joyful.

Shaw slammed into my shoulder, and I whirled to attack him, but he was grinning at me too. He just wanted to play. The three of us ran together through the forest, where red and gold leaves drifted down around us.

I wanted to catch a rabbit when I saw one take flight through the underbrush, and I ran off to catch it, but then I couldn't resist the urge to bring it to her. When she nudged it toward Shaw, I relented and, instead of growling at him, the three of us tore into the snack together.

For a few wonderful, crisp, fall moments, everything felt perfect.

And then I smelled a familiar wolf scent. It was the same strange scent I'd smelled before, wrong somehow. I'd thought that maybe it was one of the Longroads, but now I realized it carried the familiar scent of our pack, wood smoke and apple. It was just wrong. Chemical. Almost pack, but not pack.

Shaw and Amelia raced on ahead, still playing, but my rare bout of playfulness was over. I kept an eye on them, trying to drive them back toward the safety of the house. We separated in the forest just long enough for us all to dress, although I made sure Amelia was still in earshot, that I'd hear if anything happened around her. I hastily dragged my jeans on and then looped back toward her.

She stepped out from behind two birches, and relief spiked through my chest at the sight of her. I'd felt as if she might disappear while we were separated oh so briefly.

Her eyes were shining. "Can we do that again?"

"Maybe." My voice sounded harsh, and her face fell. Instant regret spiked through me. I was worried about the strangeness in the woods, and I wanted to make sure she was safe. But that seemed like too much to try to tell her.

"Right," she said disappointedly. "The doctor said I was supposed to run because it would help me heal. Did Stone tell you to take me out?"

I hesitated. She wasn't wrong, but I'd loved running with her.

"Why didn't Stone take me himself?" she demanded. Half-mockingly, she asked, "Is he afraid of me?"

I had a feeling she assumed that he couldn't stand her, but I questioned that interpretation. Stone wasn't stupid. It was obvious she was scared of him, and maybe Stone was afraid of what he did to her. He might want her to be intimidated into telling him anything she knew, but Stone wouldn't savor her fear.

"We can run again soon," I told her, but it was too late; she was already turning toward Shaw.

He threw an arm around her shoulder, looping it around her neck and pulling her close. She looked a little stiff and uncertain, but then she grinned up at him, genuine joy written across her face.

And I wished I hadn't just fucked that all up.



When we came back into the house, Amelia seemed lighter. The bruises on her face had faded to a deep yellow. Then she tucked her hair behind her ears, her lips pressing together.

“What’s wrong?” Shaw asked.

She shook her head. “What isn’t wrong right now, Shaw? I don’t know if my brother, my best friend, survived the attack on my pack’s convoy. I don’t know when I’ll ever feel safe again.”

“Because of us or because of Nathan?”

She looked at him like she didn’t want to answer.

After a second, he spoke for her. “Both.”

She nodded.

“We’ll find out about your family,” Shaw promised. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* That was going to go over well with Stone. “What do you need to feel safe?”

The thought that she didn’t feel safe here must wrench at him like it did me.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “A house to live in with Dylan? A place Nathan can never get us—”

“He’s dead,” Shaw interrupted.

“I can’t believe that.” She hugged herself, shaking her head. “Not until I see his body.”

An idea was building up in me that I knew was bad, and yet, I couldn’t resist going for it. “What if you come train with the pack? Give me enough time, and I can promise you’ll be able to keep yourself safe.”

There was the quiet sound of feet in the hallway, then the sense of the commanding presence that always accompanied Stone walking into the room.

Stone had surprised me. I felt a rush of guilt that he’d caught me here, practically flirting with Amelia—or, at least, standing by while Shaw flirted with her. “What are you doing here?”

Stone looked uncomfortable. “Walking Amelia to the village school.”

“You took time out of your busy day? For me? I’m touched.” Amelia touched her palm to her chest in a dramatic gesture that was none the less adorable.

“I said I would do it,” Stone said. “I keep my word. And, sometimes, people regret that.”

When they left, Shaw called, “See you at training tomorrow, Amelia!”

Stone glowered over his shoulder at him, but that just made Shaw grin.

“I don’t know how you survived to twenty-two, Shaw,” I muttered.

“Good looks, charm, a bit of luck ...”

I worried about being so close to Amelia in the morning. But it was the only way to make sure she was protected.

CHAPTER 24





*A*melia

THE NEXT MORNING, I took Dylan to school by myself. He'd had a blast the day before, though I hadn't gotten much out of him about his day. I felt nervous to separate from him, in case Nathan found him, but I also needed the respite. Needed time to myself to think.

Stone didn't seem to know what to do with us, and I didn't intend to wait around to find out.

As I walked back to the house, Stone's absence felt strange, even though he'd only walked me once before. It was a relief not to have him near me, but also a disappointment. I felt strange and awkward and alive when he was around.

Then I felt, rather than saw, someone watching me. I turned and peered through the woods.

An enormous wolf was hidden deep in the shadows. His red eyes seemed to glow, watching me, and fear radiated through my body. But the wolf didn't move, and I didn't sense there was any threat there.

It had to be one of Stone's bodyguards. Or Stone himself, though we tended to have the same eye color as wolves and as humans. But Stone was...special. Maybe he was the one watching over me.

A sense of gratification washed through me. The next second, it made me want to smack myself. What was wrong with me when it came to Stone?

I forced myself to ignore the wolf, and when I looked back again, it was gone to the shadows.

Cole was waiting for me outside the house. "Good morning," he said curtly, coming down the stairs. He managed to put quite a bit of attitude into one of the world's most

harmless phrases, and I stared at him, wondering why he seemed so put out this morning.

“Good morning.”

“How much experience do you have with self-defense?”

“Mostly just failing at it.” I said the words lightly, but Cole didn’t seem to know how to take them.

He cleared his throat. “Your pack doesn’t train females?”

“Not in self-defense.” My pack had definitely been concerned with training females to be useful, submissive, and quiet.

He started to take me through a series of basic moves. He showed me how to throw someone. When he did it to me, I soared through the air—it was a strange, weightless moment—before landing on my back in the soft grass. The landing knocked the air out of my lungs, and the bright blue sky above me spun lazily. The pain in my kidneys where Nathan had kicked me made me gasp.

Cole’s worried face appeared above me. “You can try it on me now. Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I promised.

He offered me his hand, and when I took it, he pulled me easily to my feet. But he kept hanging on, tugging me closer, still frowning down at me. “You may be too badly hurt to fight today.”

I laughed at that. “I’ve been fighting while *badly hurt* for the last five years.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe not fighting in the way you think of it,” I admitted. “But I’ve been fighting for my life—and Dylan’s—every day with Nathan, since he found me with Brennan.”

It felt reckless to even mention Brennan, but Cole didn’t trip over the name; he seemed focused on me. “How?”

“I had to figure out what to do to stay alive,” I said. “How to head off his anger or pacify him. It might look like I’m

weak because I was his victim. But I wasn't weak just because I was trapped. I was always fighting."

I'd told myself that like a mantra over the past several years. I wasn't sure I believed it anymore, but I wanted to.

Cole cocked his head to one side, studying me. I felt stupid suddenly for saying all that.

"Then you have the mindset of a warrior already," Cole said. "That's the biggest thing. The rest is all technique."

"Is that all?"

"I'm very good at teaching technique," Cole promised, startling me into a smile.

But I had the feeling he was a good teacher as well as a fighter.

He finally seemed to realize he was still holding my hand and dropped it. I missed the contact when it was gone.

"We'll start simply," Cole said, moving quickly away to face me. Something had changed in his face, and for the rest of our training session, he focused on nothing but throws and punches, looking as if he regretted it every time he got close to me or adjusted my stance.

Cole looked as haunted as I felt.

But why?

CHAPTER 25





*S*haw

“WELL, LOOK WHO SHOWED UP TODAY,” Teresa said when I walked into the library for our daily briefing.

I flashed her a smile. “You don’t have to try to hide your delight at seeing me, Teresa. You never succeed in hiding it, anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever get tired of yourself?”

“No.” I took my seat. “Just like you never get tired of me, Tee.”

But my heart wasn’t in antagonizing-slash-flirting with Teresa today. It was just habit. I couldn’t get Amelia off my mind.

I wanted to know if any word had come in about Nathan.

Cole took his seat across from me. I looked at him curiously, betting he’d leave the briefing and head straight to train with Amelia, the same as he had yesterday. I wondered if Stone knew what he was doing.

“There’s been no word of Nathan Longroad,” Stone said. “We need an informant in their pack.”

“I can work on that,” I said, and several skeptical gazes swiveled my way. “What? I’m the most charming of the four of us ... Although that bar is low enough for Satan to do the limbo.”

“I’ve never heard you volunteer for work before in your life,” Stone said.

“Because Tee and Cole base their whole identities on serving your whims, Stone. I’m a caring man. I can’t take that away from them.”

“I should let Tee kick your ass,” Stone said, though his heart wasn’t in his threats today. “You need to be careful going anywhere near the Longroad pack. I’ll go with you.”

“The hell you will. You’ll blow my cover. Random humans on the street turn around when you walk by, like even they can sense your alpha weirdness.”

Stone frowned at me. How dare I insult his alphaness.

“I’ll go with him,” Teresa said suddenly. “The Longroad pack doesn’t see women. I’m the best person to watch his back.”

“And Amelia is the best person to know who to target,” Cole said quietly.

“She’s not leaving pack territory.” Stone’s words dropped with the weight of finality.

“No, but we can talk to her,” Teresa agreed with Cole.

I propped my chin in my hand, absolutely fascinated by this turn of events.

Stone nodded, thinking it over. “Don’t trust her.”

“Oh, I won’t,” Teresa promised.

I’d find out who was dead and alive from the Longroad pack while I discovered what they knew about Nathan. I could protect Amelia, from both her biggest fears—that she had lost the ones she loved and that Nathan would find her again.

When we were leaving, I asked Stone, “Hey, can I talk to you?”

Stone had been absent at the house lately. I was curious why, but that wasn’t my most pressing concern.

“Yeah, of course. What’s up?”

The two of us waited as the others filed out of the library.

“How come you haven’t had your witch chat with Amelia yet?” I didn’t want Amelia to deal with Louisa, but it was interesting that Stone was waiting on getting an answer to his burning question.

Unless he was afraid to discover that Amelia had something to do with Brennan's death. Or maybe he was afraid that she didn't, which meant there was no reason to avoid her.

Stone was hard to read, but I knew my brother, and the way he acted around Amelia wasn't his normal dauntless self.

"I want Amelia to be strong and healthy before she faces Louisa." Stone looked stern and distant in a way that might've been convincing to someone who hadn't grown up in the same house and seen him turn *stern and distant* as a self-defense tactic.

"Mm. Well, I have another idea about how to get our girl to trust us and turn a bit more talkative."

Stone smiled in the arrogant, older brother way that always made me fantasize about punching him. "What's that?"

"Let her feel safe here."

"Isn't Cole in charge of that?"

I felt a ripple of jealousy at the mere mention of how much time Cole was spending with her. Not that he was making good use of it, the boring bastard.

"Give Amelia one of the cottages to live in with Dylan. Let her feel like she's one of us, she's safe, she's trusted."

Stone's smile had disappeared. "No."

"Is this about protecting her from Nathan? Or about keeping her close to you?"

"Neither," Stone said. "You think I don't see through you? You just want to make her happy."

"I think *happy* might be a reach at the moment. I'd settle for her not having nightmares anymore."

Stone looked stricken for a second at the thought, then flipped right over into his usual mode: irritation. "Why are you so soft for this girl, anyway? For all we know, she betrayed Brennan. She could be just as guilty as Nathan."

"I don't believe that, and neither do you," I shot back. "You're trying to be hard, but you're just being stupid."

“Be careful with her,” Stone said.

I was prepared to be furious at him, and when he grabbed my shoulder and leaned in, I almost punched him in the face.

But all he said was, “I’ve already lost one brother. I can’t lose you, Shaw.”

The words were unexpected, and my fury cooled in a second. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

“Good.” He released my shoulder, patted it. His face shuttered as if he regretted that brief, small show of emotion. “Maybe one day you’ll even make yourself useful.”

CHAPTER 26





Liam

I COULDN'T BRING myself to talk to the girl. She was the one from my dreams, I was almost sure of it, and I wanted to tell her she'd saved my life. I'd clung to her dreams when I was chained up, embracing the flood of unconsciousness that let me slip close to her.

The Longroads would've driven me mad if I hadn't been able to step into her dreams, into the soft, tender world she'd imagined at night: the swaying trees she loved, wandering barefoot through the forest behind her house and into other worlds, where dragons swooped overhead or where she stepped into a city built on magic, where flowers bloomed along the stone walls and glowed at night. She'd had the most beautiful dreams.

Her dream world was ruined now. I tossed and turned, trying to escape her dreams. She dreamt, over and over, of Nathan's leering face, of rough hands, of the scent of blood. They were fragments of memory, sharp and dangerous, and we were both surrounded by them.

I tried to get out of her nightmares, but I found myself in another. I was walking, but I couldn't see; I shuffled forward, my hand tracing the wall. Then I fell forward, letting myself twist into the wolf, and I rose onto my four paws, blinking my eyes open. The world opened into sunshine, and I opened my eyes, the nightmare fading as it turned into a dream.

I broke away, finally, my head aching as I sat up. God, this was why I slept as a wolf, almost all the time. Karissa had been worried about me, so I'd tried to make her happy by coming inside, but it made me miserable.

I'd put in an appearance. Made an effort. I could go wolf out again. It wasn't like they expected anything different.

But when I got out of bed, the mirror opposite me caught my attention and horrified me. My body, my dark hair was reflected back, but the face...

My face was ruined.

I raised shaking hands to touch the damaged angles of my cheeks, my jaw. My eyes were empty pockets, so I couldn't make sense of how I was even seeing myself in the mirror. My face had been shattered and it had healed, but... wrong.

Sometimes I had visions of the future.

This monstrous visage must be my future.

And then I realized I wasn't truly awake as my vision faded back to darkness. Horror washed through me. The worst was when I couldn't escape the dreams.

In my dream—my vision—someone was touching me. A warm, soft palm ran down my torso to delve beneath the waistband of my pants, and her voice murmured in my ear. It was a familiar voice from long ago. I couldn't see anything, but I didn't need to see her to know her; for once, the darkness didn't hold any fear.

Instead, I turned toward her in my dream. Her lips met mine, and every sense was elevated as I explored the curves of her body.

"I want you," she whispered into my ear, and my body responded, my cock rising against her palm.

She was so perfect, the way her breasts felt under my grip, the soft give of her breaths, the scent of her rising from between her thighs. I caressed my fingers through her slick folds and heard her moan under her breath, and my lips enveloped hers, taking the moan for my own.

I wanted to stay in this dream, but of course, it was the one that faded. When I opened my eyes, I could see again.

I barely dared to sit up and look in the mirror, but when I did, it was my own face that gazed back at me—those too intense, eerie eyes that made people uncomfortable, the sharp

angle of my cheekbones, the dark curls that were too long and drove Karissa crazy.

My cock was still hard from the dream. That voice...

Was it Amelia?

The thought that it was her, that she was here but I was too damaged to even talk to her, that everyone thought they had to protect her from me, made me pace angrily. I had to slip back out into the moonlight; just like when I had become a wolf and the nightmare had faded, this nightmare would fade too.

I threw open the door of my bedroom.

At just the same time, her door opened too.

She stared at me, her lips falling apart. Her hair was wild around her face and her nipples tented the t-shirt she'd worn to bed. She looked soft and feminine and sleepy, and I was sure she was the one from my dream.

Cole, in his wolf form, was sleeping in front of her door, blocking her from leaving. He roused himself, gave me a suspicious one eyed look, then jolted the rest of the way awake and leapt to his feet. He snarled at me, one lip pulling back to reveal his sharp teeth.

"Amelia," I said, taking a step forward. Her luminous eyes locked on mine. My voice was rusty with sleep, or maybe with disuse from longer than tonight. "Our dream—"

Her eyes widened. There was recognition there, I was sure of it, but I took another step toward her, and the fur on Cole's back went up, and she suddenly fled back into her room and closed the door.

Cole was still growling at me.

I went back into my room and turned on the shower. It was hard to move around the bathroom without looking into any of the mirrors, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I would look into the mirror and see the ruined face again. So I hung towels over all the mirrors to block them, then stepped into a long, hot shower.

As I leaned against the tile, I kept replaying the sound of her voice. Her lips on mine. The warmth and softness of her skin. I ran my hand up and down my cock, longing for her, until I came.

I was destined to be a monster. And yet... had I been that monster in my dreams, and she had loved me anyway?

I would try to be human.

For her.

She couldn't see it now. But one day, she wouldn't be afraid.

CHAPTER 27





*A*melia

THE NEXT DAY when I walked Dylan to school, he asked me, “How long are we going to stay here?”

I’d been deep in my own thoughts. That morning at breakfast, I hadn’t been able to help noticing Stone wasn’t at the table. Karissa told me Stone was a tight-lipped asshole with her too, so I shouldn’t take it personally.

But of course, I did. Because Stone loved Karissa even if they fought, and Stone hated me.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Why?”

“Because at Christmas, they have a big party. And Stone dresses up like Santa’s helper. Like an elf! Isn’t that funny?” Dylan laughed and went on telling me everything he’d heard about Christmas in the King pack. His speech was hard to follow when he was excited, but his glee made me smile.

“It’s still just fall, baby. Christmas is a long way away...”

He wasn’t listening. He barely hugged me goodbye before he ran off into the schoolyard. Another little boy’s face lit up as the two of them ran at each other, and it was hard to tell if they were hugging or wrestling. Little cubs at play.

I stood there with a goofy smile for a few seconds. It was good to see him happy.

“Is that your little boy?” Another woman asked me as she walked out of the school. She pointed to Dylan.

“Yes,” I said, a sudden sense of nerves sweeping over me in case Dylan had done something wrong.

“My son Caleb cannot stop talking about Dylan!” she said. “He’s been a little lonely this year, most of his friends moved up to kindergarten but he’s doing another year of Pre-K. Dylan has been such a good friend.”

A warm glow slowly distracted me from the way my heart had begun to race. She didn't seem to notice my panic, just stuck out her hand. "Oh, I'm sorry, I have the worst manners. I'm Janie."

"Amelia," I answered, shaking her hand belatedly.

I'd assumed everyone in the King pack would hate me, like Stone. So I felt slightly dazed by her friendly chatter as we walked through the path in the woods, until she had to split away where the path forked.

"I'd better hurry home. My neighbor watches the baby so I can take Caleb to school and have some one-on-one time with him along the way. It was so nice meeting you! See you tomorrow!"

She swept away, and I stared after her. The casual way the pack seemed to look after each other—including each other's kids—seemed incredible to me after being so alone. I'd only had my mom to help me, and that had come with so many strings attached.

The thought of running away and pulling Dylan away from his little friends and the school where he already seemed happy seemed, suddenly, like a sad one.

But I wasn't safe here. I tried to conjure up the memory of Stone's icy blue eyes watching me, of the nervousness I felt whenever he was nearby.

And yet, for some reason, I couldn't summon the feeling of nervousness. When I pictured Stone, I imagined the thrill I felt when I was near him. He'd barely ever touched me, and yet when I remembered his hands on my body, the memory was flushed with heat and sudden desire. I'd been too afraid to feel that way at the time, and yet...

Although the path was quiet, just the sound of trees rustling in the breeze and the peace of the forest singing around me, a strange prickling sense ran up my spine.

I wasn't alone.

My first impulse was to run wildly back to the safety of the King house and I kept walking, although the peace of the

forest suddenly felt like suffocating isolation. If I ran, whoever was watching me would know I knew they were there.

Although maybe that didn't matter.

I swung around to face the forest. "What do you want?"

My voice sounded too small and flat.

My gaze searched the trees until I thought I was losing my mind, and then suddenly, the glowing blue eyes of a wolf met mine through the underbrush. The wolf was big and dark and I could easily have tripped over him without seeing him in the shadows.

It looked like Stone in his wolf form. "Did you come back just to stalk me?"

I blinked, and the wolf was gone. I kept walking, but an unsettled feeling came over me. I wanted to ask Stone if he'd been the one watching me in the woods.

When I turned a corner, a stranger lingered on the path, as if he were waiting for me. What if the wolf was someone else from the pack, someone who had run ahead and shifted back into their human form?

He was short, with brown hair and an open, craggy face. His eyes lit with recognition as he saw me, and my heart sped up nervously. Behind me, I heard the faintest sound from the woods... a growl.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi." I wasn't in the habit of talking to strangers after the last five years. I whipped around to look for the source of the growl, sure that the wolf was still watching me, but the wolf was gone.

He fell in alongside me. "You're from the Longroad pack, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I used to have a friend there," he mused. "Aiden. Do you know him?"

My heart swung open wildly at the mention of my brother.
“Yes.”

He nodded, a smile coming to his lips, and stuck out his hand. “I thought so. Aiden told me about you. I’m Joshua.”

“Amelia.”

“How are you doing?” he asked, frowning. “Every time I see you, you’re with one of the King brothers. Are you okay?”

“Yes.” This entire conversation gave me a shivery feeling, as if I could get in trouble with Stone for even listening to a question like *are you okay?* I didn’t want to give Stone any more reasons to distrust me.

He gave me a long look. “I know you’re not, but I understand. You have no reason to trust me. But I’m here, if you ever need any help. I work in the blacksmithing shop.”

He pointed across the village to one of the narrow buildings.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because Aiden was there for me when I needed him,” he said bluntly. “I ran away from home when I was a teenager.” There was a bitter twist to his lips, as if it were an understatement, as he added, “I wasn’t a big fan of Stone’s father as alpha. Aiden met me, gave me cash, helped coordinate a place to stay. He helped me run.”

Once, Aiden had done that for me too. But Brennan and I hadn’t gotten far.

“I figure I owe him a favor,” Joshua said lightly. “See you around, Amelia.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and took a step back along the path.

“Wait,” I said urgently. All my fear and worry for my brother felt like a tight knot in my chest and I couldn’t handle it squeezing the life out of me anymore. “Could you get in contact with Aiden for me? Find out if he’s okay, how the pack is doing?”

I didn't mention Lawson, but Aiden would know I needed to hear about him. If Joshua didn't come back with news about Lawson too, then I would know he was just trying to trick me.

"Yeah," he said. "Does he even know you're here?"

I closed my eyes for a second, knowing that if Nathan had made it back to my own pack, that Aiden might betray my location. Nathan might come here. I hated never knowing whether it was Aiden or Lawson that fed Nathan that information that night.

"He doesn't know," I said quietly. "But once he knows I'm alive, I'm sure he can guess."

And so could Nathan.

If he was alive, he would come for me, but making contact with home wouldn't change that. Stone would make it clear I was here in the long run when he was ready for a fight, anyway; I was just here as bait.

I was better off collecting information and allies than waiting, and maybe Joshua could help me if I needed him. Most of all, I needed to know what happened to Aiden and Lawson, and Stone wouldn't help me. I hadn't even seen Shaw yet; he and Stone had been conspicuously absent this morning.


"I didn't know he was involved in the raid." Joshua's mouth tightened, his face consumed by worry. "I'll find out if he's okay."

"Thanks."

When Joshua left, I turned to look for the wolf, but I couldn't find him watching me.

CHAPTER 28





When I got back to the house, Cole waited for me in the yard in front of the house. His fitted gray t-shirt clung to his powerful shoulders, and he was quietly going through the motions of a martial arts exercise, practicing a series of kicks, blocks and blows. Unlike most people I'd seen training, he was silent, a figure of grace as he spun and leapt. His body was as muscular and agile as a cat's.

Two teenage girls hurried past, late for school—then paused, gaping at him openly. One of them grabbed the other's arm and pulled her away. "Come on, he hates being stared at. Alpha ran into Jenny and Eliza trying to flirt with him and sentenced them to grounds cleanup for weeks. I know it's hard to look away, but I am not going to spend all my weekends weed-wacking!"

"Well, it's not our fault he's so hot!"

"It doesn't matter anyway. He doesn't look at anyone like that." She cast a glance back at him, longingly, then faced toward me and looked as if she felt a jolt. She hadn't even noticed there was someone else standing at the head of the path when she was so focused on Cole.

The girls ducked around me, their faces set and embarrassed, then took off at a run. I hid my smile. Teenagers were such a funny blend of kid and grown-up.

But I had to admit, I couldn't help but stare at Cole too. Sweat was beginning to seep through his t-shirt, and he stopped, peeling the fabric off his taut, chiseled body.

Hopefully I wouldn't end up on grounds cleanup.

I swallowed and reminded myself of what those girls had just said. *He doesn't look at anyone like that.* So, hopefully, he wouldn't suspect the way I felt at the moment, the way my breasts felt heavy and taut and my core ached.

I definitely looked at Cole like that.

He turned toward me, and I started toward him hurriedly, plastering a smile across my face, trying to look cool and disaffected. “Morning!”

“Good morning, Amelia.” His voice had the cool tone that made me so nervous. It made me feel like a clumsy girl like those teens, with a hopeless crush on a man who was out of my league. “Ready to train?”

“Always,” I lied. I was already wearing the t-shirt, sports bra, shorts and running shoes that had materialized in my room.

Stone’s pack supplied my every need. I was going to owe Karissa a small fortune.

Not that I was going to pay it, since I planned to run.

“Let’s start with some easy warmups,” Cole said, as if anything were easy for me.

I assumed my stance across from him.

“Good. You remember. Just get that left fist up a little higher.”

He tapped my wrist, positioning my hand up. Just his slightest touch felt hot on my skin. I ducked my head, pretending I was focused on watching his torso, looking for the tell-tale ripple of muscle before he launched an attack. A bead of sweat dripped down his hard pecs and slid across the chiseled angles of his abs.

His abs tensed, his right side rippling, and I reacted, blocking the blow before he threw it. I was pretty sure he was moving in slow motion for my sake, pulling his blows to a ridiculous degree. His fist glanced off my forearm.

I used his momentum, stepping into him, placing my foot behind his. I attempted the throw he’d taught me the other day. But instead of his body flying cleanly over my shoulder, I only succeeded in dragging him against me, draping him over me like a blanket. I tried to duck away, but it was too late. He swept my legs out from beneath me in one clean move and the two of us tumbled to the ground in a heap of limbs.

Warm, hard, muscular limbs.

I cleared my throat and scrambled back. He sat up on his knees, looking as unruffled as ever. “Good. You had the right idea, even if your execution was clumsy. But don’t just run away after an attack. Keep fighting until one of us yields. You need to build good habits.”

“Got it.”

He offered me his hand, and I gripped his corded forearm, letting him pull me back to my feet.

He was an incredibly patient teacher, going over the same moves with me over and over, teaching me all kinds of throws to use an opponent’s body weight against him.

Then I threw him, and he landed heavily on his shoulder in the grass.

For a second, I froze, afraid he’d react badly.

He grinned up at me. His dark eyes were lit with genuine delight, and something surged in my chest.

“Good,” he said, and he held his hand to me, trusting me to pull him up this time. I set my feet and leaned back, but he unfolded from the ground with the same easy grace he always had, jumping to his feet as if he didn’t need my help one bit. But then, why had he reached out to me?

“Now,” he said. “I’m going to stop going easy on you. I want you to practice like you’re in a fight for your life, all right? Don’t be scared to hurt me.”

“How would I do that anyway?” I demanded, and Cole’s answering smile crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“You’re a fast learner,” he said. “I have no doubt you’ll be sending me to the clinic before you know it. All right, let’s do this again.”

He waved a hand at me, gesturing me toward him.

I took a step back into my fighting stance instead. “Do I seem like I’m ever going to make the first blow?”

Of course, I'd murdered Cliff without any hesitation. The memory of his shocked face rose in my mind, and I pushed it away.

I'd do whatever I must to protect my family.

The two of us circled each other, trading tentative, light blows. I blocked his punch, then tried to slip under his arm, only for him to capture me, caging me with his arms. He drew me against his body, but just for a second before he shoved me away. I slammed into the ground, rolled up with my head dizzy and staggered to my feet.

"Good," he said. "You didn't stay down."

"And I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have just shoved an actual opponent like a second grader," I retorted. *Shut up, shut up. You don't want him treating you like an actual opponent anyway!*

"One step at a time." He came toward me again, launching a furious volley of blows—or at least they seemed furious to me.

I blocked one after another, then threw up my arm to block his fist... too late. He hit my arm, and it slammed into my nose. Pain exploded across my face, washing the world red. It paired nicely with the humiliation of having hit myself.

"Stay focused," he warned me. "Even after a hit. What are you going to do now?"

He punched me in the side, the punch probably light for him but hard enough to make the air rush out of my lungs. I tried to dance back, shaking my head to clear it, but he closed on me again.

Warm blood flowed down my face. I must look horrible. I launched myself at him, desperate to finish this, and faked a punch to the left before ducking under his block and hooking my fist. It felt as if my knuckles all but shattered against his rock hard abs. He grabbed me, wrapping his arms around me, and I drove my knee up into his balls. He let out a shocked sound, then threw himself backward.

The two of us slammed into the ground together and I scrambled to get on top. I thought I had him pinned for a second, then he swept my grip away and rolled the two of us over easily, landing on top of me. Blood flowed into my mouth, making me feel like I was going to drown, and I struggled and writhed.

“Good job,” he said, rolling off me and rising to his feet as if it were nothing.

“I am choking on blood I made myself bleed,” I rasped as I struggled to sit up. “I think *good job* is an overstatement.”

He knelt in front of me and reached his arm out to steady me. His fingers felt hot on my shoulder, so intense that it almost distracted me from the pain and embarrassment.

His gaze sought mine. “I wouldn’t say something I didn’t mean, Amelia.”

A warm glow lit my chest at those kind words, and I couldn’t meet his eyes no matter how much he was obviously trying to connect with me. I was afraid he’d see how I felt written across my face. When I lifted my hand to my nose, blood seeped between my fingers.

His hands were gentle as he held his t-shirt up to my face. “Tilt your head back.”

He poured water from his water bottle onto his t-shirt and began to gently clean up my face, gripping the back of my head with one hand. His hands were gentle and firm, and slowly my sense of embarrassment ebbed a little bit. It felt good to be taken care of, and Cole seemed pleased with me despite my clumsiness.

“There,” he said, sitting back slightly. The blood had stopped trickling from my nose, and I could finally meet his dark eyes as he smiled, just slightly. That small twitch of Cole’s lips seemed like the first time I’d seen him smile, and it made me want to make his unhesitating grin. I’d bet it was gorgeous. “Look, you kept fighting even once you were hurt. Like you always have, right? You just have to transfer that mindset to physically fighting.”

I nodded, but even that movement hurt.

“If you shift into a wolf, you’ll be fine. Want to go for a run?”

When we were wolves, Cole had displayed a playful side that was intoxicating. There was something alluring about seeing this man who was always so controlled embrace his inner animal. “Very much.”

He stood, his muscles rippling. The sun haloed his hair, and my heart flip-flopped as he held his hand out to me to help me up.

“Good,” he said. “Because I enjoyed running with you the other day.”

They were small, polite words, but he hesitated as if that were some major confession. I let him pull me to my feet, and for a second, the air between us felt charged. I was tempted to take another step into Cole’s waiting arms, to press myself against that hard chest and let him wrap his arms around me.

Then his gaze dropped.

The air shifted in a second, turning icy.

I turned to find Stone watching us. He leaned on the railing of the porch. His gaze seemed to cut right through me.

I turned, but all the warmth between Cole and I seemed to have died. Cole looked stone-faced and resolute, as if he had no real desire to go with me.

“Thank you for the practice,” I said, then held his blood stained t-shirt out. “Your shirt seems like it’s been through more trauma today than any textile should have to endure.”

He gave me a strange look, but took the shirt.

“Tomorrow?” I asked him, feeling irrationally afraid he’d say no, never again.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed.

For someone who had bled an awful lot of my own blood, I felt strangely elated at the thought of seeing Cole again tomorrow.

Stone hopped the railing and came over. "I'll take her out for that run," he told Cole.

I turned on him. "Did you know you can speak directly to me?"

Stone's gaze met mine evenly. "I'm aware."

Even though he was an asshole, the air between us felt charged, just like when I talked to Cole.

Well, maybe not just like when I talked to Cole. Cole was intimidating. Stone was downright terrifying, tall and powerful and commanding. There was a deep timber to his voice that made almost anyone jump, seemingly eager to obey him.

And the fact that my body responded that way made me fantasize about murdering him. In his sleep, most likely, because that was the only way I ever could. I didn't want to bow to another man ever in my life the way I'd bowed to Nathan to survive.

"Let's run," I said, turning my back on him and heading toward the forest.

CHAPTER 29





S tone

AMELIA TRIED to walk ahead of me, but I caught up to her in a few quick strides.

“Do you remember the time we met before?” I demanded.

Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. She looked as if the word was being wrung from her body before she admitted, “Yes.”

“Not that it was much of a meeting.”

I’d tracked Brennan down. He’d been disappearing at night, and stupid me, I’d thought he was casing the Longroad pack for a takeover. Our pack wasn’t strong enough then to face them, and I’d worried my brother would do something stupid and plunge us into a war.

I’d been right to worry. He was doing something stupid that could easily start a war. But he wasn’t planning an attack.

He was planning *dates*.

My brother, the fearless alpha who had taken down our father, was packing picnic baskets and carrying a second motorcycle helmet and buying a fucking *cottage*. He’d been sneaking away with Amelia to have sex.

We’d argued that day, standing out in front of the cottage. I’d thought he was getting distracted by some human.

That would’ve been bad enough.

But then I’d seen her, hiding behind the door. I’d breathed her in, that scent like the ground after a fresh rain, mixed with the citrusy scent of her slick.

As soon as I scented her, I’d known two things. My brother had just fucked her. She was from another pack.

And as pissed as I was, I could understand why he'd been tempted.

When I caught her peeking out from behind the door—that thick auburn hair, her big, innocent blue eyes, the sweetness in her face—I'd felt an immediate surge of desire. Which was followed by a painful lurch of jealousy.

Just like I felt when I saw her with Cole.

She was Brennan's, I reminded myself.

And she was walking away, plunging through the forest to get away from me. She was always running away.

"I should have stopped you then." I called after her, but I hadn't been able to stop Brennan. He'd sworn me to secrecy about Amelia, reminding me he was the alpha—unless I wanted to challenge him.

I'd never wanted to be alpha. But even if I had, I sure as hell never would've hurt him.

"I didn't know it was you for sure," she called over her shoulder. The breeze whipped her reddish-brown hair around as she stepped into a sun-dappled clearing between the trees. "I just knew it was one of his brothers. You all look so alike, it's..."

Her voice shook, and she stopped.

I stopped too, a few feet behind her. Had I made her cry?

Because I didn't just look like Dad. I looked like Brennan, and that made her miserable.

Was she miserable when she saw Brennan's ghost because of grief? Or because of guilt? Or both?

"But of course it was you," she went on. "You've hated me since the first time you laid eyes on me."

I scoffed. But she was looking away, so she didn't see my expression. Better for her to believe what I felt was *hatred*.

I needed her to be scared enough to cooperate with me, to know she couldn't run. I didn't want to risk losing her to

Nathan or to anyone else from the Longroad pack that might try to steal her back. She needed to stay here. Safe. Near me.

Her shoulders shook.

Fuck.

The thought that she was crying was like a stake through my chest. My one fucking weakness.

“I don’t hate you,” I said. “I don’t trust you. But I don’t hate you.”

She let out a hard, bitter laugh. “You don’t trust me? I love Brennan. Being here with you and your brothers, it’s the first time in my life I could talk about Brennan, I could actually remember him, remember something more than the horrible way it ended, but you’re too much of an asshole.”

Love. She didn’t use the past tense. She still loved Brennan.

And so did I, so much that it felt like a tightness in my chest, like a building sense of white hot rage. I could never kill enough, hurt enough, to ease that tightness.

But right now, for once, I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I just wanted her.

“Turn around,” I growled, letting my alpha power seep into my voice. “Face me when you call me an asshole.”

She was already stalking forward through the trees again. Disobedient little wolf. I might be nothing else to her, but I would be her fucking alpha.

I caught up to her in a few quick strides, pressing my body against hers. She gasped as I pushed her, gently but firmly, against a tree, hemming her in with my body.

My lips dipped beside her ear. “Stop running away from me.”

“You don’t really want to talk to me, Stone.” Her shoulders shook, but now as she turned her face over her shoulder, I could see her profile, her flashing eyes and her furious, pressed-together red lips. She was beautiful and she was

furious. She wasn't crying. "You're all one-liners and rage and you aren't capable of a genuine conversation."

The curve of her ass pressed against my thighs as I caged her there. My cock was so hard it ached, having her body pressed against mine. Having her trapped. I breathed in her scent, which was the same as it was that night I first learned of this forbidden, alluring woman: the scent of rain, the scent of slick.

Was she... turned on right now?

"Face me," I dared her. *Look at me and show me you aren't as aroused being close to me as I am to you. Tell me your nipples aren't sharp, your breasts aching for my touch... tell me your panties aren't doused with desire.*

She twisted in my arms, raising her chin defiantly as her gaze met mine.

Those large, luminous eyes could've brought me to my knees. Her lips were perfectly shaped for kissing, a rounded, impish lower lip and a pronounced bow. I wanted to crush my lips to hers. I wanted to punish her for walking away. For making me crazy. For being forever forbidden.

"Call me an asshole again," I suggested, now that we were face to face.

Her eyes flashed up at me, but something new entered her expression now. Wariness. Fear.

I always wanted to find Nathan and snap his neck. But now I felt a new pulse of anger. He had broken her.

Then her chin lifted. "Asshole."

The word came out soft, and her gaze dropped as if she was afraid to meet mine, her shoulders lifting as she braced herself.

I let out a laugh, and her surprised gaze swept to mine, her lips parting in confusion.

He hadn't fucking broken her.

Maybe even I couldn't.

“When you want to insult me, firecracker, make sure you do it to my face. Otherwise, you look like a coward.” Even though she was anything but a coward. She was so fucking fierce, and it was a delight.

Her lips parted, but whatever she was going to say next was lost as I caught her chin with two fingers.

My mouth crashed into hers. Her lips were soft, her mouth hard and unyielding. She froze for a second. My heart stuttered despite myself. What the fuck was I doing? She was Brennan’s; she wasn’t mine. I shouldn’t kiss her like this.

The next second, she softened. She swayed against me, deepening the kiss. The power of that kiss took me over completely and drove every thought, every resistance, away as if they were insubstantial as smoke.

Amelia’s body was against mine, and I needed more.

Her hands wrapped around my wrists, but this time, she wasn’t trying to push me away. She pulled me closer, and I deepened the kiss. My thigh sank between her legs, wanting more of her, crushing her against my body. She let out a small huff of breath against my mouth, and I stilled, worried I’d hurt her.

But she wrapped her hand around the back of my head, her fingers slipping into my hair, and kissed me furiously.

All I wanted was to tear her clothes off and fuck her here in the woods.

Then a faint, unusual scent reached my nose. I pulled away from her, my nostrils flaring.

It was the odd scent, the one that shouldn’t be here. We’d tracked it already, but we hadn’t found the rogue wolf.

I yanked away from her. She glowered up at me, her chest heaving with her breaths. Furious I kissed her? Furious I stopped?

I didn’t care right now. Not when there was danger near.

“Get back to the house,” I told her. “I don’t have time to run with you now.”

Her eyes were wide, and her own nostrils flared. If she smelled the danger, her face didn't show the fear.

But a rogue wolf... given the timing, it had to be a spy from the Longroad pack.

I wouldn't let the Longroad pack take anyone else from me.

“Run.” My alpha power rumbled through my voice.

Her shoulders stiffened. But she didn't resist.

She turned and raced through the trees. As much as I wanted to chase the scent down, I shifted so I could follow her in the shadows, protecting her, until she had run across the clearing and climbed the porch steps.

Then I turned to go hunting.

CHAPTER 30





S haw

STONE USUALLY RAN EARLY these mornings and then disappeared to train rather than eating breakfast with us. He and Brennan had been obsessed with going to the gym and training in martial arts since we were kids, and my father had praised them not realizing that they were planning to usurp his throne..

But as the fourth son who would never be heir to the kingdom, I'd relished sleeping in.

Stone had usually joined us at breakfast, though, so I was pretty sure he was just scared of Amelia. Which I found incredibly entertaining.

It was Karissa's turn to cook breakfast.

Liam, who spent most of his time as the wolf these days, nothing that was unusual for him, stared at Amelia's face as she ate. She seemed fixed on her hash brown casserole, besides giving him a smile, and spent most of breakfast chatting with Dylan.

Then Dylan ran off to the sprawling Lego build that had taken over the living room. It was turning into a real miniature city. Every time Cole walked past it, I caught him fiddling with some legos, making a new addition. And I, personally, had given the little Lego town a number of absurd buildings.

What entertained me most was the fact that there was almost always some new building in the morning. I'd heard Dylan exclaim excitedly this morning about how there was a fire station now, complete with a pole that the little Lego firemen could not actually navigate very satisfactorily, and even two Lego dalmatians. But the firehouse garage was empty.

"I bet there'll be a fire truck tomorrow," I said.

Amelia threw me a look.

“What?” I asked.

“Now he’s going to be disappointed if there’s no fire truck tomorrow,” she said. “Are there even Lego fire trucks?”

“I’m sure there are,” I said. Now I had two missions for the day: one, find out who was alive and dead from her pack and two, procure a Lego fire truck. One mission sounded a lot less potentially lethal than the other. Speaking of which... “Amelia, can I ask you some questions about your old pack?”

She chewed her lower lip and looked up at me with wide eyes. She had the most innocent look of anyone I’d ever met, and it gave me the strongest desire to wrap her in my arms and shield her from all the misery of our world.

“Why?” she asked.

“I’m doing some recon on your pack to see if there’s any evidence that Nathan is alive or dead.” I said. Then, in a quieter voice, because one of my siblings was always eavesdropping and Stone would not have approved, “and I’m going to try to find out if Aiden and Lawson are alive.”

Her face softened, her eyes brightening with hope. Something swelled in my chest. I would do anything to make her look at me that way.

“Be careful,” she warned me. “The Longroad pack doesn’t take very kindly to people asking questions.”

“I’m always careful,” I assured her, and she smiled as if she knew very well that was absolutely not true.

“As long as you’re going to be careful... I do have a friend that works in town, she might be a good person to talk to you. Liza. She hated Nathan, and she wasn’t always really thrilled with the pack as a whole. She works at the diner where I used to work.”

I whistled. “She’s still working there? I assume that you haven’t worked in quite a while.”

Her mouth twisted ruefully. “Yeah, that’s true. She actually replaced me... inherited my old best friend. Nathan wasn’t

interested in having a working wife. I wonder what it would have been like if..." she trailed off. "I think I would have wanted to be home with Dylan anyway."

"Of course," I said. Everyone in the pack did some kind of work to keep the pack running, but for the woman who wanted to stay home, we counted raising their cubs as work for the pack. I was sure if Amelia wanted, we could also find work for her to do that didn't take away from her time with her son.

She broke me out of my planning—which was not really my usual MO, I generally preferred not to plan ahead more than five minutes—by saying, "It's in neutral territory, off pack lands. It's a pretty common meeting place for Longroad pack to negotiate with other packs. So there's a possibility you could run into Longroad there."

"No problem." I didn't think very highly of the Longroad pack; how many had known that Nathan was hurting her and had done nothing? "Anyone I should look out for in particular?"

She hesitated. "Normally, I'd have a list to give you. People like Cliff. But I don't know who's alive or dead."

"Cliff?" I asked. It was interesting she called out that one name.

"He doesn't matter anymore. He's dead."

I nodded sagely. "I see. He's the one you murdered."

Her eyes went wide, and she looked around to see if we'd been overheard. "Why would you say it like that?"

"Because you drove a knife into his gut which is usually kind of a murder thing? You were protecting your sister, I respect that. You don't have to be all, *"No, totally non murder, my hand just slipped with the knife in it."*"

She sighed, looking exasperated with me, and I couldn't resist the grin that spread across my face. "Look, Amelia, I'm not judging. Sometimes you have to commit a little murder. Get a little stabby."

"Can you please stop saying murder?" she asked.

“If you think of anyone else that might be helpful for Teresa and I to talk to you, can you have Karissa text it to me?” I’d almost suggested that she text me herself, but of course she didn’t have a phone. And Stone wouldn’t want her to have one. Right now, she had zero dollars and zero escape plan, and that was how he liked it.

“I will,” she said. “and I appreciate you trying to find out what’s going on with my brother and Lawson.”

I was really curious who Lawson had been to her, but for now I put it aside. “Of course. Anything to make you smile.”

I chucked her under the chin, and she smiled up at me. It was a standard line of mine, something I’d said dozens of times. And while I did like to make girls happy—for a while—there was never any real feeling behind it.

Until I said it to her.

She started to say something to me, her face pink, and then paused, biting her lower lip. I had a feeling I knew who was behind me even before I turned around. If it wasn’t Stone, it had to be his right hand pain-in-the-ass, Teresa...

“So you’ve got yourself a side mission, Shaw,” Teresa said coolly. “I’m sure Stone would just love that.”

I turned enough for her to see me smile. “If you recall, Teresa, I didn’t actually want to bring you.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“People might be willing to talk to me,” Amelia said.

Theresa scoffed. “There’s no way you are leaving this territory until we want to use you as bait.”

Amelia’s eyes blazed. “Do you think I want to go back there?”

Teresa looked as cool and unruffled as usual. “I can’t tell. I’m not ready to form an opinion of your loyalty.”

Her words were heavy, weighted, as if the fates of Amelia and her son might rest on Teresa’s judgment. But of course

that wasn't true. As much as I hated it, Stone's decision was the only decision.

"I'll be back soon," I promised Amelia, then turned to Teresa and swept an arm toward the door in exaggerated welcome. I had to get her to the car, partially to get her away from Amelia. The two of them were like oil and water.

As if any of us couldn't guess why Teresa hated Amelia almost on sight.

I could never stand any tension, unless I was the one distressing people for my own amusement. Call it a survival skill from growing up the youngest son in a dangerous household. I had a need to smooth things over.

I tried everything I could to make conversation with Teresa, but she would not be smoothed. Instead, we had a very quiet drive out to the nearest city near Longroad pack territory.

The diner Amelia had mentioned was a large, rough looking kind of place, the kind of place where everyone minds their own business. The waitress who came over to serve us looked tired and harried. But she aimed a bright smile at us that felt oddly familiar, and I wracked my brain, trying to figure out where I might know her from.

"What can I get you started with?" she asked.

I stole a glance at her name tag. Rose. I still couldn't place her, but something about her round face and long auburn braid felt familiar.

"Two Cokes, two burgers, and a basket of fries please."

Teresa looked at me skeptically when the waitress had gone. "We are in a dangerous situation, and you want to have snacks?"

"I always want to have snacks."

When Rose came back with our drinks, I asked her, "Do you know if Liza is around today?"

She gave me a strange look. "She won't be in for an hour."

As soon as she had tossed us straws and departed, Teresa said to me quietly, “She looks familiar, doesn’t she?”

I nodded.

Even though I hadn’t said anything, she threw me an exasperated look. “Does she look like someone you slept with?”

“You are so rude, Tee.”

“I just wondered why you were looking at me that way, because I think she bears a striking resemblance to a certain hapless—but oddly hypnotizing, apparently—shifter who recently wandered into our pack.”

I stared at Teresa, who threw up her arms in exasperation, before I asked, “You think she looks like Amelia?”

I turned to get another look at our waitress, realizing that she was probably right.

Teresa threw up her arms. “So you admit you’re all hypnotized.”

“I don’t know that I’d say hypnotized. She’s very sweet, and she’s been through some hard times, we all have those protective alpha impulses. Of course we want to make sure that she’s going to be OK.”

Teresa gave me a disbelieving look. “Yes. You’re all so...protective. That’s what it is.”

I frowned at all she was implying. “Why don’t you like her, anyway?”

“I don’t think you can trust her, and you and Cole and Stone all act like she’s your mate. And Liam has leveled-up to a whole new kind of crazy.”

I raised my hands in a placating gesture. “All right, put on the brakes. I’m pretty sure I don’t have a mate. I’ve never been the kind to settle down with one girl. And I definitely don’t have one mate that I would share with my brothers. Because that’s weird.”

She rolled her eyes. “I just call it like I see it.”

“You think Stone likes her?” I mused skeptically. “He doesn’t act like he likes her.”

“Stone doesn’t act like he likes anyone,” she reminded me, and that was hard to argue with.

Rose came around the corner and set the basket of hot fries on the table. Her fingers were shaking before she thrust her hands behind her back. Fuck. Had she heard us? Did she know we were from the King pack? Had she already called in Longroad reinforcements, or would she as soon as she left the table?

Teresa’s eyes flickered up to meet mine, unspoken communication passing between us. Except Teresa and I had never gotten along very well, and I couldn’t imagine our communication was super, and she might very well be signaling to me we had to murder her, while I was signaling back we should not have been talking about this here.

Well, we were in it now. Might as well ask the girl some questions.

“So.” I leaned forward and fixed her with a smile that was generally considered very charming. “Do you know Nathan Longroad?”

From the way her eyes went wide, I didn’t need any other verification she was part of the Longroad pack. I could smell it on her anyway. Teresa and I had both taken care to disguise our scents before we left the house today, but there was no reason for a wolf living their normal ordinary life to do that.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“I just want to know if he’s dead or alive.”

“Do you mean Amelia wants to know?” Her hands seem to be shaking more than ever. “My sister, the traitor?”

I was more irritated than I should have been by the insulting words directed toward Amelia, but I just smiled coolly.

“And who are you?”

“Rose.” Her eyes locked on mine. “Amelia’s sister.”

“Yes, so I gathered.” Except as much as I had argued with my brothers and with Karissa over the years, I’d never shook with anger as if I hated them.

“And you called her a traitor,” Teresa added seamlessly. “Why is that?”

“Because I’m pretty sure she killed my fiance,” Rose said fiercely. “So if she wants to know if her fucking husband is dead, tell her she can come home and tell me the truth, for once in her life, about what’s going on.”

I tilted back my chair, studying her pretty, furious face. Her cheeks were blotchy red with her anger. She really did look like Amelia, but she didn’t have Amelia’s controlled, careful self-possession or her sweetness.

“I think you know your sister can’t come home until she knows Nathan is dead.” I said quietly. “Did you know what he was doing to her?”

The way her cheeks flushed an even deeper hue, the way her eyes dropped, was enough of an answer.

“What were you going to do about it? Were you going to help her get away?”

The questions seem to make her all the more furious. Her gaze snapped up to mine. “I couldn’t!”

“Then you know why she can’t come back.” I didn’t want to bully the girl. I knew too fucking well what it was like to be helpless to protect my siblings.

She seemed to break at the slightest bit of sympathy, suddenly blurting out, “No one has seen Nathan. Almost all of the leadership was killed in the attack the other day. So it’s all such a mess—”

Her lips pressed tightly together. She realized too late that she was giving far more information than she should to her enemies.

“Please tell my sister to come home.” She glanced over her shoulder, waiting for someone to come, and looked back to us.

“Everyone thinks Nathan is dead. My mom is going crazy with her gone. And I miss Dylan so much.”

The way she looked around was enough of a tell. It was time for us to get out of here.

“Time to go, Teresa,” I ordered, standing. I made one last ditch effort. “What about your brother? Is he okay?”

Rose sneered at me in response. She didn’t look much like Amelia when she made that face. “Why do you care? You’re the ones who beat him almost to death.”

Almost. At least she had answered my question.

“What about Lawson?”

“Of course she’d be worried about him like she never worries about her actual family,” she muttered, and my curiosity about Lawson spiked up yet again.

“Dead? Not dead?” I demanded, giving her a thumbs-down then flipping it right-side up.

“Tell her to come home.”

I was pretty sure that meant *not dead*, even if the brat was going to fight me. “Yeah, I’m not going to do that until I know Nathan is six feet underground. But thanks for the advice.” I looked at Tee. “Let’s move on.”

Teresa actually listened for once without any argument. She usually bickered with me recreationally. But she handed Rose a small card as she stood. “If you need any help, you can call me. I’ll always answer.”

I wasn’t sure if she just hated Amelia, or she was genuinely worried about Rose, or if she just had an elaborate plan she’d formed to use the two against each other until she’d cracked open the Longroad pack.

But I hated the thought that Amelia had a sister who hated her.

Then, as we were getting into the car, she ran into the parking lot. Her face creased as if she might cry, and I was reminded that she was really just a kid.

“Not dead,” she whispered to me, then she ran back.

Teresa slammed her car door shut, already drawing her gun as if she was worried we’d have to fight our way out. “That whole family is as unreliable as a fart. I hope you know what you’re doing with Amelia.”

I smiled at her as I started up the car. “We both know I have no clue.”

Why pretend?

But as I pulled out, I caught a glimpse of Rose watching us. And even if I had to watch our backs, I was glad Amelia’s little sister obviously still loved her, despite whatever lay between them.

CHAPTER 31





*A*melia

THE NEXT DAY, Janie and I made small talk as we walked. She invited me to come to their next book club, and I laughed. It seemed like a strange activity for shifters—but the idea also filled me with delight.

We stopped at the fork in the path where we parted ways. This time, she had the baby in a carrier on her chest, and she bounced back and forth to keep the baby happy, her short blond hair brushing her shoulders.

“You don’t have to read the book,” she assured me. “Half of us don’t. We’re moms. But between you and me...” She leaned in like she was going to tell me a secret, and instant nerves spiked through me, before she whispered, “I mostly go for the sangria and a night where my husband does bedtime.”

I grinned. I couldn’t imagine myself not being there for Dylan at bedtime anyway, and I didn’t plan to keep living in Stone’s house any longer than I had to, and yet... “Maybe.”

I couldn’t bring myself to say no.

Her eyes brightened. “I’ll drop the book off at your house!”

My house. I stumbled over the very thought, but I just said, “Thank you.”

After life in the Longroad pack, I couldn’t help feeling skeptical when someone was so nice. What was she trying to sell me? But as we parted ways, I couldn’t help but feel a little lift of hope.

As soon as I had left her behind and was alone, I could’ve sworn I felt someone watching me again. I couldn’t find the wolf in the woods, but I could’ve sworn I felt him.

Joshua was waiting for me on the path again. My heart seized, afraid of what I'd hear.

"Aiden's alive," he greeted me.

It felt like the ground had dropped between my feet and then returned, and I swayed. He reached out and grabbed my arm. "Are you okay?"

"I'm so much better now," I said. "Did you get to talk to him?"

"He said to tell you Lawson survived too. Barely."

So he really had talked to Aiden. Relief flooded me.

"Thank you," I said.

"Of course," he said. "It's the least I can do. I'm sorry that you're a prisoner here."

I nodded. Until I knew Nathan was dead, maybe this was the safest place for Dylan and me. I felt protected by these men—and afraid of how I felt.

"I want to talk to you about Stone," Joshua said.

"Stone is watching," I warned him. Although I couldn't see the wolf, I was sure those red wolf's eyes were focused on me, gleaming and dangerous and bright.

Joshua frowned. "I heard Stone took Teresa and Shaw and headed for the eastern border. The rumor's a rogue wolf, not that Stone's talking to us peons."

That explained why I hadn't seen Shaw the night before. But if Stone was gone, then who was the wolf watching me? One of Stone's men, likely. If it were Nathan, I would know it. I had a sixth sense for Nathan.

Besides, if it were Nathan, I'd already be lying dead in the forest, with my guts ripped out and hanging from the branches.

"Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"Has he hurt you?" he asked.

"No." I touched the old bruises, which were beginning to fade.

“Good.” His voice was laden with relief. “You can’t trust Stone.”

“I don’t trust anyone.”

“Good.”

But that conversation made me want to seek out Stone, to begin to try to understand just how much a danger he posed, or if Joshua was wrong or deceiving me.

I really didn’t trust anyone.

But it was hard to see much of Stone. If he came back that day, he didn’t seek me out.

I stopped by the village school at recess to see Dylan laughing and running with the other kids, and my heart rose, a smile writing across my face.

That night, I left Dylan asleep when I jolted awake. The peace I felt during the day didn’t bleed over into the night.

I stepped out onto the balcony. The evening breeze was cool and dry, caressing the sweat off my forehead from that nightmare. The air woke me up and seemed to chase the nightmares away along with any possibility of going back to sleep soon.

There were voices beneath the balcony on the front porch, and I looked down to see Shaw crossing the yard. He seemed to feel me and turned back, his eyes rising to me, then brightening as if he was glad to see me.

“Amelia. Our insomnia club meets again.” He swept his arm in a bow.

“Where are you going at two o’clock in the morning, Shaw?” From what Karissa had said, I assumed he was visiting some woman.

“I just got back from hunting with Stone.”

My stomach dropped, and I leaned against the balcony to support myself. “Did you find Nathan?”

What if the wolf they’d scented was my husband? What if he had survived against all odds?

The thought twisted bitterly inside my stomach.

“No,” he said. “We didn’t find anyone. That damn wolf is like a ghost... But I can tell you Lawson and Aiden are alive.”

My eyes drifted close in relief. Somehow those words hit harder hearing them from Shaw. Maybe it was because it was confirmation of something I barely dared to believe. Or maybe it was because I trusted Shaw far more than I trusted Joshua.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

My eyes flew open as I heard a sudden rustle and then a sound of creaking metal close by. The next thing I knew, Shaw was easily climbing over the railing of the balcony. The moonlight shone across the taut muscles of his body, and then he was standing beside me.

I glanced down at the ground, then up at him.

He shrugged and smiled. “Anything’s possible with proper motivation.”

“You’re a climber like my sister,” I told him, and his smile dimmed.

“I ran into her,” he said quietly. “She’s... intense.”

A wave of protectiveness washed over me. “Where did you run into her?”

“She’s working at the diner where you used to work.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t picture my little sister there, in the place where I once sat across from Brennan in a booth. The memory used to be lit with a warm glow but now when I pictured Brennan smiling at me, the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, it was tainted by the memory of what came after. Of Brennan, fighting desperately, going down under a pile of shifters... “Is she okay?”

He hesitated. I thought he was going to lie to me until he said, “She doesn’t seem great. She said your mom’s been unhinged.”

“She’s always unhinged,” I said, but I still worried about her. “God. I wish...” I ran my fingers through my hair and

stopped, unable to even think of what I wished for.

I just wanted the world to be different. I wanted my mom to be loving and kind and just... a mom. I wanted someone to love me like I loved Dylan.

“I was thinking I’d go visit Brennan’s grave,” he told me quietly. “I wanted to tell you what I saw, but... I’ve got a lot to think about and that’s where I go. You look like you have a lot to think about too.”

They had his body? I didn’t know there was any grave for him.

I hesitated, not sure if he was inviting me to come with him or not. I didn’t want to ruin his time alone. “Can I come?”

Shaw nodded. “Of course.”

Dylan was still sleeping soundly, his dark lashes resting in the hollows above his round baby cheeks. I knelt and kissed one of his sweet cheeks before straightening and pulling on Brennan’s old sweatshirt.

The two of us went up a long, dark trail that wound through the forest, steadily upward, until we emerged in a small clearing at the top of the hill. From here, it seemed as if we could see all of the pack territory.

As if Brennan were the alpha still keeping watch.

Longing rose in my chest, longing for someone and something that could never again exist. I just wanted Brennan to wrap his arms around me and hold me against his chest.

But instead, Shaw was beside me, uncertainty written across his handsome face as if he could tell I was struggling.

I managed a smile, although it felt hollow. “Do you come up here often?”

“Sometimes. We all came up here on the anniversary of the day...” He trailed off.

“I was thinking about it too that day.”

“But it feels like everyone else comes up here to remember he’s dead. I come up here...” he trailed off. “He was always

the one who I could talk to. I love Stone, but he's, you know, Stone. And Liam is impossible to talk to; he's like a sentient fortune cookie. But Brennan, Brennan would listen to me."

He rested his hand lightly on the tombstone, and for the first time, I faced it: it was a stone cross and the vines of the rose bushes were beginning to creep up it. But if the vines pricked Shaw, he didn't show it. He was too lost in his thoughts. "Still does. But now I don't get to listen to his advice. Or his shitty jokes."

I rested my hand over his. "I miss him too."

"I know you do. It's good to share that with someone." The sadness in his eyes was unusual when Shaw was usually full of laughter and glib remarks. "It feels like the whole world shattered when we lost him, and we didn't even know he was leaving. One minute my brother was there and alive, and the next he was gone..." he trailed off, shaking his head.

"He didn't tell you?"

Shaw shook his head.

"Where did you find him?" I asked softly. "Nathan dragged me out of the motel that night and he put me in a car. I didn't see Brennan again."

"We never did. It's an empty grave." Shaw glanced away, the wind blowing his dark hair above his high brow. "Someday, we'll bring him home."

The words were laden with emotion, and for the first time, I saw Shaw's tender, aching heart under the easygoing façade. It made me want to hug him and comfort him.

"I'm sure you will."

"How did you meet my brother?" Shaw raked his hand through his hair. "He kept you a secret. Probably wanted you all to himself."

"He didn't mention he had so many cute brothers," I agreed, and he laughed. The genuine, surprised sound of his laughter made me smile too, and the pain of the last few minutes shifted into something different.

We had our grief, but we had life and laughter too, at times.

“Don’t get my hopes up, Amelia,” he teased, and there was a faint smolder in his gaze to go along with that easy smile.

“We met at a bonfire.” I would never forget the moment my eyes met Brennan’s across the blazing fire. “I was trying to enjoy one night out and pretend to just be human, and instead I ran into a wolf.”

“Did you know he was your mate from the first time you saw him?” Shaw’s eyes were curious. “What does that feel like? The moment when you know someone is your mate?”

“You haven’t found yours.”

Shaw didn’t answer. “Tell me about your version of Brennan.”

He sounded as hungry to talk about Brennan as I felt, and it made something loosen in my chest, a tightness that had become so much a part of me I’d no longer noticed it. Until now, face to face with this man who felt the same pain.

“I kept Brennan a secret because no one would approve of me dating someone from the King pack.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “I was just a kid, really. So clueless.” Nathan had been obsessed with me, but I hadn’t understood then how much danger was in that obsession. “He was so kind, so generous. He taught me to ride his motorcycle, and he...”

I trailed off. I couldn’t talk about the cottage in the woods where Brennan had marked me, where we had kissed and touched until Brennan’s body was as familiar as my own.

“He probably was afraid of getting caught too,” he said with a shake of his head. “God, we thought he was casing out your pack for a takeover. I was trying to talk him out of it, we weren’t strong enough to take your pack down then. But I guess he was just slipping off to see you.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m the one who’s sorry. I must have done something wrong that my brother didn’t trust me with his

secrets.” Shaw’s voice turned raw. “If you two had come home here instead of running away, he’d be alive.”

“He loved you all so much,” I assured him, thinking of the way his eyes had lit up when he talked about his siblings. “I don’t think it was about you or Stone... I think he just wanted the life we’d planned. The life that was the two of us.”

Even as I said the words, I regretted them. Brennan’s plan sounded harsh. How had Brennan left these brothers of his behind?

“Maybe.” He smiled, but it came out lopsided and endearing. Shaw obviously ached over not just Brennan’s loss, but his guilt. Did Stone feel the same way? Did they ever talk about their feelings?

“I miss him so much. I never get to talk about him, and now—” My voice fractured, and I broke off, crossing my arms. Trying to hold myself together. For the past few years, I hadn’t dared to open the box that contained my memories of Brennan. I’d known someone loved me once and that had sustained me, kept me filled with hope that Dylan could live a life full of love. But I hadn’t dared to feel my grief.

And it felt as if all those years of grief were rising now, choking me.

“Now you have me,” Shaw promised, resting his hands gently on my shoulders. When I looked up at him, all the usual playfulness was gone; he looked kind and serious. “I will always want to talk about Brennan. I want to hear your stories, and I want to tell you mine.”

“I’d like that,” I whispered.

He pulled me into his arms, cradling me against his chest, his strong arms wrapped tightly around me.

“I didn’t realize what was going on then,” he murmured into my ear. “But he’d been so stressed out all our lives, it seemed like, trying to get Liam back, trying to get our Dad to change... then being the alpha. But those last few months before you two disappeared, he was like... the old Brennan, the one when we were kids.”

I smiled against Shaw's chest. That was a nice thought.

"He'd even sing around the house, and that asshole was totally tone-deaf, so it was a real treat, let me tell you." Shaw went on drily, and I let out a little laugh that was half a sob.

"He played his guitar for me," I said. "And I happen to have liked his singing, thank you very much."

"Well, then that was true love, for sure," he said, with a smile in his voice.

Then he hugged me a little closer, wrapping me up tightly in his arms. I leaned my head against his chest, feeling tired and undone and sad, and safe to be all those things.

He added quietly, "He was so happy with you, Amelia."

I'd pushed down the tears until I couldn't cry anymore, but now I felt hot tears building behind my eyes.

Shaw swiped his hand over his eyes, and something broke inside me.

For the first time in years, tears spilled onto my cheeks. I was so used to trying to hide my tears from Nathan that the feeling made me panicked, but when I tried to pull away, Shaw just pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly.

I clung to Shaw, surprised to find myself crying harder as he hugged me tightly. He didn't tell me everything was going to be okay. He just held me while I cried.

"I didn't betray him," I managed between sobs. "I've spent all these years trying to figure out who did."

I didn't dare mention the names of the possible traitors. Stone might kill Lawson and Aiden, and I couldn't trust what Shaw might do either. Not yet.

"I know," Shaw said. "I believe you."

He tilted my chin up so that our eyes met, as if he wanted to be sure I really heard him.

"You were the best thing that ever happened to Brennan. Don't let anyone make you feel like you were the worst."

He waited until I'd stopped crying then the two of us walked down the mountain back to the house together. We were both rung out and exhausted, and we didn't talk.

But Shaw's words sang in my heart.

CHAPTER 32





A melia

THE NEXT DAY, Shaw, Karissa and I had breakfast together. Dylan barely ate before he ran off to the toys. The sound of a little boy pretending to be a firetruck rose in the air because, of course, a Lego firetruck had appeared.

“Come back,” I called, picking up his peanut butter toast, which had two bites taken from it. “You barely ate your toast!”

“I don’t like peanut butter toast!” he called back. “You can eat it!”

“You loved peanut butter toast a week ago, but fine,” I muttered. “And I don’t eat peanut butter toast. I’m a grown up.”

Shaw leaned over and took a bite out of the toast. He raised those mischievous blue eyes to mine as he straightened, still chewing.

“Great,” Karissa said. “You’ve got one of my brothers eating out of your hand, at least. Can you tame the rest of them?”

“Doubtful,” I said lightly, although her words made me feel a sudden nervous itch I couldn’t explain. “Where are they all, anyway? Wouldn’t they normally be here for breakfast?”

“You never outgrow peanut butter toast,” Shaw observed, before taking a long sip of his coffee.

“You’ve never outgrown anything,” Karissa said with a roll of her eyes. Then she finally returned to my question, looking a little embarrassed on her brothers’ behalf. “Yes, they would normally. But Stone’s been obsessed lately with...” she trailed off as if she didn’t want to mention Nathan or the Longroad pack.

“And Liam’s been wolfed out full-time,” Shaw said. “Like his nightmares have been worse.”

“Nightmares?” I asked.

Karissa shot Shaw a warning look, as if she didn’t approve of him talking to me about their weaknesses. But Shaw just blinked innocently back at her as if he was pretending not to understand.

Karissa sought to clarify—there was a thump under the table as she kicked Shaw—but Shaw was already talking. “Liam’s had nightmares ever since I can remember. Even before he was sent to the Longroad pack.”

“The Longroad pack?” I asked sharply. My pack?

“You didn’t know?” Shaw frowned. “It was part of the peace agreement between our packs. A foster exchange. We got Cordan Longroad, their alpha’s firstborn. And my father gave them Liam.”

“What happened?”

“Things went to shit pretty fast. My father was not good at peace, and neither was your alpha. Cordan escaped back to his pack, just in time too, because my father was about to scatter him in pieces along your pack’s territory because your alpha went back on their deal.”

“And then Liam?” I asked, my breath stuttering in my chest.

“My dad didn’t fucking care to get him back. The Longroad pack tried to use him as a pawn, but it didn’t matter. Dad didn’t want him.” Shaw’s voice was soaked with rage and grief. “Not until Brennan challenged him for alpha.”

“He was there in my pack the whole time? But I never knew.” I shuddered, thinking of Liam being so close and never knowing he was there. I’d had both beautiful, vivid dreams and terrible nightmares since I was eight years old or so, and I wondered how much Liam’s dreams were like those horrorshows.

“Chained up in the alpha’s basement. Whatever else he went through, he won’t tell us.” His face was shuttered, as if he felt too much emotion to let any of it show.

Then his gaze met mine. “Brennan saved him. That was the only reason he cared about being alpha.”

I let out a shaky breath. “I didn’t know.”

“So you’ll have to forgive my brother for being so weird,” Karissa refilled my mug of tea. “And Liam is a bit odd too.”

Shaw took the toast from my hand, where it had hung forgotten during the exchange, and leaned back in his seat to eat it. All the intensity had cleared from his gaze now. It was hard to believe he was the same person, as if there were two versions of Shaw.

“I know he’s odd,” Shaw said quietly. “But all my brothers are good guys, Amelia. You don’t have to be scared.”

“I’m not,” I said.

He gave me a look, and I lifted my chin before I repeated, “I’m not.”

I wasn’t sure it was any more convincing to the room than my first attempt.

Once I’d taken Dylan to school, I decided to seek Stone out. Except for heated glances across crowded rooms, I’d barely seen him. Even the wolf wasn’t shadowing me today; if it had been, I had a half-baked plan to shift myself and race after the wolf. I wanted to know who it was who followed me.

And I wanted to know if I could trust Stone at all. I was starting to feel safe here in a way that worried me. Especially when Dylan was obviously getting attached to this place... and these people.

I’d rather he just hurt me and I knew to expect being hurt, than to start to feel safe and turn out to be wrong.

I climbed the steps to the building that housed his command center feeling like I’d made a terrible mistake. I almost turned back, my knees shaky, but instead pushing the door open and went in. The hallway was empty.

I found him in the library. The moment I stepped into the quiet room, I could feel his presence. He made a room feel alive almost as much as he made it feel terrifying.

He twisted in his chair to face me as if he had sensed me too. When he saw me, he rose from his chair, towering over me. “Who let you in here?”

“Hello to you too.” I took the seat across from him. “Karissa told me I had the run of your territory.”

He grunted as he sat down again. “Yes, you and Karissa, and Cole and Shaw, have certainly been exploring the outer limits... of my patience.”

“Your patience? That seems like a postage-stamp patch, not enough territory to run.”

Stone stared at me. “You know Karissa is not in charge here.”

I shrugged and leaned back in the chair. My heart was pounding in my throat, no matter how nonchalant I seemed. It wasn't just fear, either—something about Stone's heated gaze made me clench my knees together against the sudden throb of lust.

“I thought I made myself clear, Amelia. I expect to be obeyed.”

“You made your expectations very clear. Is there a rule that I'm not allowed to talk to you?”

“Not yet. Perhaps you should go before I feel the need to make a new rule.”

“Perhaps I should.” I didn't move. “I wanted to ask again about checking in with my pack. Talking to my family—”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Stone made an over-acted perplexed face. “Is an alpha's no not a full sentence anymore?”

“It was a full sentence. It wasn't a good reason. My mother will be worried about me and Dylan.” Mostly Dylan.

“You want a reason? Fine.” He leaned over the table toward me, and his presence sent heat washing over my skin. Stone smelled delicious, something spicy and dark mixed with that King woodsmoke scent. “We haven’t been able to confirm Nathan’s death. If he makes it back to your pack, if he knows where you are, he’ll come for you.”

“I thought that was your plan. That I’m bait.”

“Yes. But in my own time. I’m not going to lose fighters to protect you.” He waved me off dismissively. “You’re not worth it.”

I got to my feet, my movements jerky. *You’re not worth it.* There was a part of me that respected Stone, admired Stone, and that hurt. As I headed toward the door, my feelings grew into something hot and angry.

I hadn’t expressed anger in my five years pressed under Nathan’s thumb.

Now all of it seemed to explode at once.

I whirled at the door. “I’m not worth it? Brennan thought I was worth it! What the hell would he think about the way you treat me?”

He stood so quickly his chair fell over, towering to his full height, his eyes blazing. “You do not want to bring up my brother.”

“Why not?” I demanded. “Do you think he’d be proud of you?”

“Watch your mouth.”

“What are you going to do?” I demanded. “Are you going to hit me?”

“No.” Stone stopped, a horrified expression across his handsome features. “Never.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“You won’t let me talk about Brennan. You loved him. You must hate me. So why can’t you hit me?”

He looked bewildered and furious all at one time. “Not every man is the kind of asshole who hits women.”

“So you wouldn’t have killed women when you attacked our convoy? If we’d had female fighters?” I knew some of the men in my pack, like Nathan and Cliff, would’ve taken extra joy in hurting women who fought them.

“That’s different.”

“That’s different,” I repeated. “Well, you’ve got a weird moral code but at least you’ve got some semblance of one. *I’ll rip a woman’s throat out but I draw the line at slapping her.* Very interesting.”

“Why do you keep pushing me? What are you trying to accomplish?”

“Nothing.”

He caged me in with his arms, leaning so close to me his lips scraped my ear when he whispered, “Bullshit.”

“Get off me,” I said, trying to push him away, but I couldn’t move him. He was a wall of muscle.

I started to duck under his arm, and he caught me and reeled me against his body. His strong arms caged me in. “You sought me out. You came to talk to me, Amelia. So now talk.”

“I already told you what I wanted, and you were an asshole just like I expected.”

“No, not *just* like you expected,” he disagreed, and the realization he was right felt like the floor dropping out from under me. “I’ll never hit you, Amelia. You and Dylan are safe here.”

“That’d be a lot easier to believe if you weren’t holding me against my will.”

“Is it against your will?” His nostrils flared as his face dropped toward me, as if he were scenting me. “I can smell your arousal.”

“You’re a fucking monster.”

“And you’re a fucking liar.” He sounded amused now, not angry. “I’ll let you go when you tell me what you really want from me.”

“I told you. I need to make sure my family is safe.”

“Keep lying to me, it will definitely work out for you.” He chided.

This time when I shoved away from him, he let me go. He laughed as I stormed toward the door.

“You can’t goad me or trick me or flirt with me into doing anything I don’t want to do, Amelia. And I promise hurting you will never be on that list. I’m not Nathan.”

“What do you want from me?” I demanded.

“I don’t know,” he said, his jaw tense. “Can you go back in time five years and not fuck up my brother’s life?”

“Believe me,” I said. “If I could take back the day I met Brennan, if I could save his life, I would.”

I slammed the door behind me.

But when it was closed, I could barely believe I’d just yelled at Stone. What had come over me?

CHAPTER 33





*A*melia

JOSHUA WAS WAITING for me again. The path from the school was the one place I was ever alone...except for the wolf that watched over me. I didn't even see him today, but I was sure he was there.

I didn't want to talk to him about Stone. I couldn't make sense of what happened when he and I argued. He'd shown up and watched me fight with Cole and Shaw and Teresa several times. I'd thought he might join us, but then he'd been gone when I looked back again.

"Hey." Joshua fell into step beside me. "I want to talk to you about Stone."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Is he following you? Is he hurting you?"

"No." I didn't think he would, either, but Joshua made me doubt that a little. "Has he ever hurt anyone before?"

"Stone killed my mother."

"What?"

Joshua looked away. "I shouldn't have told you that. Stone barely tolerates my existence in this pack."

I wanted to ask what his mother did, then realized that sounded insensitive. "Why?"

"She dared to question him. I don't know if you noticed this, but Stone doesn't take very well to his authority being questioned. He thought she was disloyal, and so he..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"I'm so sorry about your mother."

"Thank you." He grimaced as if it still hurt badly, even as he added, "She's been gone a long time."

“Is that why you’re willing to... help me?”

“I’d like to think that I’d help anyway, because they kidnapped you, because I owe Aiden,” he admitted. “But I don’t know. The truth is, I do want revenge on Stone for what he did to my mom.”

I hated the feeling that I still didn’t understand Stone at all. Nathan had been terrifying, but simple. Stone was impossible to make sense of. Had he really wronged Joshua?

Stone was unyielding, and I couldn’t exactly imagine him apologizing if he made a mistake or backing down or listening to unwanted feedback. Maybe he had hurt Joshua’s mom for no good reason.

Why did the thought raise an ache of bitter disappointment?

Even after our fight.... I wanted to think well of Stone.

“What would happen to you if Stone found out you were willing to help me escape?” We both knew the answer to that, but I had to bring it up. “Aren’t you scared?”

“I’m more scared of just being a victim in my own life,” he said.

“I know what that feels like.” I hesitated, feeling sorry for Joshua but also distrustful. “Thank you for the offer.”

But the thought of helping someone get revenge on Stone felt deeply wrong.

“But no thanks?” he finished. “You’re going to take your chances with the King pack?”

“I spent my whole life without getting to choose my chance,” I said. “Now I’m betting that if Nathan shows up, I’m safer here than I am in the Longroad pack.”

He scoffed. “You’re an idiot if you think you’re safe here. But I’m around, if you ever come to your senses.”

He sauntered away through the woods.

His words lingered restlessly in my mind all the rest of the day and well into the night.

CHAPTER 34





*A*melia

I WOKE UP BESIDE DYLAN, sleepy and content for a few long seconds before a coppery scent jolted me fully awake. I bolted upright and reached for Dylan, who stirred and rolled over, his auburn hair wild against the pillow.

He was fine. I realized that at the same time as I felt how my panties clung to me damply—and not in a fun way.

I hadn't gotten my period in a year. I'd been too thin, too stressed. The absence had made me hopeful I couldn't get pregnant with Nathan's baby, but it had also left me constantly wondering if I could be pregnant, despite taking my illicit birth control pills.

I hated the thought of having a second child when I wasn't sure I could protect my first. At least if I had just one child, I might be able to carry him if he needed me when we ran.

I left Dylan in bed and went to the bathroom to clean myself up. My guts cramped painfully, pulling at my muscles, and I winced; I'd always had miserable periods and I sure hadn't missed these feelings.

I'd have to ask Karissa for some pads. The thought of asking for yet another thing made me feel vulnerable, and so did the thought of them knowing I was on my period.

I kissed Dylan's chubby little cheeks until his eyes opened. "I'm going downstairs," I told him. I didn't want him to wake up in this house alone and be scared.

"Okay," he murmured, rolling over and going back to sleep. I ruffled his hair and got out of bed.

He seemed comfortable here, even if I wasn't.

At first, that thought filled me with peace—I wanted Dylan to be happy—and then I thought about it more as I pulled on

one of Brennan's old hoodies. What if Dylan belonged here? With his father's family?

What if I never did?

The thought stabbed through my chest, and I pushed it away. Dylan already seemed to love his uncles... but the love between mother and child was meant to be fathomless. If it came down to it, Dylan needed me more than he needed them.

But I wished he could have both.

The hallway was quiet. Distant stirring noises drifted up the stairs, probably from the kitchen. As I went to find Karissa, the scent of freshly-brewing coffee and bacon drifted up the stairs, and I walked in expecting to see the bustling dark-haired dynamo.

But it was Shaw who was mixing pancake batter. He was shirtless—why was he shirtless—with his tattooed skin and chiseled abs on display, and he flashed me a grin when I walked in. “Morning, Amelia.”

“Good morning.” I hesitated on the threshold.

His nostrils flared, and I had the feeling he could smell me. The reaction embarrassed me, and I took a step back.

“Looking for Karissa?” he asked, as if he understood. “I know there's some... stuff... in the guest bathroom downstairs.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, feeling my face flush hot. Good lord, I was a grown woman; why was this so humiliating? Probably partially because Nathan had never hesitated to make me feel disgusting when I had discharge of any type.

I headed toward the bathroom off the foyer. Sure enough, I found pads and tampons tucked under the counter. Karissa was definitely the hostess with the mostest, prepared for anything her guests experienced. Even a little light kidnapping.

When I headed back out, smuggling a handful of tampons in my hoodie pocket, I tried to sneak back upstairs.

“Amelia,” Shaw called from the kitchen.

I stopped and debated sneaking back upstairs, but the draw to spend time with Shaw alone was hard to resist. Even as I debated, my feet carried me toward him. Just for a minute.

Plus, he not only had all those abs and tattoos to offer. He also had coffee.

“Found it,” I told him as I stepped over the threshold, reluctantly, into the warm and sunny kitchen. “Thanks.”

I put my hand on my stomach, pressing in on the cramp and trying to make it feel a little less miserable.

Shaw set the bowl down on the counter with a thump. His worried gaze checked my face. “Are you all right?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Women go through this all the time.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make it easier, does it?”

“It’s never stopped me before,” I said lightly. “Nathan would never let me...”

I trailed off. Nathan had accused me of being lazy regularly, and cramps had definitely not been an excuse for not getting more chores done, for being grumpy, or for not being eager to offer up my throat—given that he was too disgusted by my body during my period for any other form of sex.

I shook off the memories and smiled at Shaw. “I wish you didn’t know, but I guess that’s hard when we’re wolves, hm?”

“Why?”

“It’s kind of gross.”

He laughed. “Well, we are humans just as much as we’re wolves. Humans are kind of gross. I mean, when you think about sex, it makes the term ‘weird as fuck’ make a lot of sense, doesn’t it?”

I couldn’t help grinning back.

“Anyway, I grew up in a house with three brothers, you can’t convince me there’s anything especially gross about any feminine function. Those guys were disgusting.” He handed me a cup of coffee, without asking if I wanted one.

It was already creamy and when I took a sip, it was sweet too. He'd noticed how I liked my coffee.

I reminded myself that Shaw was a dirty player, according to his own sister. He was always charming. It didn't mean anything. Shaw was thoughtful and charming and, in his own way, was as unattainable and impossible as his brothers.

"Even Brennan?" I asked, raising my eyebrows in mock horror.

"I mean, I don't want to speak ill of him, but he ran out of socks when we were in high school and Mom found them all under the bed—"

"Ahh!" I cut him off, squeezing my hands over my ears. "I sleep in that room!"

He laughed before going over to a cabinet and pulling out a hot water bottle. He filled it from the teakettle, which he must have put on to boil while I was hunting up pads.

"Take this and go back to bed," he told me, handing it over. "You look miserable. I'll take care of Dylan so you can rest."

"It's Saturday. No school," I reminded him.

Cole strolled in through the back door. "What's up?"

"Amelia's on her period and she feels awful. I was just telling her we could take care of Dylan."

Cole's jaw fell open.

"You were my favorite brother," I told Shaw, feeling my face burn. Cole didn't blush, but I was blushing for both of us. "But not anymore."

Shaw picked up the knife block from the counter and stowed it in one of the cabinets, then turned to me and leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms over his powerful chest.

Cole looked at a loss for words for a few long seconds. Then he said, "Would Dylan like to go fishing? We could take out my boat."

“I bet he’d like that,” Shaw said.

“I don’t think so,” I said, unable to imagine Dylan going off away from me with these men. “Thanks so much, but you don’t need to go through any trouble.”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble. I like hanging out with Dylan,” Cole told me.

The thought made me stumble, because Cole and Dylan did seem to have an effortless bond, and it made me feel raw and aching inside. Nathan had always seemed so annoyed by Dylan, and I was always trying to act as a buffer, to keep Nathan from being annoyed and to shield Dylan.

The tension of that fear uncoiling made me feel light-headed. I wasn’t sure I could trust these feelings of comfort.

“What about me?” Dylan asked sleepily from the doorway. His cow’s lick stuck up from the top of his head. “We’re going fishing?”

“Ah,” Cole said, stealing a glance at me. “No, buddy, sorry. Not today. But hopefully someday.”

He was trying to keep me from being the bad guy, and I sighed under my breath. It made it harder to resist him.

“You guys can go out,” I said, and Dylan’s face lit up. Also, to my surprise, did Cole’s.

He genuinely seemed to like my little guy. That made me smile, even if my stomach was one big knot of pain and anxiety.

Soon, I was back in bed curled up around my hot water bottle, with a romance novel in hand and my coffee on the bedside table. I’d opened the windows to the fall breeze and I was enjoying the way it fluttered the curtains and the view to the winding silvery-blue creek.

There was a knock on the door, and Shaw came in. “Dylan and Cole are off. Karissa went with them, so they have some adult supervision.”

I grinned. “Thanks. Why didn’t you go?”

“Fishing is boring.” He drummed his fingertips on the door; Shaw never seemed to stop moving. “And I figured this way, I could play nurse if you needed anything.”

“I’m content to suffer alone,” I told him.

He frowned. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I said. “But it kind of sounds like a standard line, you know? Playing nurse?”

“Yeah. I guess I can see that. But just because Karissa told you I’m...” He paused. “Does this mean I don’t get to know how the book ends?”

“This book?” I held up my romance novel. “It’s a series, and I’m actually on book five now. The last one.”

“Do they get a happy ending?”

“Do you want me to read to you?” It was a teasing question, but the truth was, I did want Shaw to stay with me. Feeling so terrible made me lower my defenses.

“Very much so.”

The words surprised me, but when I shifted over, he flopped onto the bed beside me. With one muscular arm tucked beneath his head, he stared up at the ceiling, just listening. I kept glancing over at him as I read, studying his handsome face in profile.

When I read the last words, he sighed and rolled toward me. “I like books that have happy endings. All the books I had to read in high school were so depressing. They burnt me out on reading.”

I secretly agreed, but I pointed out, “They were trying to be realistic.”

“But they weren’t. Real life comes with happy endings, Amelia. You just have to keep going til you find one. It’s all about how you end the story.” His gaze found mine, and suddenly I realized how close the two of us were. His deep green eyes, darker than Stone’s, vivid and free as the forest, met mine.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I wanted to kiss Shaw, but I didn't want to be just another girl who kissed him and was forgotten.

Shaw's breath was warm against my face, scented with coffee and mint, when he murmured the sweetest words a man can say. "What do you want to eat? I'll get you anything."

"How are you going to do that? We live in the middle of nowhere."

He grinned as he rolled up to his feet. "Give me a chance."

"Pad thai and chocolate cake," I said, naming two of my favorite things.

An hour later, I was eating noodles in bed, watching *Friends* with him lounging beside me, and learning not to doubt Shaw.

"You're a lot of fun," I admitted.

A cloud passed over his face, just for a second, before he smiled. "That's me. The fun brother. *Surly* and *crazy* were already taken."

I rolled my eyes. I didn't want to call Liam crazy, exactly; it was more complicated than that. But I wasn't going to argue with Shaw, who knew him better than I did, despite my protective impulses.

"Hey, I just got a text from Cole." Shaw passed me over his phone. On the screen was a photo taken out on the river. Dylan had a wide grin on his face. His smile was bigger than the fish he'd caught, and it made me laugh. "He's having the time of his life."

"Aw, Dylan's lucky day," I said.

"I was talking about Cole."

I laughed and handed him back his phone. Having the phone in my hand made me think about how I could probably use Shaw to get a phone, to contact home.

But right now, I didn't want to worry and plot and plan.

I just wanted to lie close to him, and when he took the empty bowl out of my hands and set it on the nightstand, I put my head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me, and the two of us snuggled together.

Lying with my face against his chest, the beat of his heart seemed to be racing along, faster than normal, even though we were just lying in bed. But he just cuddled me close.

CHAPTER 35





*A*melia

THE NEXT DAY, I felt better when I came down to breakfast. Stone was in the house, although he didn't sit down at the dining table as Karissa flitted around making breakfast, and the weight of his gaze made me feel small.

"Can we go fishing again?" Dylan asked Cole excitedly.

Stone gave Cole a meaningful look. Right. Cole was my principle bodyguard... or captor. It was hard to tell which exactly.

"That's a great idea," Shaw cut in smoothly. "Maybe take Uncle Stone. He needs some time in nature."

Stone's brows shot up at being Uncle Stone. But he was, and suddenly I knew what I needed to do to help anchor Dylan here in this place where he'd begun to feel so safe. No matter what happened here, Dylan needed these men. He'd come home chattering about all the fun he'd had with Karissa and Cole.

"All right," I said, having a feeling Stone wouldn't want to be the bad guy. My heart was in my throat trying to manipulate him, but god, I just needed him to love my son, to keep him safe. Stone had spent so much time trying to avoid me. "I think Uncle Stone's busy today, but you can go out with Cole."

Stone looked as if he were at a loss for words. Shaw leaned back against the countertop and winked at me from behind Stone's back.

Stone might not want to get attached to me, but I'd already seen his flares of jealousy. He didn't want to be left out. And he already had a tenderness for Dylan, but he hadn't spent time with him yet like Shaw and Cole.

"I could go for an hour or two," Stone said finally.

Shaw grinned in triumph.

I hugged Dylan goodbye, lingering over the hug even when he started to pull away. I couldn't help feeling like I was already setting him up to leave me.

I needed him to be safe, even if I wasn't. It felt inevitable to me that Nathan was still alive, like a cockroach; he was hard to kill. And it felt inevitable to me that either Nathan would finally kill me, as I'd expected all these years, or I would kill him.

Whatever happened, if I couldn't escape to a new life, if I died... maybe Dylan could be safe and happy with Brennan's kin. God knows my pack had never been a safe place for him. If I'd known what the King pack was like, I might have carried him here while he was still new and pink-faced and begged them to protect him.

But god, he needed me, and I needed him. My eyes blurred with tears at the too-sharp image of abandoning him here, and I buried my face in his hair and kissed him goodbye to cover my emotions before I let go of him.

Then he ran off with Stone and Cole, barely glancing back at me. Karissa looked at me as if she saw my distress, and squeezed my shoulder gently before she headed out of the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" Shaw asked me quietly.

I nodded. "I feel a lot better today, actually."

"Well, the day is still yours," he gave me a questioning look. "Whatever you want to do with it."

"I want to watch TV in bed with my own personal hot water bottle," I teased him, because he was so warm to the touch.

His lips parted in a smile. "Excellent. Because as someone who will never be alpha—and would never want to be—that's actually my highest career ambition. Hot water bottle."

"I think you'd be a good alpha," I told him.

He crooked an eyebrow at me. “Don’t make me wash your mouth out.”

They were teasing words, but they brought up a sudden rush of memory—Nathan had no tolerance for women using unladylike language, even though he cursed himself—and I felt my smile turn frozen.

“Amelia,” Shaw said quietly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“If you don’t tell me, I can’t watch what I say,” he told me.

“It’s not your job to watch what you say!”

“No, it’s not my job. But it’s something I want to do, for you. And I guarantee you that while those men are also assholes,” he swept his arm in a way that somehow encompassed both Stone and Cole, and maybe Liam too, “they would want to know as well. No one wants to hurt you when they could just... choose their words differently. It’s a small thing to do for someone.”

He sounded so matter-of-fact, as if it were nothing. But it made something tighten in my chest. Somehow I felt worse about the past lately than I had in a long time, as if being here made everything I went through seem worse.

“You’ve already done enough for me,” I told him as we climbed the stairs. It was easier to talk to him when we weren’t face to face. “Nathan thought it was disgusting when I was on period. It’s nice to have someone act like it’s just... normal.”

“It is normal.”

I shook my head as I opened the door to my room. “You don’t know what an amazing man you are, Shaw.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew they were true, and I knew I shouldn’t have said them. I was afraid I’d lose him when he realized how much I liked him, how much I wanted him. I liked my friendship with Shaw, the way I felt light and happy when I was around him. We couldn’t ruin that comfort.

“That’s a nice thought, but I’m not here for you. I actually just love Thai food and *Friends* and romance novels.”

His words were so unexpected that I let out a laugh.

He rested his hands lightly on my shoulders, then began to massage the tension away. I hadn’t expected his warm, solid hands on my skin, but as I felt my muscles begin to unknot under his palms, I let my shoulders sag, let myself relax.

“Nathan was an asshole,” he told me quietly. “I’ve never minded a woman being on her period.”

The implication made my cheeks flush. “You would… have sex with a woman anyway?”

He laughed. “I’d do more than have sex. I’d eat her out if she wanted me to.”

I twisted out of his grip, my eyes widening. “You would?”

“You are so innocent,” he murmured, looking down at me. “Even after everything you’ve been through. You don’t realize how perfect you are.”

“I’m far from perfect. I’m a mess, Shaw. I have nightmares, I have a son who I love more than I’ll ever love anyone else—”

“Love’s not a competition,” he interrupted. “You don’t have to worry about any decent man being afraid that you love your son too much.”

I touched his face, surprising myself by doing it, but he just didn’t seem real. He seemed more like that dream I’d had the other night, of touching the man with the ruined face, the sense of love that had flowed between us. I’d woken up with my slick running down my legs and an urgent, aching want, and I’d stumbled out into the hallway looking for something or someone. But that very need had scared me.

Maybe if I gave into my need, just a little, it would be more controllable. Because I ached looking at Shaw.

“You seem a little too good to be true,” I whispered to Shaw.

There was a flicker of pain in his gaze, there and gone, before he fixed me with a smile. “Then test me. You’ve been hurt, you need to know you’re safe now, so however you want to test me, go ahead. I promise I’ll always be good to you.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” I shook my head, knowing no one deserved to be tested.

“You’re going to do it anyway,” he said quietly, resting his hand over mine so it stayed cupped to the hard angles of his cheek. His stubble was rough against my palm. “Trying to figure out if anything can make us hurt you, if you can let yourself be loved. So why shouldn’t we just talk about it?”

Loved. I froze on the word, my lips parting, though I had no idea what to say. I should say a lot of things. That we barely knew each other, that it was complicated, that we didn’t even know if I would get to stay. But I didn’t manage to say any of it. Didn’t *want* to say any of it.

Shaw leaned forward and covered my lips with his.

His kisses felt tentative, as if he wasn’t sure I would want him and he didn’t want to press me. When I kissed him back, his body heated against mine, and he leaned into me. His hand cupped my jaw and held me close, his face angling until he teased the tip of his tongue against the seam of my lips. My thighs throbbed as I opened my mouth to him, letting him taste me.

He kissed me more deeply, his tongue teasing mine in an intimate dance. At first, I was passive, letting him kiss me, the way I’d grown accustomed to just taking kisses.

Then suddenly, it felt like I woke up. I began to lick into his mouth, and his hands on my body sent electricity tingling through every bit of skin.

Then slowly, he walked me back to the bed, his hands sliding under my shirt. I reached for his belt, unbuckled it, slid his jeans down his hips.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, and I pushed his hands away as he started to pull my t-shirt away. Hiding the mark on my skin was second nature now.

Instead, I stepped quickly out of my leggings and panties, then felt a sudden flush of embarrassment as the coppery scent seemed to rise more strongly around us both.

But he didn't seem to notice how awkward I was, keeping my shirt on, or how I smelled. He only seemed to grow more turned on, kissing me more deeply, his hands gliding up and down my thighs until I ground forward against him, forgetting to be self-conscious.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and we kept kissing, wrapped together. I wasn't sure if I was the one who guided us toward the bed or if he was, but my desire for him was wild and strong and... vulnerable. I couldn't stop expecting him to reject me, even as his strong hands gripped my hips and he kissed me like he couldn't get enough of me.

Finally, I was the one who broke away and climbed onto the bed. I expected him to join me and kiss me again, but instead, he climbed between my legs and spread my thighs apart.

I gasped and my knees closed as I shook my head.

"I told you to test me," he said, his gaze fixed on me as he pressed another kiss to my knee. His hands glided up and down my thighs. "I'm never going to see you as anything other than desirable, Amelia."

A rueful smile came to his lips. "Believe me, I've tried. Maybe you should be off limits, but you're all I want. You're all I can think about."

Those words felt dangerous and yet lit a wild glow of warmth in my chest.

His tongue started licking a slow path up my thighs, making me gasp and writhe beneath him. He paused at the junction of my legs, pressing a light kiss against my lip before he exhaled, the warmth of his breath sending a shiver up my spine. His hands grasped my hips firmly, holding me in place as his tongue licked boldly down my center.

I moaned, my back arching off the bed. As my hips swung in the air, my hands reached out to grasp the headboard.

His tongue swirled through my folds, exploring every nook and cranny. Those bright green eyes met mine while his tongue sent a hot ache licking up through my core, through my stomach, until delicious tension sang through every part of my body.

His tongue continued to swirl and lap against me, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. I was in a state of pure bliss, and I could barely keep still as he pushed me higher and higher.

His tongue slid up and down, heat radiating from it. He licked and kissed me, pushing me ever closer to the edge. I was lost in a sea of pleasure, my entire body trembling and quivering with each movement of his expert tongue. I was so close that I could feel it—my orgasm was just within my reach, but it still seemed so far away.

Suddenly, his tongue slipped inside of me, and I gasped. The sensation was intense, and I could feel my muscles tightening with each thrust. I was on the brink of an incredible orgasm. But I couldn't quite relax into the sensation, still feeling shame.

He pulled away, and I opened my eyes to find him smiling down at me. "Let go," he chided me gently. Then he returned to eating me out with blissful abandon. He looked as if he were genuinely having a good time, and I certainly was, as pleasure curled through my muscles until they all tightened.

"Shaw," I moaned, and the sound of his name seemed to drive him even harder.

He let out a low roar of a sound that vibrated against my clit, and I gasped. He was eating me out as if this turned him on, as if he were driven by an animal need now. The realization he loved working his mouth against my clit, loved thrusting his tongue inside me, washed over me along with a sense of relief and joy.

The pleasure rippling through my body was too much, and I could no longer hold back. I cried out, my orgasm washing over me in waves of pleasure. His tongue continued to explore until my body could no longer handle it. I lay there, panting

and trembling, as my orgasm crashed over me in waves. My hips bucked and he rode them, his mouth still working furiously on my clit until I collapsed, spent and sated.

There was blood in his stubble, but I had just the quickest glimpse of it before he rose to his feet and disappeared in the bathroom. For a second, shame spiraled through my gut again, making me feel tight and embarrassed.

“That was fun,” he said, reappearing with a cheeky grin. His face was clean, and he carried a damp, warm cloth.

“I can do that,” I said as he reached between my thighs.

“I know you can,” he said, pressing me back in the pillows. “But I told you I was going to take care of you while you weren’t feeling well.”

He ran the warm damp cloth over my folds, cleaning me off, and the cloth moving over my sensitive, aching clit made my hips jerk with the aftershocks of my orgasm. He watched me intently as if he loved watching my pleasure. Then he helped me pull my panties back on, my hips rising to assist him. I felt odd, but also...completely cared for, in a way I never had before in my life.

And the pain of the cramps was gone, as if Shaw’s tongue had worked magic.

He curled up in bed with me again, pulling me against his body, and I rested my head on his chest as he reached for the remote and turned it back on.

I looked up at him, befuddled, but didn’t dare say the words until he looked down at me and asked, “What is it?”

“You don’t want anything...”

“In return?” His brows arched. “I want your trust, Amelia. As much as I want to feel you around me, to come together... I want you to know you’re safe with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

I bit my lip, feeling too overwhelmed to respond.

“Besides,” he said, pressing play on our show. “I still don’t know if Ross and Rachael ever get back together.”

I leaned into his warmth and let myself relax.

CHAPTER 36





*A*melia

THE SUN SHONE down on Cole and me, and I could feel its warmth on my skin as I stripped off my t-shirt, leaving me in just my sports bra and leggings. It was too warm, even at this time in the fall, when we were working so hard. Cole had taken off his shirt, and sweat glistened on his body in the bright sunlight. His toned muscles shone with his exertion and my gaze lingered just a bit too long on his chiseled frame.

Cole caught me looking at him and gave me a knowing smirk. I felt myself blush slightly, both embarrassed to be caught looking and surprised that Cole had reacted with cockiness. He always seemed to look away whenever the air felt charged between us.

He came towards me, stopping just close enough that I could feel his breath on my face when he spoke. “Do you want to keep going?”

I swallowed hard before responding, “Yes.”

He nodded and stepped back from me.

We started slowly at first, but soon found our rhythm and our bodies moved in sync with each other.

Our breathing quickened and our movements became less controlled. I lost myself in the work, the feeling of our bodies moving together, the sound of our breathing in the strangely silent training yard. When Cole’s hands touched my body, I became keenly aware of both of us, completely grounded in the moment. The unique scent of his sweat was just a hint of that King woodsmoke and a musky scent of his own, touched with leather. He was so close his body heat made me glow with warmth. My breaths began to come short and shallow, both from exertion and desire.

There was something different today in the quick flow of our movements as he whirled to attack, blocked me and counter-attacked. The feeling of being alive and strong and in the moment sang through my muscles.

He wasn't holding back so much anymore. As I blocked each strike, his strength rocked me, and I had to dig deep to keep up.

I'd blocked a blow from Cole, but he was already in motion again, spinning around me and striking at my face. I hadn't even seen the blow coming and only blocked it at the last second. I stepped back, trying to get space between us, and realized I was out of breath. A sense of shock washed over me from being almost hit in the face.

"Good," he commented. "You're getting better all the time."

"Yeah, you seem like you're getting better too. Good job, sport." I clapped him on the shoulder, but once my hand connected with the solid, warm muscle, I felt suddenly awkward. His gaze followed my arm to where my hand connected with his body.

I folded my hands primly in front of me. "You're not holding back as much anymore."

"It would be a disservice to you," he said seriously. "You're improving at an incredible rate, Amelia. Your pack didn't realize they were wasting quite the warrior."

"I'm not a warrior," I said.

He raised his eyebrows, his gaze intense. "I only know a little bit of what you've been through, Amelia. And I'd trust my life to believing that you are a warrior, through and through."

The moment seemed to hang between us. He was so close that I could breathe in his scent, which was alluring even when he was sweating. He chewed mint gum all the time and the freshness on his breath when he leaned toward me washed over me.

Our gazes met. He hesitated, but for a second, I could have sworn he was about to kiss me.

“I admire you,” he said quietly. “I hope you can see yourself the way I do, someday.”

Those words rushed through me, heady and intoxicating. I stared up at him in surprise. Cole was incredible; it was unreal to have him say he admired me.

Then Cole pulled away abruptly, squaring his shoulders and tightening his posture. Those faint movements changed the air between us.

I knew who was coming even before I caught his scent.

When Stone strode into the yard, he smelled of fresh sweat and forest pines and newly turned dirt. My nostrils flared as if the wolf inside me couldn't resist. He smelled of all the places he'd been and things he'd done. It was the scent of a man who'd been all over the world, seen it, conquered it.

God, Stone got into my head like no one else.

Stone's presence had an immediate effect—the air seemed to crackle with electricity, and I could feel Cole's gaze on my skin like a gentle caress. His warm, dark eyes locked with mine as Stone took one look at us and then made a snorting sound to himself as he moved past.

“Go on,” Stone ordered, before he settled himself on the porch steps. Apparently we were the morning's entertainment.

I bristled in irritation, but Cole gave me a reassuring look. “Time to show him what you've got,” he said lightly.

In that moment, something snapped between us. The desire in Cole's eyes was unmistakable. But what did he want? To win Stone's approval by having trained me well?

Or... did he want *me*?

“Show me what you've learned,” Stone called out. “Or are you wasting my second-in-command's time?”

My jaw set, and Cole flashed me a quick wink, as if he knew Stone was pushing my buttons. That wink shocked me.

It was the first time Cole had shown me a glimpse of being on my side—and the first time I'd seen him reveal any mischievousness when he was in his human form.

We circled each other warily, neither of us wanting to make the first move. Which was how I felt every time I was near Cole, like there was something I should do but I couldn't quite bring myself to reach out first.

Then finally, he punched me, and I deflected the blow up with my arm striking from beneath his. The two of us both stepped in toward each other, seeking an opening for another blow, before we whirled apart. The dance was on.

Our fists flew faster than our words ever could, each punch creating an explosion of sparks through my body. I'd felt so helpless for so long, but I didn't feel helpless in the give and take of punches and blocks with Cole.

Our bodies moved together seamlessly as we danced around each other, neither of us wanting to give an inch.

I wasn't the only one feeling it. I could smell the scent of Cole's desire. It was like something heady in the air between us.

I couldn't deny the attraction I felt toward him.

But I wasn't sure if it was just lust.

I kept my hands up protectively, blocking blow after blow while I tried to figure out what it was. I was too keenly aware of Stone's gaze on my back, judging me.

Maybe I shouldn't care what Stone thought, but I did. I cared a lot.

We danced around each other, spinning, kicking and charging.

Cole let out a series of punishing blows, all of which I blocked, before he dove at me. I tried to escape, but his hard body hit mine. His arms wrapped around me as if to pin me down, and we fell to the ground together, hard.

I couldn't breathe, pinned beneath him like that. My heartbeat was roaring in my ears, and the frantic pounding of

Cole's pulse echoed just as hard in my chest. His arms locked around me, holding me in place.

"Amelia," he whispered into my ear, and even though Stone was right there, the word was a plea.

"I give up," I whispered back. "I yield."

The words felt raw, unbearably so. I didn't want to fight him, not only because he was so much stronger than I was but because when I was near him like this, I felt like I was home. The realization hit me like a punch in the gut.

He scrambled up off me, his face a mask I couldn't read. He usually wouldn't allow me to give up; he made me fight until one of us was hurt, blacked out or too exhausted... although I was the only one who ever grew so tired I couldn't raise my fists in front of my face anymore. I could feel Stone watching us even though neither of us looked his way, and the way that examination burned through us both. Cole offered me his hand, and I let him pull me to my feet. Although we only touched for the briefest second before I was standing in the grass once more, I was keenly aware of how Cole's hand was strong, firm, and warm. The heat of his skin seemed to linger, and so did a slow burn that started in the pit of my stomach and spread outwards.

Stone strode toward the two of us, his face unreadable.

"You can go," Stone told Cole tautly.

Cole's first impulse was to obey, I could tell that but he paused. "What do you want with Amelia?"

Stone's brows arched dangerous, and even though I believed he would never hurt me like Nathan did, my stomach still bottomed out.

"I want to talk to her alone," Stone said, his voice a dangerous rumble. "And I want you to go. Is that clear?"

Cole bristled, his chin lifting. "Yes, it's clear."

But he looked to me. "Are you done training, Amelia?"

"I'm fine," I promised. "Maybe I can get Stone to agree to let me to practice my throws. If I can get him onto the ground,

I can take down anyone.”

Cole grinned, despite Stone’s bristling, and ruffled my hair as he headed past me. “You’ve got this.”

Stone stared after Cole as he left as if he were wondering what the fuck that all was.

Then he turned back to me. “Do you really want to spar with me?”

He sounded deeply amused.

“Oh yes,” I said.

My fight with Stone would be short. I knew that.

But he seemed like he’d wanted a show, so I was determined to give him one now.

I attacked him with all the fierce anger that coursed through my body. I was a woman fighting for her life, always, and I was going to fight like it was the end of the goddamn world every time.

He let out a bark of surprised laughter, his eyes widening as if he was pleased with me, as he hastily blocked several blows, giving up ground. He clearly hadn’t expected much of a fight, and his eyes danced as the two of us circled each other.

I caught his arm with my left hand, stepping inside his grip. He tried to pull his arm back, but I twisted, pivoted, and knocked him to the ground, even though I couldn’t help stumbling against his body in the process. He smoothly hooked my legs with his and dropped me to the ground. I slammed into the grass on my shoulder, and I immediately scrambled to try to get on top of him. The two of us grappled, and I kept trying to buck him fiercely even though his powerful muscles felt impossible to escape.

I soon found myself on the ground under his massive muscular weight, even though I could tell he was holding himself carefully off me.

“I’ll have to have Teresa work with you more.”

I still wondered why Shaw had kept my secret from him about how I'd killed Cliff. I wasn't as harmless as I looked; I just knew I had to take a different route than these men with all their brute strength.

He was too close to me, with his body still braced over mine. His eyes seemed to look right through me and strip away all my defenses. I was stuck feeling his warmth, the way my vulva turned into an ache of need; the way his scent mixed with the scent of my desire, which made my core pulse.

"I've come a long way," I said defensively.

He frowned. "I'm not insulting you. You have come a long way. You're doing well."

If I thought Stone insulting me was bad, Stone being... nice... threatened to totally undo me. I pushed at his chest, trying to heave his weight off me, to get some distance between us. I could lose my mind when I was looking up at him like this, able to see the faint scar on his temple, the first few laugh lines at the corner of his intense eyes. I never saw him laugh, not for real; I just got those hard, bitter laughs. But then, I paid him back with the same.

His gaze dipped to my lips, and for just a second, he seemed as tense and wanting as I felt. The next second, he scrambled off me.

"Why Teresa?" I sat up as Stone offered me a hand up. I took his hand, reluctantly; sparks seemed to pass between us when I gripped his warm, calloused palm, and I was afraid he'd realize what being close to him did to me. "Cole's been a good teacher."

"Mm. You two seem to be getting cozy." He pulled me easily to my feet. The movement brought us uncomfortably close, so that I was eye-level with his broad, powerful chest. I lifted my gaze to those icy blue eyes, the beautiful hard planes of his face, and that wasn't any better.

"Are you jealous?"

He laughed. "No. Cole has nothing that I want. But I would hate for him to forget where his loyalties lie."

It pissed me off that he was insulting Cole. “Cole’s always got your back. Even if you’re too dumb to realize it.”

Stone folded his arms over his chest. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I said. I stormed off toward the empty house, but Stone easily kept up with me. He was right on my heels as I crossed the front porch and stepped into the foyer.

“I’m not stupid,” Stone warned me, shutting the door behind us both. He grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, before pausing to press me—gently—against the door. He caged me in again.

I grabbed his wrists. “Is this the only way you’re comfortable having a conversation?”

“It’s the only way to make sure you don’t insult me and then run away from the consequences.”

“And what are the consequences?”

“Having to explain yourself.”

“It’s not that deep, Stone. You don’t seem to realize how much those men love you and look after you. You should appreciate them.”

“I do.”

“Do they know that?”

“If they’re not idiots themselves.”

“God, you are insufferable.”

“I’m insufferable?” he repeated, looking shocked. “You make me crazy. Nothing you say makes any damn sense. Somehow you think you’ve gotten to know Cole and Shaw, better than—”

“It’s not that hard to get to know people, Stone, if you actually talk to them.”

“Is that why you’re always running away from me?”

“Maybe. Maybe I don’t want to get to know you.” But my heart was hammering in my throat, because the truth was I felt incredibly attracted to Stone despite him being so.... Stone.

“Bullshit,” he shot back.

“Do you have any other lines?”

“Maybe I would if you didn’t make it such a habit to lie to me, and to yourself.”

“Leave me alone.” I ducked under his arm, knowing it would probably be ineffective, and sure enough, he just pulled me back against the door.

“I’m not done with you.”

“I’m done with you.” I kneed him in the crotch—one of the softening blows that Cole had taught me to make it easier to bring someone down before starting to throw them—but he blocked me with his thigh.

I grabbed his wrist, trying to step behind him to get the leverage to throw him, but he just grabbed me and swept me off my feet. I gasped as suddenly he had me up in the air, pinned against the door again.

For a long second, our eyes met. I could hear both our hearts hammering.

Then his lips descended on mine.

Stone kissed me hard, his lips claiming and brutal. He kissed me breathless, then set me down. He abruptly pulled away.

“What?” I demanded. “What are you thinking?”

He stared at me, then he took a step back. “You’re Brennan’s.”

His voice was harsh, but emotional. Tortured. The sound of it ignited the deepest need to comfort him.

“I’m my own,” I said, because it was too soon, too much, to say I was his.

But I could feel the pull of the bond between us powerfully.

I jumped into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist, and he caught me. He didn’t even stumble under my weight.

His hands wrapped my thighs, holding me against his body. His erection was rigid against my thigh, and I pressed myself harder against him, my breasts pushing against his hard pecs. I wanted all of Stone.

The two of us traded kisses as he carried me up the stairs and down the hall. His room was a blur around me, as much as I wanted to see the place where Stone slept, before he tossed me onto the bed.

Then he was climbing on top of me, the two of us trading quick, urgent kisses. His hands stroked down my sides, then up again caressing my bare skin, rucking up my shirt.

“Stone,” I gasped, wanting him to talk to me. The silence between us felt eerie when every touch felt charged and needful. I needed Stone inside me; I wanted every intimacy between us. I wanted to know what the hell was happening behind those dark, dangerous eyes.

But his mouth claimed mine, cutting off my question before I could form it. His tongue nudged my lips apart determinedly, and I let my lips part, taking him in. His thigh parted mine as easily as his mouth had opened mine, his leg pinning my thigh down. His hard muscular weight against mine made it hard to breathe, but most of all, it reminded me of other times I’d been pinned down. I pushed on his shoulders and he suddenly rolled over, wrapping his arm around my waist to bring me with him.

The next thing I knew, I was breathless, straddling him. He looked up at me with concern written across his face. “Are you all right?”

I didn’t know how he’d read my feelings. Maybe everyone could read my feelings, and I was just used to having no one care.

“Yes,” I murmured. “Better than all right.”

He hesitated, but I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. His day’s stubble was rough across his jaw.

His eyes met mine. “Do you really want this, Amelia?”

“I really want this,” I promised, reaching for him. I squeezed him through his jeans, feeling how hard and enormous he felt.

He let out a groan and seemed to lose all self control then. He kissed me wildly, his hands gliding around my clothes, starting to pull them off. I pushed him away and I sat up to peel his shirt off his body, admiring his tanned skin, his broad shoulders. Tattoos criss-crossed his chest and his powerful arms, and I wanted to ask about every one of them. But Stone didn't seem to be in a talkative mood.

He reached for my shirt again, and I pushed him away. “No,” I said. “I'm used to keeping my shirt on.”

It felt too vulnerable to let him see me. To see the mark. I wasn't ready to reveal something I'd had to hide for the last five years.

He frowned at that, but didn't argue. His eyes seemed to catalog that information as if he were building a complete case file on me and my past, but I didn't want to be analyzed now. I wanted to be fucked.

I reached for his belt buckle and undid his belt. I couldn't stand to see him undo it anyway, I realized, too late; the sight of a belt reminded me of all the times Nathan had swung shut out bedroom door and come toward me, his belt whispering out of his belt loops...

I must have shuddered, because Stone froze. “Amelia?”

I turned my gaze toward his, taking comfort from his icy blue eyes—no matter how cold he looked, he wasn't Nathan. He looked, in fact, so much like Brennan that if I squeezed my eyes shut, I could pretend I was with Brennan again.

But that seemed like a betrayal.

Of Brennan? Of Stone? I wasn't sure.

“Stone?” I asked, faux-lightly, as if I had no idea why I'd left the building—no, the planet—during such a charged moment. I wrapped my fingers around the back of his neck and pulled his head to meet mine, and he sat up obligingly, his

abs rippling between my thighs. I sat on his lap as his hands teased over my sides, his lips pressing mine over and over.

I pushed his jeans down insistently, and he rolled his hips to assist me. The next thing I knew, I was wrapping my hand around his long, thick cock. Precum already beaded at his tip, and he looked good enough to eat.

So I bent over him and licked his tip. As my thighs brushed against his legs, the ache of the hollow between my thighs intensified. I was turned on by the mingled scents of our arousal and by his warm skin against mine.

He stiffened. “You don’t have to do that...”

“I want to,” I said, then wrapped my mouth around his cock. He let out a groan, a transfixed look coming over his face, and his lips parted. I almost smiled at the sense of power that came over me when Stone was trembling in my grip. But instead, I focused on working my way up and down his cock, sucking him off greedily.

He groaned again, rising onto his elbows as his back arched, and his cock jerked in my mouth as his salty cum filled my mouth. I swallowed frantically, barely able to keep up with the wild pumping of his cum. When I tried to pull away, some of it slid down my chin.

He was watching me with a warm expression, and he caught my arm and pulled me up on top of his body. “You’re so fucking amazing,” he murmured into my ear as he pulled me on top of him, his hands gliding down the curves of my body, lighting fire everywhere he touched. “You didn’t have to do that for me.”

“I just wanted to show you, you don’t always have to be in control,” I teased him, pressing him back down on the bed with my palms against the hard planes of his chest.

He reached out for his discarded t-shirt and wiped the corners of my mouth tenderly. Then he tossed it away and caught the back of my neck with one big hand, but he didn’t pull me down to meet him until I leaned forward. “Come here

and kiss me,” he said once I did, guiding my head the rest of the way.

Our lips met in tender, exploring kisses. His touch was softer than I’d expected, knowing Stone. He swept his hands over the curve of my ass, and his hands were heavy but in a comforting way. I reached for his cock, and he tucked his arms behind his head and watched me intently as I guided him between my thighs.

It didn’t seem like Stone to take such a passive role, but after a minute, I understood. He was being careful with me, letting me take the lead.

Stone was being... thoughtful?

The thought might’ve broken my brain if I hadn’t been so thoroughly distracted by his big dick.

He reached up and cupped my face in his hands, his blue eyes searching mine. He gazed at me as if he was seeing right through me, and usually that would’ve scared the hell out of me, but right now, Stone’s lips tilted up in a slow smile as if he loved what he saw. A warmth spread through me that felt deeper, more intense, than the burn of lust. He pulled me the rest of the way against his chest, my nipples pressing the hard planes of his body. When he brushed his lips against mine, I couldn’t stop kissing him back, even to satisfy the raw, aching need I felt as his cock brushed over and over against my thigh.

He kissed me until my head was spinning, and then his hands slid down my back, over the curve of my ass, across my thighs, his fingers exploring every inch of my body. I moaned softly as his fingers delved between my thighs, working against my clit until pleasure coursed through me like a current. I clutched at him, my body trembling with desire, and he smiled against my lips before his fingers slid inside me, his mouth exploring me with new intensity.

I gasped, my body tensing with pleasure, as his fingers pressed my inner place over and over until liquid warmth flowed through my body and I threw my head back, my muscles tensing around his hand. He looked up at me, his eyes alight with pleasure, and I wanted to memorize his expression.

He looked at me like I was something precious, and god, I had longed for that all these brutal years.

But I couldn't have guessed until now that Stone could look at me that way.

“Stone,” I whispered, a plea—for more, for him, for this moment to last. I reached for his cock, and he teased his tip through my folds.

“You're so wet for me,” he said as his cock glided easily around my opening. He held himself steady as I slid down, slowly taking his cock, inch by inch, feeling the way he stretched me. His lips parted in pleasure, and I loved seeing the effect I had on this powerful man.

I began to ride him, and he put his hands on my hips, guiding me into a slow, gentle rhythm. His hands supported my hips and he moved me as easily as if I weighed nothing. Our pace grew faster, wilder, and even though I was on top where I could stop everything in a second, he was still obviously the one in control, guiding both of our movements.

But I didn't care. Stone could be a control freak right now. Because he was also a god in bed, and my orgasm was coming...

I clung to his shoulders, arching my back as he moved within me, the sensation more than I could have imagined. I felt myself rising up, my breath coming faster, and with one final thrust, I shattered into a million pieces, my body trembling with the force of my release.

I closed my eyes, letting the power of it ripple through me, feeling his release and the way his body moved beneath mine as he growled my name.

“Look at me,” he commanded, and I did. That growl of alpha power in his voice that usually annoyed me now just turned me on, and I met his gaze boldly, then leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

He kissed me back, hard and wild, his cock still buried deep inside me. My clit ached as it pressed against him, but I still already wanted more.

And from the way he was kissing me, Stone was happy—
for once—to give me what I wanted.

But even as I was lost in his warmth, part of me knew it
couldn't last.

CHAPTER 37





S tone

AMELIA'S LIPS were tender and soft, and I couldn't stop kissing her. She was so spirited and strong, but she kissed me so sweetly, her lips parting, letting me take control. It felt like an honor, having her trust, even for just a few moments.

She slid off my cock and lay beside me, throwing her leg over mine as the two of us continued to tease into each other's mouths. I ran my hand up her side and her hips rolled toward me as I brushed my fingers against her breast—even through her bra.

She'd insisted on keeping it on, and now I worried that she was hurt. I hated the thought that I could've hurt her when we were having sex. The need to see her, to know she was all right, to possess and protect every inch of skin, was a powerful thrum through my body.

I ran my hand over the small of her back, feeling her warm, soft skin. Her back arched, pressing her breasts against my side, and I buried my face in her hair and inhaled deeply. She smelled so good. Petrichor and grapefruit. The two freshest scents I could've imagined.

“We should both get cleaned up,” I told her, thinking that would be my excuse to check her for damage. She was proud, and I couldn't stand the thought of her pushing me away now. I wanted more of her.

For a moment when she had first kissed me, I'd thought maybe I could fuck her once and get her out of my system, stop obsessing over her.

But now I knew my obsession with Amelia had only just begun. She was mine, and I was going to take care of her.

I lifted her in my arms as I rose from the bed, and she twined her arms around my neck, letting me carry her. Her

eyes were heavy-lidded, relaxed and satisfied like a cat's, and she was so cute I couldn't help but kiss her forehead.

I carried her into the bathroom and set her on the edge of the sink. I turned away to turn on the shower. "How hot do you like it?"

"As hot as you can handle it."

I turned back to find her watching me, her long, bare legs crossed at the thigh. I ran my hands over her pale skin before teasing her thighs open. When I dipped my head and pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, she tried to close her legs again.

"I'm dirty," she said.

"So?" I asked bluntly. "I like you dirty. I'm the one who made you that way." I slid my hand up her thigh, between them, running my fingers along that smooth, wet, velvety pussy. God, she was perfect.

Slowly, her legs parted to let me in. I sank to my knees in front of her, one hand on either thigh to brace her open for me. When I licked down the center of her pussy, her back arched and she let out a soft breath.

I kissed her until her head fell back. Her shirt rode up, revealing a strip of her narrow waist, and my hands slid up that warm skin as I began to kiss her thighs.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her eager hands gripped my hair and guided me up to her face for a fierce kiss. Apparently Amelia had a dominating side herself, because she lapped into my mouth as she gripped my wrist and guided my hand between her thighs. I slid my fingers through her slick warmth, stroking her intimate places until her hips rocked forward with desire. I pumped my fingers against her clit, feeling her moan against my mouth.

Our tongues fought for control until I lowered myself to my knees before her.

Oh, she gasped.

As my face dipped into her wet curls, I moaned in appreciation over the sweet citrus scent between her thighs. Her hips jerked at the first touch of my mouth against her slickness. She was so warm, so delicious, that I lapped against her with abandon.

I parted her with my tongue, lavishing her with soft flicks of my tongue that had her keening and rocking her hips against me.

Her fingers sank into my hair as her hands clenched into fists. Her head fell back, exposing the long line of her throat. Submission at last, but this submission I had earned.

Her moans could've made me cum right there myself as I slid my tongue back and forth, lapping against the tight bud of her clit.

She squeaked softly as I teased her, and she tried to force my head closer to her core. I resisted, jerking her hips forward and making her grind her mound against my mouth.

I slid my tongue along her folds, drinking her in as my fingers slipped between her thighs and lifted her higher. She groaned as I buried my mouth deeper between her legs. Her hips bucked forward, grinding against my tongue, and I flicked her sensitive clit with my thumb.

Her feminine scent filled my nostrils, sending my cock throbbing against my groin. I needed her pussy with a desperate need that scared me.

She writhed and arched on the marble countertop as I licked and sucked the orgasm from her body. When she was done gasping, I straightened and kissed her again. She moaned against my lips as if the kiss were just as satisfying as my tongue against her pussy, and warmth glowed in my chest.

I wanted to remember this forever.

"I hadn't had an orgasm in a long time before I came here," she said quietly.

That fucker, Nathan. He'd been a failure in every way.

"Thank you, Stone."

I caught her chin with my fingers and caressed her face with my thumb, wanting to memorize the shape of her face, the determined set of her chin and the curve of her cheekbones. She looked so good like this, her hair wild around her face and her cheeks flushed, her lips red and parted with desire.

“You don’t have to thank me. You deserve all the orgasms.”

Her lips parted in a smile. I pulled her off the sink and began to undress her, removing her top. She let me, though she stiffened slightly. What was she hiding?

She pulled her long auburn hair over one shoulder, where it hung over her bra. I slid her bra off, revealing the creamy skin that had been untouched by the sun, the roundness of her breasts, her perfect nipples. I wanted to cover those nipples with my mouth and see what it did to her, so I did, and she bit her lips and arched against me. I sucked and teased her, my hands gliding over the curves of her body.

Just like that, my mouth still on her breast, I walked her into the shower.

I washed her hair, and she leaned her head on my chest, letting me take care of her. It felt good to take care of someone. I protected the pack—but I didn’t exactly take care of anyone in this intimate way.

And in turn, she washed me, her soapy hands caressing my body, exploring every muscle. She washed my abs twice, and it made me smile. I liked that she liked what she saw when she looked at me.

Her skin was clear and healthy, the last of the bruises had faded entirely.

It wasn’t until we got out and she was toweling off that her wet hair shifted from her shoulder and I saw the mark.

My stomach dropped.

She’d already been marked by her true mate.

And she’d hidden it from me.

That was the thing that burned the most, accompanied by my sudden flare of jealousy. I ran my thumb over the mark. “Who’s is this? Nathan’s or Brennan’s?”

Her lips parted as she looked up at me in surprise, but she hesitated. Choosing her words. If it was Nathan’s mark, if he really had been her true mate, would she lie to me?

I hated that I couldn’t trust her.

I knew she’d been through hell, I knew she had reasons to lie, but it didn’t change the fact it fucking hurt to have her look into my face and measure what she should say.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” I said. “You have your mate mark already.”

But it did.

“It’s Brennan’s,” she said as I wrapped my towel around my waist and paced toward the door. “He was my mate.”

“He is your mate,” I said as I reached the door.

And I’d betrayed him.

I’d fucked his true mate.

“He’s gone, Stone.”

I let out a laugh. “Is he, really? I wish he was still here, but his ghost... now his ghost is a bastard I can’t live with.”

I went out and I tried not to slam the door behind me.

CHAPTER 38





*A*melia

SHAW CAUGHT me when I was heading out of the house to get Dylan from school. His nostrils flared, and the sense that he knew I'd had sex with Stone sunk in my stomach.

“Can I walk with you?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said lightly. I felt as if I had betrayed him somehow by having sex with Stone, even though we hadn't made any promises to each other. I stiffened my spine as we walked down the front steps together into a beautiful, brisk fall day. The weather was starting to turn colder as I stayed here. It was a reminder that time was sweeping along. Time was always merciless.

As the two of us walked, he asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.”

“You can tell me if my brother's a dick. I've been his brother for twenty-two years; I have a lot of firsthand experience. You're not going to shock me.”

As always, Shaw surprised me and made me smile. And it made me want to be honest with him. “Stone and I had sex.”

“Neither of you look very happy since.” His tone was carefully neutral.

“He may have cried and run out of the room after,” I said dryly. The sarcasm helped shield my hurt feelings.

Shaw nodded. “He must feel like he betrayed Brennan.”

I licked my lips. “How do you feel?”

Shaw stopped and turned to me. The two of us were alone on the forest trail. “I want you to be happy. And I don't know if Stone is capable of making anyone happy, it's certainly never been his priority. He just wants us safe.” He hesitated, as

if he was searching for the right words. “If he’s your mate too, somehow, then I hope he’ll stop being stupid.”

“I don’t think it works like that. Having more than one mate.” I tucked my hair behind my ears, feeling butterflies in my stomach. I didn’t know what the right things were to say to Shaw. There was too much that I felt and I was too shy to put any of it into words. But I knew he made me feel safe and comfortable. “Thank you.”

He touched the small of my back, the weight of his hand sending sparks flying across my skin, and the two of us continued together down the path.

The mystery of if I could find love a second time, when I’d lost my mate, weighed on me. But then, I was living with a lot of mysteries.



THE DAYS PASSED. Cole and I trained. Shaw and I flirted. Karissa and I made meals together, or at least, I talked to her while she cooked since she was a control freak.

Stone avoided me.

And Dylan danced through those fall days, lit with joy and excitement, throwing leaves with his friends and relishing his childhood. I'd known how much the dark storminess of Nathan's house had affected him, but I hadn't known what he would be like with that burden lifted from his thin shoulders.

One night, Karissa and Cole lit a bonfire in the backyard, and it reminded me so much of Brennan that it twisted at my heart, and yet... when I put a marshmallow on Dylan's stick and held my hands over his, making sure he didn't turn it into a flaming inferno of sugar, the fire was reflected in his eyes along with delight. He hugged me afterward with sticky hands, then ran off to play flashlight tag with some of the other little cubs in the front yard. For the first time, afterward, I stood there and relished the good memories I had of Brennan from the night we met, and they didn't make me feel sad or hopeless. The scent of decomposing leaves and smoke drifted in the night air, and a sense of joy and well-being filled me.

And so even as I felt like I was on a knife's edge, not knowing what would happen next, part of me was happy.

I couldn't shake the feeling something would change, but I wished that we could just stay in these long moments of fall forever.

CHAPTER 39





S tone

I WANTED Amelia so badly that it was making me crazy. But Brennan's mark was on her. Even though he was dead, she still belonged to him. And so did Dylan.

I could never fill Brennan's shoes. I could never even try. It seemed like such a betrayal to his memory.

But I also didn't know how to stay away from the two of them. Amelia was alluring, and Dylan was such a sweet kid who reminded me so much of Brennan. I wanted to protect them both and I wanted to stay the hell away so I wouldn't ruin them.

I rubbed my hand over my face trying to make sense of what to do as I paced my command center. I hadn't been able to sleep for the last few days.

My selfish actions haunted me.

Most of all, I still didn't even know if Amelia had been responsible for Brennan's death. Blinded by my own attraction to her, I'd chosen to put off what I needed to do: have Louisa interrogate her.

I was letting her make me stupid. I'd accused Cole and Shaw that she turned them stupid. But I was the real idiot.

I sent Cole and Shaw on a mission to get them out of my way.

"You're going to regret this," Teresa warned me.

"Do I pay you to harass me?"

Teresa snorted. "Maybe you should try paying me more and see if you like my attitude better."

Still, she went with me along the path toward school, where Amelia would be walking back. I wanted to make sure

we were done with Louisa in plenty of time for Amelia to recover and be ready to see Dylan. Louisa wouldn't hurt her, but the process was certainly... taxing.

I'd been through it more than once when my father realized I was keeping secrets.

We ran into Joshua. He seemed surprised to see us and when he'd gone by, I asked Teresa, "Did he seem extra twitchy to you today?"

"You did kill his parents."

"They were a couple of abusive assholes anyway." Besides their betrayal of the pack.

"Still, people are attached to their parents."

I scoffed and Teresa said, "Don't blame me for trying to explain to you how normal people function. I didn't make them like that. I wish everyone would be logical."

She put a subtle emphasis on *logical* that sounded distinctly like shade. She didn't think I was being logical.

"Why am I here, anyway?" Teresa asked. "You don't have any issue getting Amelia to come along with you."

I ignored her, because I wasn't even sure why I'd wanted Tee along. Maybe to make sure I didn't cave to my feelings for Amelia and change my mind about taking her to Louisa.

Once I knew Amelia wasn't responsible for what happened to Brennan, then maybe I could consider some kind of relationship with her. At least I could develop a friendship with her, and spend time with Dylan without worrying about how much it would hurt him if I had to murder his mother.

I had to know she was innocent.

Teresa sighed, but didn't push me. I appreciated that; she was the opposite of Amelia, who would never stop pushing me.

We turned a corner, and there she was, parting ways with Janie and another of the moms. They were all laughing, and

Amelia seemed carefree and happy in a way I never saw her. Her face was lit up.

“She’s hanging out with the book club moms,” Teresa observed. “She must have been really lonely in her old pack.”

“Just because you hate everyone doesn’t mean Amelia is the same.”

Teresa sighed. “You obviously care about her, Stone. You’re going to regret this.”

“I have to know, Tee.”

Amelia turned toward us, and her face changed as she saw the two of us standing there,

“Stone.” Amelia’s cheeks colored as her gaze met mine.

Teresa glanced at me meaningfully.

Now I regretted bringing her. The way Amelia looked at me made me want to just... talk to her. Just kiss her. But I had to go through with this.

“Amelia. Come with me. I want you to meet someone.”

Amelia nodded, then turned to Tee. “Hi, Teresa.”

There had been tension between them, and Teresa jerked her head in a nod. She was never the most polite person.

The three of us made our way out into the woods. With every step, my sense of foreboding grew. Usually these woods felt as comforting and familiar as my own bedroom, but today the trees seemed to curl in toward me, blocking out the sun. Amelia stumbled over a gnarled root, and I reached to catch her, but then she walked on and I let my hands fall. God, I wanted to touch her so badly. To comfort her, but that wasn’t my place.

I was the one who would bring her pain.

And no matter how necessary that pain was, it made the air in these deep, quiet woods feel scant.

Amelia glanced at me curiously. “Is this about the scent in the woods? The rogue wolf?”

My brows arched, and her face clearly gave away that she'd just made a mistake, even before I asked slowly, "What do you know about that?"

Amelia took in the way Teresa was looking at her, and she blushed even deeper. "I overheard you and Cole talking about it. I thought it might be Longroad pack. You can't blame me for having a pressing interest in any visit from the Longroad pack."

"We haven't found anything." I was good at tracking, but Cole was the best. And yet despite the two of us, the rogue shifter seemed like a ghost; we'd never found him.

It was why I always had someone watching Amelia. Why there was always someone watching over Dylan. And yet, it didn't feel like enough. As much as I tried to keep a distance between Amelia and myself, I wanted to be the one guarding her.

We reached the stone slab, ringed by pines. Louisa was humming to herself, sitting cross-legged on the ground in her faded university t-shirt, her pink-streaked hair brightening the gloom. The witch always looked out of place in the forest, and yet she seemed at home there. Smoke rose from the bowl in front of her.

"What's going on?" Amelia asked glancing at me curiously.

"Louisa is going to help you answer some of my questions," I said. "So that I'll know if I can trust you."

Amelia glanced between Louisa and me, her gaze disbelieving. "You're going to torture me?"

"It's not torture." I promised. "Louisa will make it so I can see inside your memories."

Amelia's eyes went wide. "No, no, no."

She began to back up.

Teresa said, "There's no point in running, Amelia." She sounded bored.

Amelia did turn and run, but Teresa jumped on her and brought her down to the ground. She pulled Amelia back up to her feet.

Amelia's eyes were wild, her hair disheveled around her face, as Teresa dragged Amelia back across the clearing. The sight made my stomach sour. Why was she trying to run if she didn't have terrible secrets to hide?

"Thanks for the help, Stone," Teresa said drily as she shoved Amelia onto the stone. Teresa gripped one arm to stake it to the bonds on the other side, and I grabbed the other.

Amelia writhed and fought, and Teresa's jaw set as if she was about to palm Amelia's face and slam her head into the stone until she was more compliant. The thought sent a spike of fury through me. I grabbed both of Amelia's wrists, pressing them against the rock. Amelia let out a cry as my hands crushed her wrists against the stone, and I loosened my grip, shame rippling through my gut. I hadn't meant to hurt her.

Teresa quickly tied the leather throngs that hung from either side of the rock, anchoring Amelia there.

Then I climbed up beside her. Those wide, terrified eyes met mine, and they would've been enough to melt my heart.

If I hadn't been alpha. If I hadn't been Brennan's brother. If I hadn't been responsible for keeping my pack safe...even from the most intoxicating, intriguing woman I'd ever met.

But I was.

"This is a mistake," Louisa warned me, rising from the ground. She had the smoking bowl clutched in one arm, and the smoke drifted around her face, making the familiar soft curves of her round face look distorted and surreal.

"Is that your professional opinion?" I demanded. I was not in a good mood, and the fact I feared she was right just made her smartass remarks more annoying.

Louisa flashed me a tight smile that reminded me of a disappointed look that my mom would've given me. "It

doesn't take a witch to see the obvious. No matter how difficult it may be for an alpha."

I was surrounded by smartasses. "Just do the spell."

While she might argue with me, she didn't disobey. She carried the smoking bowl to Amelia and nodded at Teresa, who caught Amelia's face between her hands and held her still. Amelia bucked and fought as Louisa smeared the ash on her forehead.

"Don't do this," Amelia cried.

"What are you so afraid of?" Teresa retorted before I could answer.

I had to go through with this. Otherwise, my pack would always think she was guilty. She would never have a home here.

She might never forgive me. Her eyes caught on me with a plea that I couldn't answer, and I turned my face away. My first priority was to protect my pack.

And if she was responsible for Brennan's death, she would never be part of my pack. It didn't matter if she hated me.

Louisa marked my forehead with the same ash. Her fingers felt bony patting it into my face, marking me with it, and for the first time walking into someone else's memories felt filthy.

Then she stepped back and lifted her voice. Her wild singing filled the clearing. It was eerie and spiritual, an otherworldly sound that seemed to rise around us like the wind.

I reached for Amelia's hand, and she tried to yank away.

But I caught her, just as it felt as if the stone opened up beneath us. The two of us free-fell for a moment before landing hard on the ground, deep inside her dreams.

It was just the two of us, sitting in the darkness, and she gasped as she looked down at our joined hands, then yanked away from me.

"What's happening?"

She sounded so frantic that all I wanted to do was comfort her. I steeled myself. “Take me to the night Brennan was killed.”

She shook her head, closing her eyes as if she was trying to keep from thinking of it. Her lips peeled back in pain and her mind shook around us, the ground heaving beneath my feet. I reached for her arm to steady her as her eyes flew open.

“Amelia, don’t fight it. I can tell you from experience, it’s only worse if you fight it.”

“Who did that to you?” she whispered. “No one should take your memories away from you.”

The sympathy in her eyes, even when she was furious, almost overwhelmed me. “I’m not taking them away from you.”

“I don’t want you to see. They’re my memories.”

“What don’t you want me to see? What are you ashamed of?” My heart sank, then spurred into fury. She must have hurt Brennan.

Her chin lifted. “We’re not always afraid of what we did, Shaw. Sometimes we’re ashamed of what other people did to us.”

But there was no hiding from the past. Not here..

The darkness was melting away, and the motel where she and Brennan had hidden was in front of us. In the almost-empty parking lot sat a pickup truck with two motorcycles in the back. I recognized his sleek black bike, the one he’d always been tinkering with when we were teens before his life was overtaken by being alpha.

Just seeing the place brought up a mess of memories. I could almost smell the scent of that empty hotel room. There had been the scent of Brennan, of his fear and pain, of piss and blood splattered across the wall. There’d been a bullet hole embedded in the side of the wall. I still had the slug they’d put through my brother’s brain. I’d demolished the wall with my bare hands to dig it out.

I was going to bury it with Nathan.

Maybe then, I'd finally be able to move on, because it felt as if Brennan was haunting me.

"Come on." I held out my hand to her, determined to get her into that room no matter if I had to carry her. I had to know the truth. She wasn't acting like she was innocent.

She threw me a look that was full of disgust, then stalked ahead of me. She pushed open the motel room door, which swung easily. It revealed a room with a dark green carpet and old oak furniture. Brennan had liked the finer things in life, but this place must've let him pay in cash. After all, he'd been hiding from two packs.

When the two of us walked into the motel room, Amelia let out a gasp of pain. The two of us were ghosts here.

Brennan and Amelia—the Amelia of the past—were already here, and the room felt more alive than our real life.

Brennan had her pinned against the wall, the two of them naked. His lips were all over her throat, his hands roaming her body. He was inside her, the two of them moving together, and he looked at her with love in his eyes. She looked right back at him the same way.

Then the doors burst open.

Amelia hugged her arms over her chest, backing up toward the wall, as the scene played out all over again.

Brennan and Amelia fought back as a dozen Longroad pack filled the room, followed by Nathan Longroad strutting in behind. Brennan threw himself into them, throwing punches and breaking arms. He started to shift, and one of them shot him. He staggered back, blood blossoming across his shirt, his shift momentarily lost in the shock, and four of them jumped on top of him to bring him down.

Meanwhile Amelia scrambled for Brennan's gun in the nightstand, but one of the Longroad men reached her just as she raised it. The gun went off harmlessly into the wall as he wrestled it away from her. She slammed her head into his face, and his nose exploded, blood flying everywhere. He stumbled

back, cursing, and she went for the gun again. But Nathan Longroad grabbed her around the waist and hauled her back, kicking and screaming.

Nathan's hands gripped her naked breasts roughly until she cried out as he forced her against his body. Then he pushed her away from him and she fell onto her knees on the carpet.

"Get her dressed."

Four of them had finally beaten Brennan into submission—for the moment—as they held him against the wall. His face was bleeding, his hair wild around his face, his chest heaving with emotion as he watched Amelia.

"Let her go," Brennan said. "It's not her fault."

Nathan walked over to him silently—then punched him over and over until Brennan's head was hanging down, blood streaming from his mouth. Amelia screamed and begged, and it just seemed to egg Nathan on, as if he were taking great pleasure in destroying Brennan.

"Your turn will come next," Nathan promised her.

Two of Nathan's henchmen forced Amelia's clothes onto her body, leering and touching her as they did. Nathan just smiled his approval. Brennan thrashed against his captors, fighting to break free. But they held him back, raining blows upon his body as he fought. He started to shift and one of them slammed him across the temple with the butt of their handgun.

He crumpled to the ground, unconscious, and they let him fall.

"Too bad," Nathan told Amelia. "I wanted him to see what I'm going to do to you."

She raised her chin defiantly, her gaze flashing. I knew that look.

"I'm never going to love you," she told him. "You're a monster."

"Mm. Well, my father used to say you could rule through love or rule through fear." He gripped her chin, his fingers digging into her skin. "I'm happy to choose fear."

Nathan pulled out his cell phone and tossed it to one of his thugs. “Record this. I know some people who will want to see it.”

My hands tightened into fists. He meant me; he’d made sure I saw the video of my brother’s last tortured moments.

Amelia screamed as the thugs dragged him over. Nathan had to grab his hair to hold his head upright when he put the gun to his temple.

She whirled, trying to cover her eyes, when the gun went off. I stepped toward her protectively, my arms rising to shelter her against my chest, and she pushed me away, pushing back to face the scene. She didn’t want me.

Brennan sprawled on the floor, his face unrecognizable.

Agony lanced through my chest.

Seeing my brother die was different now than watching it in video, and I’d watched that video a thousand times.

She let out a scream, as full of pain and terror as the Amelia we’d just seen who was living in that moment.

Maybe Amelia was always living in these dark moments.

CHAPTER 40





Liam

SHE WAS SCREAMING in her nightmares again.

She used to have the good dreams, the key to escaping my nightmares for a while by slipping into hers.

But this nightmare... I strode outside into the forest, desperate to turn into the wolf and escape. The fragments of it were terrible and sharp. A door splintering open. The crack of gunfire. The scent of desperation. The feel of blood slippery and wet across skin. I had to get away.

The scent of smoke...

I paused, barefoot with mud squishing between my toes. Slowly, I realized I'd accidentally walked into the creek behind our house when I was desperate to escape the bad dreams. Reality came back to me. The moon shone down on the water, which rippled around my legs.

The scent of smoke...

And the thick, heady scent of magic.

She wasn't just having a nightmare. Someone was guiding her through a nightmare, forcing her to see the terrible past. Louisa was at work.

I took off running through the forest.

When I reached the stone, Teresa saw me and stepped in front of me, her mouth opening in surprise as she raised her hands. Her wide eyes reflected my wild face as I pushed her aside. Teresa flew halfway across the clearing and landed hard on her ass. Her face was disbelieving as she stared up at me from the forest floor.

Louisa stumbled back, fear written across her face, as she dropped the copper bowl from which the smoke drifted.

I stomped into the ashes, smothering the last tendrils of smoke.

Amelia cried out, her body moving abruptly as if she was suffering along with her dream self, as if she'd just been kicked. I ripped the leather straps binding her off her wrists, and they came away in my hands like they were mere strings.

Teresa watched me warily from a dozen feet away in the shadows, her hand on the hilt of her knife. I wasn't sure if she was more afraid of me or more afraid of Stone's wrath if she hurt me.

She could try. I'd been hurt a lot. I couldn't be stopped easily.

I lifted Amelia from the rock. She fell against my chest, her face lolling against my shoulder. I frantically rubbed the ash from her forehead as my brother stirred and groaned, lost in her memories. Fuck him. I hoped they hurt.

Then her eyes flew open. Her frantic gaze met mine, and she struggled, shoving me away. She slapped me across the face, and the world went red for a second.

"It's all right," I told her, cradling her in my arms and rocking with her. "I've got you. I'm here to save you from the nightmares, just like you saved me."

Her gaze focused on me for the first time. "Liam."

There was relief in her voice, and the sound of it settled into me, heavy and warm. Her trust was a gift and a burden all at once.

"I'll get you out of here," I promised.

Stone was rising from the stone slab, his dark brows drawing together. "Liam, what the hell are you doing?"

I wasn't going to waste my words on this idiot. I turned, carrying Amelia into the forest.

Stone came after me. "Liam, she and I are almost done—"

"You're done now." I didn't turn back to face him.

He grabbed my shoulder.

I started to turn, shifting Amelia's weight to one arm. Her arms clung around my neck and I didn't want to fight with her here. Hell, I didn't want to fight anyone, ever again, but I would if I had to.

For her.

For the first time since I'd been freed and vowed I'd never hurt anyone like I'd been hurt. The memories rushed up to swallow me: my head aching from being punched, the oppressive darkness when I'd gone blind, the broken arm left to heal crooked.

I wouldn't let them make me like they were.

The next second, Amelia's fingers dug into my t-shirt, holding herself tightly to me, and I was back in this moment. I inhaled the scent of her and I couldn't remember who *they* were. Did I need to be different from the Longroad pack who had tortured me? From my own brothers who had tried to save me, but didn't understand anything?

"Liam," Stone said again, and there was that uncertain look in his eyes, like he got sometimes when I was lost between the moments.

But I just got confused between the past and the present and the future. Stone was worse off; he always knew where he was, but somehow he still didn't understand how to live in the present.

"Let us go," I said, and the deep rumble of my voice surprised Stone as much as it surprised me. There was a threat in my voice, even without saying the words.

He stared back at me. Then his gaze fell to Amelia, who clutched me, terror written across her beautiful features. A resigned look came over his face. "Go."

I turned and carried her into the forest.

"Where are you taking me?" she whispered.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere but the big house," she whispered back.

With her body pressed against mine, I carried her toward a place we'd be safe.

CHAPTER 41





Amelia

I HAD RECURRING nightmares of Nathan murdering Brennan, but somehow those memories felt even stronger now after seeing it all play out so vividly. The smells. The sounds. I squeezed my eyes shut, but it didn't matter.

I'd never escape the past.

"Amelia, stay with me," Liam said quietly.

I should be scared of him, shouldn't I? But right now, I was just afraid of the past that ruined my every moment, awake or asleep.

I tried to focus on the present moment. The scent of lavender rising in the air, mixed with pine and the musky scent of Liam's body. His heart beat against my shoulder, as he carried me. His hard arms.

The forest rising around us, like an old friend.

Liam settled down with his back against a tree, still holding me as he settled me on his lap. He kissed my forehead tenderly, and I pulled back, confused.

"Right," he said, sounding like he'd just accidentally stepped on my foot. "It isn't time yet."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He shook his head, as if to clear it. "You and I haven't fallen in love yet, right?"

"No."

"All right," he said. "Sorry, I get confused sometimes."

"I get confused too," I assured him.

I was always confused when I was anywhere near Liam.

But at least being close to him, looking at his handsome face, was a distraction from the memories that seemed to press in on me. My heart was racing, my body in panic mode even though there was no one to fight.

“Let me give you back one of your good memories,” he said. “I used to love this one when we were young.”

As usual, I had no clue what he was talking about. But he wrapped his hands around mine and held them tightly between us, his forehead dropping forward until it met mine.

His breathing was slow and even, and when panic threatened to sweep me away, I mimicked his breathing. Slowly, the pressure of the past receded, and I started to breathe easily again.

I opened my eyes and realized somehow, he had pulled me into his dream. I was still sitting on his lap, but flowers hung over our heads, white and luminous and glowing under the moonlight.

“How is it night here?”

“It’s always night here,” he said. “I used to go here all the time when I couldn’t take...things. But this was your world first. Sometimes I found you here.”

“I wish I remembered it,” I said, feeling like I’d lost something. I climbed off his lap and began to wander through the deep forest around us, which was different than anyplace I’d been before, primordial and magical. And slowly, it began to come back to me, the faded bits of pleasant dreams bursting into full color.

And slowly, I started to remember a boy who had been by my side here oftentimes.

I turned to look at Liam, my lips parting as I remembered him. I felt guilty I’d forgotten. Even though they were still just the faintest wisps of memory.

His lips quirked, but his eyes were sad. “I can always find my way into the dreams. I saved them up inside when I was trying to survive, and they’re a part of me. But the visions

don't belong to me. The past, the present, the future... I don't know how to make sense of any of it."

"Maybe you could figure it out," I said. I held out my hand to him, remembering that I had done this once a long time ago, when I was a little girl and I thought he was just a dream. "Maybe we could figure it out together."

Together, the two of us walked through the world of dreams. Waterfalls cascaded into emerald-blue lakes, and around every turn were beautiful flowers blooming wildly or odd little houses with smoke rising from the chimneys. A family of white-dotted deer wandered across the grass, and apples hung low from tree branches. I reached for one bright red apple and it came away easily in my hand, and I was suddenly tempted to offer it to Liam. He turned to me with a smile on his face, offering the apple he'd just plucked from the heavy limbs.

Then, suddenly, Stone's voice jolted us both out of our dreams.

I grabbed for Liam's hand again, but it didn't matter. I opened my eyes in the forest again, feeling cold and exhausted, and scrambled to my feet. Liam was already up, facing Stone furiously with his hands folded into fists.

"You interrupted before I could know she was innocent!" Stone said furiously. "I needed to go back and see if she set Brennan up—"

"You're a fool." Liam's voice came out exasperated, but still warm. He ran both hands through his air. "Oh, Stone. You already know the truth."

Stone shook his head. "I need to know for sure. So the pack will know. They can accept her."

"So she can stay?" Liam let out a laugh. "You must know she's not going to stay, not after what you did to her."

Stone's brows tightened. "Are you saying she's going to run? Did you see that in the future?"

I stared at Liam, feeling exposed and at the same time, uncertain. Was I going to run? I hadn't thought about anything

yet but getting away from Stone and Louisa. Was I going to go back and talk to Joshua, to make plans to escape with Dylan?

If Stone was going to drag me into the world of nightmares again until he had examined my memories from every angle... a shiver ran down my spine.

I had to escape.

“I don’t know,” Liam said, frowning. “You know I get confused.”

Stone softened, and I stared at Liam in wonder. I had the feeling Liam was just pretending. He might genuinely get lost in time... but he was also using his sometimes-confusion to his advantage.

“It’s all right.” Stone looked past him to me. “Amelia...”

He trailed off, looking lost, as if he had no idea what to say.

And neither did I.

“Are you going to do that to her again?” Liam asked.

Stone met his gaze and didn’t answer. The silence between them felt deep and terrible.

“If you try,” Liam said quietly, “You’re going to have to chain me up like the Longroads did. Because I’m going to come for her. I’m never going to let you hurt her.”

Stone’s face washed with shock and horror. “I would never do that, Liam. And I would never try to hurt her or—”

“No? Not even if you were convinced it was for our own good?” Liam tilted his head to one side, studying Stone. “I love you so much, Stone. In the past, in the present, in the future. But you think you’re better than me when you aren’t.”

“I don’t,” Stone began.

“You think you’re sane,” Liam said. “But I’m living in reality, even if I get mixed up on who I am or what time it is. It’s still always real. But you have created this fake reality where you can somehow fix everything, keep everyone together, safe, if you just make them obey.”

Stone scoffed. “Believe me, I live in reality where no one obeys. Even though they should.”

Stone held a hand out to me. “Come on, Amelia. Let’s finish this. You’ve already been through the worst. I just need to see what happened before.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t let him see Aiden and Lawson. One of them must have betrayed me; they were the ones who knew about my plans to run away with Brennan. But even though they had hurt me, I wanted to protect them so badly.

They were still mine, and I still loved them.

Just like these fucked-up King brothers loved each other no matter what.

“This part will be easy,” Stone promised. “I won’t tie you down, I promise.”

“She said no.” Liam’s voice was sharp. “Go away, Stone. You’ve done enough damage.”

“Enough, Liam!” Stone’s tone was filled with his alpha growl. “You go for a run. Clear your head.”

Liam stepped in front of me, his broad shoulders and the lean taper of his back blocking me from Stone. He let out a growl that was purely feral, rumbling through his body.

He was the oldest brother. He’d been meant to be the alpha. He always seemed so lost that it was easy to forget, to see him as weak despite his height and powerful build.

But there was nothing weak or lost about Liam King.

“Do you want to challenge me?” Stone’s voice was disbelieving. “You’re the one who never wants to fight, but you would fight me?”

“You know I don’t want to,” Liam said.

“But you would.”

“For her?” Liam’s voice was deep and rich, filled with his own alpha growl. “I would break every vow I’ve made.”

I stared up at him in wonder. What the fuck was happening with this family?

Liam's body rippled, as if he was on the verge of shifting.

Stone's face paled. Quietly, but certainly, he said, "You know I wouldn't fight you, Liam. I won't hurt you."

He raised his hands in a gesture of peace. But even though he projected perfect calm, there was something wild in his gaze.

The two of them loved each other so much.

"It's all right," I said, grabbing Liam's arm. I pressed myself against him, trying to soothe him, putting myself between him and Stone. Liam's gaze finally met mine; his eyes had been glowing with the shift, already the wolf's eyes, but as I murmured to him, the light faded. "Stone's going to let it go, for now. Right, Stone?" I asked him over my shoulder. "And I'll go back to the house, and everything will be okay. No one needs to fight. Okay?"

"Right," Stone said.

Slowly, the tension drained out of Liam's body. He jerked his head in a nod.

"Thank you," I whispered, pressing myself against him, although I didn't entirely know why I was thanking him. I just couldn't stand the thought of him and Stone hurting each other. I kissed the smooth skin over that taut, hollow cheek.

Then I turned to face Stone.

"Back to the house," he confirmed, as if he knew I needed his promise.

I nodded.

The two of us walked side by side back to the house. I needed to know he and Liam were apart, that there would be no fight between them.

Stone let out a long, shaky breath as we walked through the forest. "Thank you, Amelia."

He sounded sincere.

“Fuck you.”

His head whipped toward me. “What?”

“Did I stutter? Because I can say it again.” I could say it a lot of times, after what he did to me.

“You’re mad about the trial at the stone.” He sounded resigned. “I had to know, Amelia. I didn’t want to hurt you, I just wanted to see it for myself. But I wish I hadn’t had to. I know that was painful for you to relive.”

“Is there an apology in here somewhere, Stone?”

He gave me an affronted look.

“I guess not,” I answered my own question. “So once again, fuck you.”

The green lawn was just ahead through the trees. Now that Stone and Liam were safe from each other, I ran toward the house.

CHAPTER 42





S haw

COLE and I had just returned when Amelia ran past us toward the house. She looked exhausted and rung-out. Cole and I exchanged a look.

“You go.” he said. “You’re better with....people.”

“Ha,” I said, assuming he was being a smartass, but then realized he wasn’t. It would kill me to not be the one who was there for Amelia, and I patted his shoulder. “I’ll let you know what’s going on.”

“Thanks.”

I followed Amelia into the house. Her door was already shut.

“Amelia, what’s going on?”

Long seconds dripped by before she opened the door. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and her face was blotchy, her eyes bloodshot. My heart turned inside out. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” she whispered.

“Stone,” I corrected, already knowing. I held my arms out to her, and she hesitated, then folded herself into my arms. I rocked her back and forth, holding her tightly.

First, I’d comfort her.

Then I’d deal with Stone.



DOWNSTAIRS, Cole, Karissa and Stone were sitting in the living room, all drinking beer and talking about nothing.

Cole sat forward when he saw me, setting his beer down on the coffee table. He wanted to know what was wrong with Amelia.

I vaulted the back of the couch and crashed into Stone.

“Hey, hey, what the hell?” Karissa shouted, jumping to her feet. “Shaw, I just mopped!”

Stone could probably take me in a fight. But I intended to get my punches in first.

The two of us rolled off the couch, and I buried my fist in his stomach, over and over, before he finally grabbed my throat in a choke hold and began to squeeze. I got some space and flipped him over, and he slammed into the coffee table, which fractured into a dozen pieces.

“Shaw!” Karissa screamed.

I scrambled on top of Stone and pinned him to the ground.

“How could you do that to Amelia?” I demanded. “Make her relive Brennan’s death? I thought you changed your mind about the witch!”

Stone stared up at me with an expression I couldn’t read. Did my arrogant older brother feel regret for once?

“Oh, that’s what this is about?” Karissa turned her furious gaze on Stone before she said, “Very well, Shaw, but you’re going to have to mop.”

I punched Stone across the face, and his head jerked back, slamming into the hardwood floor. He might’ve been able to block the punch, and I stared down at him in confusion. He wasn’t making this very satisfying.

Cole gripped my shoulders and dragged me off him. “Enough, Shaw. This isn’t going to help anyone.”

I shrugged him off, turned to face him. “Did you know what he was going to do to her?”

Cole shook his head, anger written across his face. “No.”

“Good job, Stone,” I told him. “You really do fuck with the heads of anyone stupid enough to care about you.”

“Shaw, wait,” Karissa started to say, but I was already heading out of the living room.

I ripped off my shirt before I made it across the porch, already beginning to turn into a wolf.

I needed to stop thinking, stop seeing Amelia’s face.

I ran into the deep woods.

Liam found me in the woods, and we ran together as wolves. I felt a tightness in my chest ease as I ran beside him, dodging between trees and jumping over thick roots and exposed tree stumps.

The scent of the forest soothed me, but my brother’s shadowy form slipping through the trees was even more calming. We couldn’t speak, but I knew he understood everything I felt: the mingled love and frustration with Stone, the protectiveness and uncertainty with Amelia.

We ran until I could go no further, until my lungs burned and my heart pounded, and then we slowed to a walk. The problems hadn’t faded, but I felt like I could handle them again. Liam moved closer to me, our paws silent over the leaves.

Eventually we made our way back home, loping through the trees along the borders of our territory.

It was the first time in a long time that my brother had sought me out and we had run together.



When we shifted back, it was dusk. The two of us side-by-side at the edge of the water where the creek connected with the river, water tumbling by urgently as the sun sank beneath the horizon.

“Her nightmares are going to be worse tonight,” Liam told me. “You should sleep near her. It will comfort her.”

“I can’t sleep in her bed. Not with Dylan.”

Liam was quiet, and after a second, I added, “Do you think it would help her if I slept in the hall?”

“You’d have to kick Cole out of his place.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “God, Liam. What are we doing?”

He shrugged. He was never the one I went to for life advice, so maybe it was rude of me to start now.

“I’m going to ask Louisa for some tea to help her sleep.” I got to my feet. “Do you want to come?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I have any interest in being face to face with Lousia after she enabled Stone’s stupidity. And she shouldn’t have any interest in being face to face with me.”

I nodded. “All right. Well... I’ll see you later then.”

I hadn’t seen Liam so lucid and present in a long time. Since before he was taken away. I didn’t really remember that version of my brother very well.

But it made me want to stay with him while it lasted.

He ducked his head, dismissing me, still staring out at the wild river.

I clapped him on the shoulder and left him behind, walking through the woods until I reached Louisa’s house.

When she opened the front door to me, she looked sad. “Shaw...”

“It’s all right. I know you’ve got to do what Stone asks.” I was angry with her, but I tried to push it down. My anger

really belonged to Stone. “But she already has nightmares. Could you make her some of that calming potion? The one you made for Liam?”

He’d refused to take it after the first few times. He’d insisted that the nightmares were real and no one should have to go through them alone. I rubbed my hand across my face, wondering where to even start with my brothers.

“Of course.” She stepped back, inviting me in. As she bustled around in the kitchen, pulling out various herbs, she told me, “I told Stone it was a bad idea.”

“And he didn’t listen. I’m shocked.” I took a seat at one of the stools at her kitchen island.

“I’d say he means well, but you don’t want to hear it.”

“I already know it. That’s the exasperating thing about Stone.”

She pushed a marble mortar and pestle my way, then shook a few final herbs into it. “Grind those for me, will you?”

“Sure.” I set to work, and the herbs released their relaxing fragrance. Hopefully this would help Amelia. It seemed like so little to offer her.

“So. What are you going to do with the girl?”

“Shouldn’t you ask Stone that?”

“I don’t think this is just about what Stone wants anymore, even if he is the alpha.”

I scoffed. “You could try telling him that too, but it would go about as well as when you told him off in the woods.”

She fixed me with a sharp look. “Are you ever going to stop trying to float through life, Shaw? You have so much to offer the world. The pack. *Amelia.*”

Funny how that last one hit the hardest.

I flashed her a smile. “I don’t have much to offer anyone but a good time.”

She snorted. “You don’t have much to offer but bullshit. That’s bullshit, Shaw. They need you.”

She didn’t specify who *they* were, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask.

CHAPTER 43





*A*melia

I DID my best to stay out of Stone's way, and he was certainly staying out of mine. I didn't see him again that night. Karissa tried to talk to me, and I knew she wanted to smooth things over, but I couldn't pretend.

Some things can't be forgiven.

When I was getting ready for bed, there was a knock on the door. I glanced at Dylan as I walked to the door. Dylan was already asleep, laying like a starfish in the exact middle of the king-sized bed. Somehow I'd still end up hanging off the edge of that huge bed tonight.

I opened the door, steeling myself to face Stone's stubborn face or Karissa's cheerful chatter.

But it was Shaw, leaning in my doorway with a steaming mug and a plate of cookies. He offered them to me.

"You can set them on the balcony," I whispered. That was where I liked to sit and read at night after Dylan was asleep, so my light wouldn't bother him.

The view of the creek and the forest seemed magical in the evening. Sometimes fireflies flitted through the trees, little golden sparks of light winging over the grass, and the moon reflected off the burbling creek. When nature was so beautiful, it didn't seem right that life was so messy.

He nodded and carried them to the balcony, and I slipped out behind him.

"The tea should help you sleep without nightmares," he said.

"Oh, thank you." Now that I knew how often Liam had been by my side in my dreams, for some reason when I

thought of avoiding nightmares I imagined him standing there alone in the dreamworld. It seemed strangely like a betrayal.

His lips twisted bitterly. “Louisa can be good for something. She made a potion to help you relax.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a bottle, which he stepped back and set on the dresser before he rejoined me.

I glanced down at the steaming mug. I didn’t want it, knowing it came from Louisa.

And Teresa... I didn’t know if I’d ever forgive her for the bored, dismissive sound of her voice when she told me not to fight back, as she helped push me into my nightmares. I felt tense around Teresa, but there was something about her that I admired, too. She seemed to walk so confidently through a man’s world, being so unapologetically herself but finding her own way. And she despised me.

I felt brittle and sad and it was all the worse because I’d felt happy for a little while. *Safe*. Having that wrenched away made me feel so alone.

Shaw looked at me as if he wanted to say something, but what was there to say? He couldn’t defend Stone.

He couldn’t promise me this was the last time Stone would hurt me, either. Not when Stone was convinced it was what he had to do as alpha.

I drew the curtain shut, then closed the French doors behind us. I wanted to be close enough if Dylan needed me, close enough to protect him.

But I needed someone myself tonight.

I just wasn’t sure if I would ever have anyone I could truly trust. Not here in the King pack.

“Liam’s going to stay wolfed out for a while, I guess,” Shaw said.

“Yeah.” I wished he would be here for me, but I couldn’t hate Liam for looking after himself when his grip on the world was already so tenuous.

But god, I missed him, a surprising amount. I leaned my elbows on the railing and looked out over King territory. Liam was the one who was intimately connected to my mind, the one who had raced to protect me from Stone.

I hadn't realized who Liam King really was.

And I was beginning to think no one else—not even these brothers and this sister who loved him so much—really knew him either.

Shaw hesitated. “I should go.”

“You might as well,” I agreed. “There's nothing to say.”

He frowned down at me, his dark hair blowing in the breeze. “Amelia, I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop Stone. I didn't know—”

“I know. You couldn't stop him. No one can stop the pack's alpha, right?” My lips twisted bitterly. I had to get out of here, away from Stone. No one could stand against him, the same way no one could stand against Nathan.

Stone was a thousand times better of a man. I knew that even after what he had done to me. But that didn't change the fact Stone was dangerous. Stone had good intentions to go with his cruelty. I massaged my wrists, still feeling the way his weight had crushed me down to the stone altar.

Shaw's jaw tightened. “I'm not weak.”

“I didn't say you were. I'll never be an alpha, and I'm not weak.” My hands tightened on the railing as I straightened to my full height. I had to run. I had to be free, on my own, so no man could crush me down again and make me weak.

I had loved Brennan so very much, but his memory had been the thing that made me weak. That love itself, that had sustained me through so much darkness, was dragging me down now into the endless undercurrent of my grief.

Shaw raked his hand through his hair. “How do I make this better?”

His voice sounded raw.

“You can’t.” My voice came out hard, because as I spoke, terrible reality crystalized around me. “In the end, Stone will do whatever he must to convince himself I’m innocent. But there are no memories where I betrayed Brennan, Shaw. So when he can’t find any evidence of guilt, he’ll have to rake through every memory to know I’m truly innocent. If he ever believes me...”

Shaw stared down at me in horror, but he couldn’t argue with me. He knew it was true as much as I did.

“Every bit of happiness I’ve clung to... he’ll have handled it all, weighed and judged every moment. And it’ll turn to dust. I’ll never be able to see those moments again without seeing Stone.”

My voice curled into disdain on the name *Stone*.

Shaw looked shocked. “He won’t do that. I won’t let him.”

I couldn’t hold back my laugh, even knowing it would hurt him. Shaw pulled back as if I’d slapped him.

But we both knew he couldn’t stop Stone.

“Louisa would never do that.” He was grasping for straws now. There was no point in claiming Stone wouldn’t do something. He was as implacable. The asshole was aptly named.

“She’ll do what Stone tells her.”

He shook his head. “Amelia, I promise, you’ll be safe here ___”

“Don’t.” I whirled on him so fast he looked stunned. “Don’t lie to me. I felt safe here!”

“You are safe.” He rested his hands on my shoulders, his face tortured but his eyes intent. “Amelia, I know seeing those memories again was horrible, but your body is undamaged. Your son is sleeping in that bed—”

“Don’t tell me I’m safe!”

“You are safe!”

I brought my hands up inside his grip and snapped outward, pushing his hands off my shoulder. “Don’t touch me! Not when you’re going to lie to me. Do you know how much worse it is because I let myself feel safe here? Because I was *happy?*”

“I won’t let him hurt you!” Shaw’s gaze locked on mine, full of promises. “Amelia, please, believe me. Stone can see reason. And if he doesn’t—I’ll stop him.”

“What are you going to do?” I demanded, but we both knew the option that lay before us.

Shaw could challenge Stone for alpha.

Never, never, never. My heart screamed at the thought. I didn’t want to see the King brothers tear each other apart. Not for my sake. Not even to keep my son here.

I caught his arm before he could say anything, desperate to keep him from speaking those words, from even thinking about them. “Help me escape!”

His eyes widened. “Amelia, I can’t do that. It’s dangerous out there.”

“There’s no sign Nathan is still alive.” I couldn’t quite believe he was really gone. I’d like to stab his corpse a few times just to be really sure before I could truly accept that he was gone.

“No,” he said carefully. “But there’s a rogue wolf that keeps entering our territory. We can never catch him, but the timing is just too much to be coincidence. What if he’s hunting you?”

I stared up at him, thinking of the wolf I’d glimpsed in the woods. I’d felt safe having it watch over me, and I’d convinced myself almost without thinking that it was one of Stone’s men, or Stone himself.

But maybe every moment of safety I’d felt in King territory was a damn lie.

“So you’re telling me you and Stone and Cole couldn’t track down one rogue wolf, but I need to stay here so you can

protect me? While Stone—” I broke off. I couldn’t bear to repeat what Stone had done to me.

“The rogue’s like a ghost, Amelia! We can protect you, I promise.”

I shook my head, turning away. “There’s no other way for this to end, Shaw. I want so badly to stay here.”

The whispered words left my throat feeling raw. They were honest and jagged. I did want to stay. I wanted to be safe and happy here, and I wanted to keep Dylan with his kin. These men loved him.

“Then stay,” he pleaded, as if he knew I’d find another way without him. “I’ll make Stone see reason. And if I can’t...” He trailed off.

He couldn’t promise to betray his brother. He shouldn’t. And I shouldn’t ask him to.

But I had other ways of escaping Stone.

The thought of leaving Shaw behind broke my heart. I wouldn’t get to say goodbye because if I did, he’d see through me. I’d put him in the situation of betraying his brother, his alpha, in yet another way.

But I didn’t want to leave him quite yet.

“It’s okay, Shaw,” I said quietly, touching his face. He was incredibly handsome, but over the past month, I’d come to see him as more than handsome. He took care of me whenever I was in pain, whether that was emotional or physical. And for the first time, I wondered if it hurt him that he couldn’t take care of me when it came to Stone. I inhaled his scent, which was smokier and darker than any of the others. “Let’s not make any promises.”

A cloud passed over his face, and he cupped my hand, holding it to his cheek. “I’m not going to be that man anymore, Amelia. The one who never makes promises.”

“You’re a good man, Shaw,” I told him, and his face softened as if he had needed to hear those words.

Studying his face, I wanted so badly to kiss him. His lips were plush above that big, hard jaw. Need ached between my thighs, and the citrusy tang of that need seemed to rise with the breeze around us.

We couldn't have promises. We couldn't have goodbyes.

But we could have this moment.

I rose onto my toes, and he moved toward me seamlessly as if he had the same instincts, his hands wrapping around my hips and hauling me toward him. His lips descended on mine and his hands wrenched me toward him as if he wanted my body against his as completely as possible, as if he were trying to obliterate the space between his soul and mine. His tongue stroked into my mouth with a powerful sense of need that curled through my body like smoke gliding through the air. My needy core clenched at his touch.

"I will protect you," he promised. "If he forces me to...I'll challenge Stone."

"I don't want you to do that." Brennan's face flashed through my mind, the animated affection and exasperation that flickered across his expressions when he talked about his brothers. "I don't want you to challenge him. Promise me you won't."

He looked down at me, refusing to promise. His chest heaved with emotion.

I didn't want to hear whatever he was going to say next. I had to protect these men from themselves.

I grabbed his lapel and crushed my lips to his.

My heart raced as his hands swept up my spine and then into my hair as he deepened our kiss. An electric current ran through my veins as I clung to him, not wanting the moment to end.

His deep green eyes were full of heat as he gripped my arms and pulled away, just enough to say, "You can shut me up, but you can't change how I feel."

The next second, his mouth covered mine, swallowing any protest.

I didn't want to hear about how he felt when I needed to leave. But everything in my body ached for him. There was a strange restless feeling in my arms and legs and I throbbed like I was going to die if I didn't have him inside me.

I still fisted his shirt, and I tugged his mouth down to mine again. He came easily. His lips brushed against mine in a soft, tentative kiss. When I tried to deepen the kiss, pressing myself against him urgently, his hand cupped my jaw and he slowed me down.

His hands were firm yet gentle, as his fingers tangled in my hair. He leaned in and kissed me again, soft and slow and sweet. The heat of his mouth against mine sent my pulse racing.

My skin tingled as his hands explored my body. His fingers caressed my curves, tracing circles around my hips, my breasts, my stomach, and every touch increased my sense of wanton need.

I gasped as he kissed me again, more deeply this time, his tongue exploring my mouth with a hunger and longing that threatened to overwhelm me. I clung to him, kissing him wildly.

I only broke away from him long enough to murmur, "I need you."

His hand delved between my thighs, and even through the nightgown I wore, his touch made my back arch, my hips rocking against him. His gaze when he looked down at me was intense, his pupils dilated as if he were drugged. He rubbed through my dress as desperately as I rocked against him, and his cock was hard against my thigh.

He pulled me close and murmured into my ear, "I can smell your slick and it's driving me wild."

Then he turned his head and kissed my neck, finding the places that sent an electric thrill through my body. I let out a moan before I crushed my lip between my teeth, trying to

stifle it. I had to be quiet. We were barely alone, here at the back of the house with the curtains drawn between us and the bedroom. I didn't want anyone to overhear.

“Shaw,” I whispered hungrily, reaching for his belt, unbuckling it urgently. It was only when I'd pushed his trousers open that I realized I didn't feel the usual impulse of fear over a man's belt.

But it was Shaw. Shaw, who was safe, who had held me during my cramps and kissed the top of my head and held me tenderly.

I drew him out and gripped him tightly. He let out a groan as he looked down at me, and his face was filled with barely-mastered control. He looked as if he were about to lose his mind.

“Amelia,” he managed, “do you think you could be in heat?”

My lips parted as I stared up at him, trying to make sense of the words when I was a ball of want and need.

“I can't be.” The heat started sometime after a woman began to shift, and only after she'd found her mate. I'd pretended to be in heat for Nathan, but only because he needed me to pretend to be wild for him for the sake of his ego. “I never...”

He shook his head as if he were trying to sober up, as if he couldn't quite shake himself back to sense. “If it's your first time, then it won't be as bad... yet... but it could start to be worse.”

I gripped his hand and guided it back to my aching need. “It had better not ever be worse,” I murmured, because the desperate need I felt for him now felt uncontrolled.

And I always had to be in control of myself. It was the only way I could survive in a world where men controlled everything else.

And yet...

“We'll figure it out,” I said urgently. “But I need you now.”

He hesitated.

“Shaw...” I whispered, my voice a plea.

The sound seemed to break him. He ran his hands up my thighs, under my skirt, and his fingers hooked into my panties. I swayed against him urgently as he all but ripped them away.

His fingers were rough now as they moved over my body and between my thighs, exploring every inch of my skin with an intensity that made me gasp in pleasure and anticipation.

Every touch seemed to rip through me like lightning and I couldn't help but cry out as he caressed my curves and kissed the sensitive spots at the base of neck and shoulder where his lips found purchase against my heated skin. He nipped beneath my ear, my throat, and the grazing of his teeth over my skin made me want to scream with desire.

He caught my chin and pulled my face up to meet his, then kissed me fiercely again. My head was reeling as he suddenly spun me around and bent me over the balcony railing. But even though my mind couldn't quite keep up, my body screamed that this was what it wanted. Every part of my body was wild for him.

The cold metal sent a shock wave through my body that made me gasp and arch even higher against it. He grasped my hips firmly in his hands as he moved behind me, then carefully slid inside of me with one long thrust.

I let out a shuddering cry at the sudden fullness and at the pleasure that flooded through my veins like an electric current. He clung to my waist as we moved together, as if he wanted me close to him, even as he set a furious pace thrusting into me. My back arched, and I slammed my hips back against his. His cock was big and it hurt a little to push back against him like this, his balls slapping me with the force of his momentum, but I wanted this pain so badly. We moved together in an urgent rhythm, his thrusts becoming faster and deeper until I was gasping in ecstasy. His breathing was ragged as he drove into me, pushing us both further and further towards a peak that felt dizzyingly close.

Then it seemed to come all at once, a wave of pleasure so intense it seemed almost unbearable, and I cried out as my legs shook with its intensity. He followed soon after with his own cry of pleasure, his fingers digging into my hips as he finished with a few final thrusts before letting out a roar that he buried against my neck, biting down on my skin as he pumped into me.

We stayed like that for what felt like forever, with him panting against my throat and his knot buried deep inside me.

The sense of being a part of him washed over me, that feeling that there was no part of him that wasn't mine. There wasn't any distance between us.

This was what it felt like to have a mate.

I closed my eyes, my body still shaking with the aftershock of my pleasure. My mind couldn't keep up.

Could Shaw be my mate too?

I had too much to figure out. And yet... the same hungry need I'd felt before still ran through my body like a raw ache, a little less intense but still present.

"I can't pull out," Shaw's voice was quiet but deep in my ear. His hands ran over my thighs, then one hand found my clit and sensation raced through me so intense that I keened. "I guess you aren't done with me yet."

His cock felt even bigger now, an intensely full sensation that I stretched around, that made me tremble with pleasure and need.

Maybe I should've been sorry, but I wasn't. I ran my hands over his thighs, pushing my ass into him urgently, wanting more.

He kept working his fingers against my clit as my need grew urgently. "I was fantasizing about wooing you. About this... but it was going to be sweet."

"You don't need to woo me." My breath came out in soft pants between each word. "I'm already yours."

He ran his teeth over the curve of my shoulder, and I bit down on my lower lip at the way the sensation echoed through every part of my body, as intense as his fingers on my clit. He lifted his head to growl into my ear, “God, don’t say that unless you mean it. Because I’m already *yours*.”

My mind was spinning and I tried to think of the right things to say, but I was lost to the sensation of his hard, muscular body against mine and his powerful fingers thrusting against me. Instead, I just moaned, my legs shaking as if I were on the verge of another orgasm from just his fingers. One of his arms slid around my waist, holding me up, as his mouth continued exploring and teasing my sensitive throat.

His hand slid up the back of my neck and knotted in my hair. “On your knees.”

There was a growl of alpha command in his voice, even though I knew he was just trying to keep me from falling as my body lost itself to its need. I’d heard about what it was like to experience heat, the need some wolves had to be fucked until they could barely move, but I’d never thought I’d feel this wild, unrestrained need.

My lips parted and I whimpered as I moved to my knees and braced my hands against the railing. He moved with me, still buried deep inside me. But now, his hand worked furiously against my clit as he began to pump in and out the small amount he could. His cock filled me so intensely that I didn’t need much movement, not with his fingers teasing my clit until I was moaning.

He kissed the nape of my neck and I shuddered as pleasure burned through my body. I’d never felt anything like this before.

The moment was coming again, that peak of intensity.

“Come for me, angel,” he whispered in my ear. “I need to feel you come around my cock.”

I cried out as the climax hit me, and my body arched against him. He groaned, his pace becoming more erratic as he thrust hard into me, burying his cock deep inside me until his

rhythm was broken by a deep rumbling growl. He thrust once more and buried himself as deep as he could go, then froze as the knot swelled even bigger.

I keened as it became so full I was sure it was going to split me in two. He worked his fingers against me wildly, since he was too big to thrust into me anymore, and my core squeezed wildly around him as my toes curled. I couldn't help the cry that ripped from my throat as pleasure rushed through my veins, overwhelming me. The golden lights of the fireflies flitting over the creek seemed to swell and blur until the whole world was bright. His warm seed spilled inside me, filling me, as he let out a growl against my skin, the sound rumbling through my body. Slowly, the two of us came down from that high together, back to kneeling on the cold tile. The sound of our breath and moans faded until we could hear the wind whisper around the house and the creek's cheerful noises.

He breathed in my ear, his hand brushing my hair back as he murmured softly to me as I came down from the intensity of my pleasure. "I don't know how you do that, angel."

As my body trembled, I let his arm around my waist hold my hips up to his. But the rest of my body was boneless, and I lowered myself to my elbows, resting my head against the cool tile floor of the balcony. "Do what?"

"Make me lose control. I've never..." He pressed his lips to my shoulder. His body was draped over mine, his hard abs pressed against my back. I still wore my dress, was still hiding my mark even though he knew about it, but I wished I wasn't; I wanted to feel his warm skin against mine.

"You don't do heats." They were, after all, for mates.

And Shaw had made it very clear that he was not the mate type.

I felt suddenly embarrassed as he withdrew. His cum and my slick slid down my thigh, the pungent citrus-and-salt aroma of the two combined permeating the night air.

I stood, but my knees almost gave out, and he caught me around the waist. I tried to push him away, and he frowned as

he pulled me closer.

“None of that,” he murmured into my ear. “Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I needed you,” I admitted, trying to explain why I felt so vulnerable, why I felt so *wrong*.

“And I need you,” he muttered.

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me, soft and slow, and I let myself get lost in his kiss.

CHAPTER 44





S tone

I WALKED into my own house, and found myself walking right back out again.

“You can fuck all the way off,” Karissa told me, her pointy finger stuck in my chest. She looked up at me from a good foot below, but she still glared at me intensely. “You are not sleeping in this house tonight.”

“It’s my house.” I wouldn’t hit my sister or even push her, which she knew damned well, so I had to back up.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s her house right now,” she bit back at me furiously. “*You* forced her to stay here. Shaw asked you to give her a cottage of her own, but you didn’t want that. You wanted her *here*. Well, now she’s *here*. And you’re not.”

“Karissa, get out of my face. It’s been a long day.”

“You’re the one who makes the days long!” she exploded.

I frowned down at her. “She’ll be fine. It’s just a memory. She’s not hurt.”

“You are such an idiot.”

“You are talking to your alpha, remember.” A growl of power rumbled through that reminder.

But she just scoffed. “Save it for someone who isn’t your sister. Honestly.”

She looked as if she wanted to slap me, but she just pointed out the door.

“You know you can’t stop me,” I warned her.

She raised bright eyes to mine. “You’re right.”

The words were so unexpected they made me pause.

“But you know you hurt her. You know you fucked up. Deep down, don’t you?” she asked. “So, as I said earlier.” She fixed me with a bright, fake smile. “Fuck all the way off.”

I scoffed, but turned and walked away. There was no point in arguing with Karissa.

An unsettled feeling swept through me.

I’d done what I had to do.

But usually, no matter how much I disliked interrogating a packmate or punishing the guilty, I felt sure of myself. It was the right thing to do.

The memory of Amelia’s wide blue eyes, her panicked look, the way she’d pushed me away, rose like ghosts.

The thought that she was in pain right now speared through my chest.

I turned the corner around the house, determined to go for a run.

The cry that broke through the night air stopped me in my tracks.

I paused, listening. It was a wild sound, full of pleasure.

Amelia’s voice.

Moving quietly, I went around the corner of the house. The creek spilled out in front of me in a silvery ribbon, and all the stars were out tonight, shining above the pines. But all I could see was the beautiful woman on the balcony—and my brother, shirtless as ever, thrusting into her over and over. Amelia’s face contorted with pleasure; she wore a nightdress but no bra and her breasts bounced in steady rhythm under the crisp cotton.

My cock was hard and aching even as jealousy pulsed through my veins.

Yeah, she certainly seemed like she was broken.

She let out a moan so loud and powerful that seemed to echo through my body. As I watched his hand work furiously against her clit, the way she pushed back greedily against him,

I could've sworn I could imagine well what it would feel like to have her clenching around me like that, to have her smooth, flushed skin under my palms. I stepped back into the shadows, but I could've sworn I could still smell her, the familiar grapefruit scent that hung in the air when she was wet with desire.

Need burnt under my skin. Cursing, needing to get rid of the wild urges that struck me when it came to Amelia, I pulled myself free of my jeans and began to stroke myself in short, hard pumps. Shaw's breathing was loud, and my own breaths began to match his as Amelia's delicious sound rose in the air. I wanted to be the one she chose, the one burying himself deep inside her soft, warm pussy, but instead the cold night air brushed my skin as I worked myself hard. As their cries intensified as they tumbled into pleasure together, my cum squirted across the fallen leaves.

It was the first time I'd ever come, then somehow felt fucking worse.

I shifted into the wolf, letting the change overtake me as my bones snapped and shifted. My vision blurred for a second with the transition, and then the world blinked back into existence, clearer and brighter than before. I raised my nose, breathing in the scents, but Amelia's sweet, pungent slick was going to drown me.

It spurred me into movement and I took off running through the forest until I caught a now-familiar scent.

The rogue.

I was always hunting for that damned rogue wolf. It haunted me. Why did he dare to come onto my territory? What did he want?

I began to track the scent. My paws bounded over the rough terrain. Teresa would want me to get backup, but I wasn't afraid.

The scent became clearer, and I picked up speed, hurtling through the forest.

I bounded over a hill, and the rogue loomed large in front of me.

He raised his head and stared at me, his eyes wide. He was a big wolf, maybe even bigger than me, with a dark coat.

I charged at him. He backed up, his lip curling back as he growled at me. But I kept coming, and suddenly, he turned and fled.

I ran faster, my heart pounding with the thrill of the chase. His muscles rippled under his fur, his stride long and powerful, and he seemed to be getting just slightly further away with each pump of his legs.

He bolted through the undergrowth, and I followed.

My paws hit the ground in a steady rhythm, and still, I couldn't get any closer to him.

I chased him into a clearing, and he glanced back at me. His eyes were wide with fear. He was just another wolf. A wolf who was afraid of me. I could take him down.

The ground shook beneath my paws as I closed the distance between us, and he staggered to a stop, whirling to face me.

I leapt for him.

He ducked me, racing away. I whirled to chase him. He'd only been feigning his exhaustion, his fear.

I leapt after him. He moved so swiftly, seamlessly moving into the shadows, and my momentum carried me past him. My side slammed into a tree. Stars burst in front of my eyes and for a second, I couldn't breathe.

I shook myself, gathering my senses, preparing to chase him again.

But he was gone.

The night was empty.

The rogue had vanished completely once again.



I felt defeated and angry as I stalked back to the house. I should stay in my wolf form and sleep out in the forest, but I needed to see Amelia and know she was safe.

Maybe I'd sleep in my own fucking yard like a dog just so I could watch over her. Unreal. My whole life had unraveled since that day I saw her in the smoke. My simple plan to exact revenge for Brennan's death had turned into an insane urge to protect her.

But as I splashed through the creek, I saw movement on the balcony. My body tensed, expecting to find Amelia and Shaw having yet another wild bout.

But Shaw was alone. Amelia must finally be sleeping, and he had set himself as bodyguard. He leaned against the balcony, looking as lost as I felt.

Then he must have felt me watching him. His gaze snapped up and met mine across the distance.

The next second, he vaulted lightly over the balcony railing and crouched to catch himself, one hand braced in the grass. He leapt up the next moment and moved toward me.

I was not in the mood for my little brother's gloating today. Especially when I knew his ways with women. Amelia was just another conquest.

But to me, she was the world.

Where the fuck had thought come from? I turned and raced off into the woods.

He shifted into a wolf himself and chased me through the woods. I was not about to run from Shaw, of all people. I turned and snarled at him, warning me off.

He growled right back.

I charged forward, diving into him and knocking him off his feet. His jaws snapped at me, coming close to my fur. I leapt up and away from him, ducking around him and trying to stay just out of reach.

He was fast and powerful, more than I'd realized when my brother and I had played before. Now, he had a fierce edge.

He lunged for me again.

I leapt and twisted out of his grasp. He followed after me. We raced through the forest, our movements blurring together in a haze of fur and claws. I stopped, turned and set my massive body against him, then leapt.

He tried to dodge around me but I slammed into him. The two of us snarled as we fought back and forth, both vying for dominance.

His throat was exposed. I had my opening to wrap my jaws around his throat, to bite just deep enough to sting and remind him who was alpha.

I didn't take it.

He was my little brother.

I leapt back, shifting into my human form. I faced a snarling wolf who was larger than I was. Human versus wolf was a bad game. For several long seconds, he stared down at me with his lips curled back, revealing all those dangerous fangs.

Then he shifted back himself.

“What’s wrong with you?” he demanded.

Typical Shaw. Best defense is a good offense.

I swallowed everything I wanted to tell him about what was wrong with *him*. “Amelia’s in heat?”

“Amelia’s none of your business.”

“So, yes.” I wasn’t going to argue that ridiculous point. Amelia was very much my business. “She hasn’t had it before?”

He shook his head. “Not with Nathan. But with an alpha in the house... closely related to her mate... her hormones must have kicked into gear.”

“That’s the last thing we need.”

An incredulous look spread across Shaw’s face. “No, the last thing *we need* is to hurt her. To hurt Brennan’s girl.”

He didn't say the words out loud, but I could still hear it: *how could you?*

"We didn't know that," I said. "Not until I started what has to be done. We couldn't just take her word for it."

"I could," Shaw returned.

"Of course you could," I said. "You're not the alpha. You're not responsible for the pack."

He shook his head. He looked as if he wanted to shift right back and tear my throat out.

I didn't know how Amelia had won over my pack, my own family, so completely in a month.

"Help her," I said.

He stared at me, looking stunned.

"Get her through her heat," I growled.

I turned and walked away into the trees.

CHAPTER 45





*A*melia

THE NEXT MORNING, as soon as Dylan had been safely seen off to school, I found Shaw. The two of us kissed as we moved through the house together. His strong hands stripped off my borrowed rain jacket, then stopped at my top. As soon as we stumbled into his bedroom, I dropped his belt on the floor and reached to pull my shirt off over my head, grinning at him triumphantly.

His eyes lit with pleasure at the sight of my breasts, and he palmed one, bending over to press a kiss just above my areola. “God, I love seeing all of you,” he breathed, letting me know he knew how much revealing the mark meant to me.

His lips moved up to press a kiss to the mark on my shoulder, and my head fell back, my fingers gliding through his dark curls.

He leaned in toward me, his eyes intent. I caught my lower lip with my teeth, looking up at him, and he took it as an invitation. He pulled my body against his as he leaned in, and as always, Shaw seemed completely possessive.

His lips were warm, each kiss a soft, tentative swoop. Then my hips swayed against his, and he made the faintest groan under his breath, as if he couldn’t hold himself back. He kissed me urgently, his tongue lapping into mine, his mouth hard and fierce. He kissed me like he needed me, and my head spun. It was exhilarating but there was also a softness to it—a surrender for both of us.

I didn’t pause long enough to wonder what came over my body, even though I knew eventually, I’d have to make sense of what was happening between us. I didn’t understand the way mates worked, apparently. Being near Shaw awakened a primal sense of need.

He cupped my face in his hands as he kissed me, eliciting a shiver through my body. His fingers ran along the curve of my neck and then down to the small of my back. I gasped as his strong arms pulled me closer against him and the heat radiating from his body washed over me. He groaned, pressing himself against me further. And I pressed back, wanting him just as much.

We fell onto the bed together in a tangle of limbs, and I felt a current of electricity shoot through my veins as his hands explored every inch of me.

His touch was tender. It felt like we were making love instead of a man having sex with me, something I hadn't experienced for my five years before I came here. Maybe it was a fine distinction, but it was one that mattered to me.

I arched back as he moved with purposeful intensity, each thrust making my head spin faster and faster. His lips trailed hungry kisses across my shoulders and collarbone as his hands caressed every inch of skin. We moved together with an urgency that bordered on desperation. It was intoxicating, a roller coaster ride that had no end in sight.

He kissed my throat reverently as he moved against me, each stroke building up more intensity than the last until our bodies shook. We gave in to each other completely, grasping at any sense of relief or pleasure that came our way, until finally we collapsed in a breathless heap next to each other.

God, maybe it was the heat's raw flush of emotion, but... I loved him. The intensity of my feelings, the way I wanted to just study his face, felt wild.

I wished that was enough.

I didn't want to leave.

Maybe I could talk to Stone.

The thought of seeing him again filled me with dread. I settled my head onto Shaw's broad shoulder and twined my leg through his. His fingers traced lazy circles across my hips, making me long for a second round.

But that still wouldn't be enough.

“I need to talk to Stone.” The words were too heavy, a promise I didn’t want to make. “To try to... work things out.”

Shaw looked at me with worried eyes. They looked dark in the gloom, since the sky was heavy and gray through the windows. “If he promises not to take you back to Louisa’s rock...”

“Then I’ll feel like I can stay,” I said, then added smoothly, “Not that I have a choice.”

His lips curled up one side ruefully, as if he knew I’d find a way out if I must. Eventually.

The heat had all but driven away the nightmares, for a while, but that wouldn’t last. I still couldn’t help but think of Brennan too often, in the worst way. I wanted to remember the good moments with him.

But it seemed like I was losing my grip on them. Every good thing I thought of blurred into those last horrible moments. His grunts of pain. The sight of blood splattered against the wall. The screams wrenched from my throat til it was raw.

A shiver raced down my skin at the thought of facing Stone.

But I had to try.

I kissed Shaw’s cheek tenderly and rose from the bed before pulling on one of Brennan’s old hoodies—for strength—and my new favorite pair of leggings.

Then I went out into the rain to hunt down Stone.

The garage doors were open, the multicar bay emptied, and Cole’s usual training session that he conducted on the front lawn was happening in the garage instead. Knowing how protective Stone was of his space—Karissa said he liked only to have family in the house—the sight surprised me.

But then, Stone had let me into the house, and he’d also made it clear I wasn’t family. He didn’t trust me.

Stone came into sight, and my heart skipped a beat, my stomach twisting with nerves.

He was trudging back toward the house from the command center, his big shoulders down against the beating of the rain. Then he looked up at me, his eyes widening, as if he had sensed me.

Our eyes locked through the rain. In the distance, thunder rumbled, but all I could see was his intense gaze; I couldn't look away to search for the flash of lightning.

He kept striding toward the house. I veered to intercept him, and he stopped short, his nostrils flaring.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

My lips parted. What an absolute asshole.

He took a step back from me, bracing his arms over his chest. “Well?”

No matter how brusque he sounded, he looked uncomfortable.

My heat.

He could smell my desire—hell, maybe he could smell Shaw's cum still sliding down my thigh mixed with my slick—and it bothered him. The sudden flash of realization came with a throb between my thighs that I had to ignore.

“I want to talk to you.”

“What is it?”

I gestured back toward the house. “You really want to do this in the rain?”

“Yes.” His nostrils flared again, and his mouth straightened out into that hard, bitter line.

The rain diluted the scent of my heat. I understood now. But it was even worse for me, because he was all alpha and so the traitorous prickle of heat along my skin was his fault. As much as I wanted to hurt him right now, part of me also wanted to press my lips to his narrow mouth, to reach for his cock.

“Fine.” My chin rose. “I need you to understand what you did to me.”

I need you to promise you'll never do it again.

Everything in me begged for him to listen, for me to be able to *stay*.

His dark brows drew together. "I did what I had to do, Amelia. I needed to know you didn't betray Brennan."

"But you betrayed me."

"I never made you any promises. You are my prisoner."

"I'm not just your prisoner. I'm Dylan's mother, I'm Brennan's mate... I'm your..." I didn't dare to say *mate*.

But there was something between us, something dark and complicated that I didn't understand.

I forged on anyway. "I have tried so hard to focus on all the good Brennan brought into my life. It's been a struggle because I would think about him and then my thoughts would race to how I lost him. But here, I can talk to other people who love him. I can focus on Brennan's life and not his death. But you took that from me, Stone. You made the end into everything."

He stared down at me. Was his gaze softening?

"Listen to me," I begged, needing to stay, needing for Stone for once to *feel*.

Raw, desperate need throbbed between my thighs, but it didn't matter. Not unless Stone decided to be on my side instead of against me. Images flashed through my mind of Stone taking me in his arms and promising he'd never hurt me again, of how I'd run my hands over his warm, hard muscles even with the rain pounding against us, how our lips would meet in urgent kisses.

"I'm listening," he said coolly, and my hopes fell. "But you're alive and well, Amelia, even if you're sad. And my brother is still dead."

"What's wrong with you?" I drew myself to my full height—even though I still had to look up at him—and met his gaze evenly.

“What’s wrong with me? I’m alpha. And it’s my job to protect my pack.”

Something tight and bitter lodged in my throat, and I spat the words out at him. “Brennan would hate who you’ve become.”

I turned to stalk back toward the house, and he grabbed my arm and hauled me back around to face him. Fury was written across his face. “Don’t you dare use him against me.”

“You brought him up first, you hypocritical asshole!” I shouted at him. The fury that ripped out of my lungs surprised me and from the look on Stone’s face, it shocked him too. Some small distant part of me marveled that I was shouting at Stone, that I wasn’t overcome by fear. “I need you to listen to me!”

“I’m listening.” His voice was cold, but he released me, crossing his arms once more.

“You can’t do that to me again, Stone.” My voice came out soft. “Nathan made my body his own. He controlled every bit of me—but he couldn’t have my mind, my memories. It’s all I have that’s mine. You can’t take them from me.”

“I’m not Nathan.”

“No.” I thought of Shaw’s gentle request that I test him, how he had known what I needed when I couldn’t have asked. “But I need you to prove that you aren’t. Let me be safe. *Here*. With you.”

The words were raw and aching.

Stone met my gaze, his eyes sorrowful, and my heart dared to rise.

“I need to know.” Those four words dropped like weights between us.

My chest heaved as if I couldn’t breathe. “You won’t promise? To stay out of my mind?”

“I can’t. I will protect you, Amelia. I’ll protect you from your old pack, from the rogue wolf. But I will use every

resource at my disposal to protect this pack—and you—whether you enjoy it or not.”

“It’s more than me *not enjoying it.*” Rain drizzled down my face and into my eyes and I scrubbed my eyes with my sodden sleeve. At least if I cried, he wouldn’t be able to see my tears. “Stone. Why can’t you just be reasonable?”

“If there’s no guilt in your past, then why are you so desperate to make sure I don’t go back into your memory?”

He turned and walked away. Whatever he’d wanted at the house, he abandoned it now, leaving me behind in the storm.

CHAPTER 46





S tone

BEING face to face with Amelia made me insane. Everything inside me was desperate to respond to her pleas, to that beautiful face, to the scent she carried. I just wanted to make her happy.

I just wanted to bury myself deep inside her and claim her mouth.

I just wanted to let her make me weak.

But I was still alpha, and I had to protect my pack above all.

Her presence played havoc with all my feelings. It had taken everything in me not to respond to her scent by grabbing her and fucking her, even right there on the lawn. I wanted her so badly.

As I walked, I replayed her words. I couldn't fucking help it. Every look she'd given me, the frustration and pain, the way she'd tried so bravely to get me to listen even though revealing those emotions must have hurt... my heart ached thinking about it.

She was my pack too.

I'd needed time to think. I couldn't just give in based on a moment's feelings, an impulse of lust. But the truth settled into my soul.

I couldn't hurt her like that again. I couldn't go back into her memories.

After my talk with Amelia, I walked to Louisa's cottage. As I walked, I couldn't stop replaying the horrible scene—and the love written on Brennan and Amelia's faces in the minutes before that door burst open. He had looked down at her with such open adoration, and her eyes had been warm and alive

and tender as she gazed up at him. Something raw and aching opened in my chest.

I'd never ask her to relive Brennan's death again.

I knocked on Louisa's door, but she didn't answer.

"Louisa?" I called. My nostrils flared.

The earthy scent of herbs and magic hung in the air, as if she was in the midst of making something. I walked around the house; golden light from inside glowed through the windows from her lamps. Her house was small and cozy and...

Destroyed.

It looked as if there had been a struggle inside. One of her bookcases had been knocked over.

I ran back to the front door and slammed into it. It burst open in front of me.

There was no sign of Louisa. But the house had been ransacked, and her magical ingredients were spread across the counter or ground into the floor as if someone had raged against the witch's use of magic.

Hard, bitter fear spread through my body. What if this had been one of my siblings, trying to protect Amelia? What if it had been Amelia herself, guilty, knowing that the truth revealed would knock her from her tentative place?

I already had the feeling that when I tracked down Louisa's scent, she'd be dead. But I dared to hope that for once, I wouldn't arrive in time to find someone I cared for turned into a corpse.

My heart thundered in my chest as I raced into the woods, searching for Louisa. I ran through the trees and branches, dodging obstacles as I followed her scent. It was weak, faded, as if she hadn't been alive when she was taken into the woods. And the rain that fell steadily, trickling through the trees, wasn't helping.

It made Amelia's scent rise around me, since Amelia smelled like the rain.

I almost stepped on Louisa. She was lying in the bushes, her body sprawled as if she had stumbled and fallen.

Or as if someone had dropped her there, disrespecting her corpse. I could imagine the shoes paused by her body, but whose? Amelia's sneakers? Shaw's boots? Liam's bare feet?

"Louisa." I shook her arm, hoping she would wake up before realizing she never would. I frowned at her maimed body. Someone had known to bind her hands and mouth so she couldn't do any spells; her eyes were wide with terror. Would Amelia have known to do that?

I rose heavily to my feet and looked around, peering through the rain, but there was no one there.

Was this Liam? He was crazy enough to kill, but he was also crazy enough to make his vow of non-violence. But he'd admitted he would break that vow to protect Amelia. Shaw? Shaw had been pissed off at me—and probably at Louisa—for interrogating Amelia. But Shaw knew how much we needed the witch.

Louisa had been under my protection. Not many witches would've worked with a wolf pack. She had trusted me, and I'd let someone hurt her.

I ran back to the house, my heartbeat wilder than the driving rain. Anger and regret spurred me on.

Cole walked out of the garage, where some of the shifters were still sparring with each other. He frowned, the rain sliding down his torso as he raked his hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "What's going on?"

"Go get Teresa," I said, before going into the house.

To my surprise, when Amelia's door flew open, it was Shaw who stood there.

Apparently her heat was endless.

Fury—and desire and jealousy—raged through my body.

"What do you want?" Shaw demanded.

“Family meeting, outside,” I said. That meant not just my siblings, but Teresa and Cole, who were as close as adoptive siblings to me.

“Does Amelia count as family?” Shaw asked.

I wasn’t going to answer that loaded question. “Bring her.”

Grumbling, they followed me out of the house. Teresa and Cole met us outside. I quickly set a rapid pace through the woods, and they scrambled after me, asking questions I didn’t bother to answer.

I wanted to see how they responded.

“Which one of you,” I demanded as Amelia gasped at the sight of the body, “killed my witch?”

I tried to catalog all their faces, looking for guilt. God help me, I hoped it was none of them.

“I didn’t,” Amelia stammered.

Shaw put a protective hand on her shoulder. “Stone, what’s wrong with you?”

“She was under my protection.” She was also my friend, but that part didn’t matter.

I didn’t see guilt in any of their faces, just shock and horror.

But Liam wasn’t here. I needed to talk to him, too. I needed for him to see the witch and to try to read his face.

Because Liam had lost what was left of his mind when he met Amelia.

CHAPTER 47





*A*melia

THE REST OF THAT DAY, I couldn't focus on anything else. I couldn't stop thinking of the way Stone had looked at all of us, as if he thought any of us could be murderers. I couldn't shake the terrible fear that Shaw or Liam had acted to protect me by stopping Louisa.

But Stone's gaze had felt most heavily weighted on me.

If Stone thought I had killed Louisa... he would do his duty as the alpha. The thought drained my legs and made me feel weak.

It also crystallized what I needed to do next.

I'd never be able to convince Stone to trust me now.

I hugged Dylan hello when he came out of school. The ground was still soaked, his shoes squeaking over the grass, as he ran off to play with his friends, but the sun was shining. As I watched them, I had tears in my eyes, knowing we would have to leave this place he'd come to love so much. I brushed them away before Jainie came over, and we walked back as usual until we came to the fork in the road. She wanted to make plans for Caleb's birthday party and I said we'd come, knowing we should be long gone by then. Dylan would've loved to go to Caleb's birthday.

Further down the trail, a figure loomed in the forest gloom, waiting for me. Joshua.

"Run ahead to the house," I told Dylan, ruffling his hair. "Aunt Karissa said she was making hot cocoa."

That was only part of the afternoon snack his doting aunt had planned, and a familiar ache pressed my chest.

He brightened and ran off, leaving me alone on the trail with Joshua.

I turned to him and steeled myself. “I’m ready to go.”

“That’s wise.” He held out a cell phone. “Tomorrow when you bring Dylan to school, we’ll walk out of here, okay?”

“What’s the phone for?” I gripped it tightly, relieved to have a way to reach the outside world.

“So you can talk to your brother. And,” Joshua pulled a face, “In case something happens to me.”

That frank admission chilled me. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“Of course not,” Joshua said, although he didn’t sound like he believed that for a moment. “But… Amelia, don’t forget how dangerous Stone really is.”

“I won’t,” I promised, glancing over my shoulder for the ever-present wolf. There was no sign of him.

Joshua looked at me as if he didn’t believe me.

I stepped into the forest to call Aiden, although I quickly realized I only had one bar. Still, if I stood in just the right place, I could make my call.

“Hello?” Aiden’s familiar voice flooded me with relief. I hadn’t been convinced he was really okay until just now, and I was so overcome with relief I didn’t manage to answer for a moment. “Hello?”

“Hey,” I said. “It’s me.”

“Amy,” Aiden sounded just as relieved as I felt. “Thank god, you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I promised.

“The King pack hasn’t hurt you?”

You mean besides making me replay the absolutely worst day of my life? “No. I’m okay.”

He exhaled, and his palpable relief made my heart swell. I couldn’t imagine my brother betraying me, and if he had, it was because he’d had no choice. I’d try to leave the past in the past.

“Has there been any sign of Nathan?”

“No,” he said. “Looks like you’re free.”

Those words, so carelessly spoken, made my knees weaken.

If Nathan was truly gone, then the world spread out before me, full of freedom and promise.

“Amy? Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” I said.

“Joshua told me we’re planning a rescue mission,” Aiden said. “I know things went south last time. But this time, I plan to go with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’ll be with you.”

“Do you think we can get Rose out of there too? Before she gets married off to another version of Cliff?”

“Yeah, she needs you.”

The serious note in his voice worried me. I asked, “What happened?”

“Mom’s been in a real rush to marry her off. I mean, half the men in the pack just died in one swoop, Amelia. Mom’s got her moving on from Cliff and on to the next guy.”

I couldn’t let that happen to my baby sister. “Do you think she’ll go with us willingly?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just let me talk to her. She’s pretty desperate to get out of here right now.”

“We’ll take care of her.”

“Yeah, and we’ll be together.”

I felt so relieved by the time I hung up the phone.

I didn’t want to leave Cole and Shaw and Liam behind. But my attraction to them was nothing compared to the need I felt to protect my siblings and my son.

It meant I didn’t even dare say goodbye.

CHAPTER 48





S tone

THE CLINIC WAS quiet and deserted at this late hour, and the corpse made it eerie.

Doc examined Louisa's body carefully. She shook her head. "This is a damn shame. Who would do something like this?"

Someone who was sick of me being alpha.

Louisa was dead because of how useful she was to me.

"That's what you're here to tell me, Doc," I said. "There's got to be something that leads us in the right direction."

Doc examined Louisa's body carefully, rolling Louisa over and peering at the wounds.

She was an experienced doctor who had cared for our people under my grandfather and my father's time as alphas. Doc didn't do politics or care who led the pack. She just patched us up and kept going.

She took out a magnifying glass and began to look for clues. After several minutes of intense searching, she made a soft, satisfied huff under her breath. She went hunting with her tweezers, and I watched her closely as she drew out a small shard of metal.

"Someone broke the tip of their knife off in her side," she said. "If you find the rest of this knife, you might just have yourself a killer."

She dropped it into a bag, and I held my hand out for it.

"I'll get justice for her," I promised.

"I know you will," she answered.

When I lingered at the door, she glanced up at me. "If I find anything else, I do know where to find you, Stone."

“I know,” I said. “But I’ll stay until Lawrence arrives.”

“I’m fine.” She sounded exasperated, but fond. “Louis was just a witch. I’m a wolf. I can take care of myself.”

I still waited until Teresa and Lawrence arrived, no matter how much Doc grumbled that I was distracting her. As we left the shelter of the clinic behind and stepped into the rain, I showed the bag to Teresa.

An hour later, we’d collected a wide assortment of knives—not a hard thing to turn up between the two of us—and we were comparing them carefully.

“It’s not a knife from her knife block,” Teresa told me. “I already eliminated those.”

“It could be one of these.” I held the tip in the baggie up to the training knife that we gave young cubs when they were old enough to carry a knife into the forest.

“Great,” she said. “Everyone’s got one of those.”

“But not everyone has a broken one.”

“How do you want to eliminate suspects?”

“I have some ideas where to start,” I said. “We both know who’s been fantasizing about rebellion.”

She cut me a look. “So you’re going to pretend you don’t sleep in a house full of suspects?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They wouldn’t have done this.”

She looked as doubtful as I felt deep inside. “People do weird things when they get desperate.”

As we were hunting for Louisa’s killer, Teresa and I broke into one pack home after another, rifling through the belongings of those who we knew might be disloyal and covering our tracks so they wouldn’t know we were there.

I didn’t find the knife. It must have been disposed of somewhere.

But I did find a cell phone with messages to the Longroad pack. Hunter Green had been sending messages to someone

there, telling them all about Amelia. That she slept in the big house so she wasn't an easy mark. That extra security was always on her son. That she had begun to sleep with the alpha's brother, embedding herself in our pack like a tick. That she would be hard to take.

Fury blazed hot within me.

"Calm down, Stone." Teresa had crowded against my elbow, her breath against my shoulder as she studied the text messages. "Hunter's not the only one. Let's use this to smoke out whoever he was working with."

"It seems like too much of a coincidence for this not to be related to Louisa's death. But why? What did she know? Or what did they need to hide?"

Teresa frowned. "Can we go back to Louisa's cottage?"

Walking into her empty cottage felt wrong, as if we were violating her privacy. I knew my brothers would've told me I was wrong for what I'd done already today. But everything on pack territory was mine. And I had to find the killer, and I had to keep them safe.

My feet crunched over broken grass and stalks of dried herbs, sending fragrance drifting up into the air.

Teresa searched through the ransacked magical ingredients, then looked up at me.

"What are you thinking, Tee?"

"What if they made her make something for them?" she asked. "Well, they tied her up so she couldn't fight back. But maybe they got her to help them? Maybe they had to cover that up?"

"Maybe," I said. "But we didn't find any evidence."

"They would've hidden it like they hid the knife, right? Somewhere else." She stepped to the doorway, her nostrils flaring as she looked out at the forest. She shook her head.

"There isn't enough of a trail to follow the knife." I'd thought of the same thing she had. Our tracking powers were strong, but not strong enough. "I'll call a pack meeting."

Someone will get nervous, and if they're hiding something, they'll come out to get it. We'll follow them then."

She nodded, but she looked worried. "Cole and I will be watching."

CHAPTER 49





*A*melia

THE ORDER for a pack meeting at dusk swept through the pack. Karissa looked grim-faced when she came to tell me about it, and I had the feeling she'd been arguing with Stone.

This time, it was no family meeting. He pulled the whole pack together, except for those who stayed behind to watch the cubs. I kissed Dylan goodbye once the babysitter arrived, but he barely noticed me going. The little boy who had once clung to me desperately was focused on his sprawling Lego city.

The mess always stressed me out but Karissa assured me she didn't mind, and neither did the guys. In fact, they often stopped to play or added their own builds during the night, which made Dylan light up.

When we got outside, Cole and Shaw stayed close to me, and it made me nervous. We joined the semicircle of wolves in the dim moonlight, ringing Stone. Stone looked even larger than life than usual as he gazed around at us.

"I like to think of us all as a family." Stone's powerful voice rang out, easily reaching everyone in the circle. "An imperfect family, sure, but...I haven't run into any perfect ones. None of us should expect perfection from each other—only brotherhood, loyalty, safety."

His gaze seemed to catch on mine. I lifted my chin and stared him down. He hadn't shown me loyalty or safety. For a few seconds, we stared at each other.

Then he finally looked away, his gaze once again sweeping across the pack, "But one of you has betrayed us all. Or more than one. One of you is plotting with the Longroad pack, and one of you killed Louisa."

My blood ran cold.

Technically, I was plotting with the Longroad pack. But I definitely hadn't killed Louisa.

"I'm sure that whoever killed Louisa wanted to make sure I would never again be able to ensure I had the full truth from an... unwilling participant."

Shaw glanced at Cole and me. "Shit. Where do you think this is going?"

Cole's head tilted faintly as if he'd heard him, but he didn't look away from Stone. It would have been disrespectful to take his eyes off the alpha while he was talking.

Stone prowled around the center of the pack. Everyone looked tense.

He stared at Joshua. Joshua shifted uncomfortably, looking as if he wanted to run, but there was no point in running from the alpha.

Then I realized Stone was staring at a man beside Joshua, at a tall man with sandy blond hair.

"Hunter," Stone said, "do you want to explain to me why you've been plotting with the Longroad pack?"

Hunter looked terrified.

Then he turned and ran.

Stone sprang after him, and in the second that he leapt forward, his clothes burst off his body as he transformed. It was an enormous black wolf who landed on his paws and streaked after the running man. It was the smoothest, most beautiful shift I'd ever seen, and it was terrifying.

Stone chased the man into the trees. The man screamed once, then stopped.

I felt sick. If Stone knew I had a cell phone I was using to communicate with my pack, I didn't know what he would do to me. He'd killed Joshua's mother.

"Easy," Shaw said, resting his hand lightly on my shoulder. He gave me an encouraging smile though lines of tension stood out around his eyes. "It's all going to be okay, Amelia."

But he didn't know what I'd been up to with Joshua either.

I had to stay calm and pretend until I had the chance to get Dylan and get out of here.



“AMELIA.” Joshua’s voice broke the darkness as I headed toward the house. He glanced around before he indicated the shadows, and I stepped into them, casting a glance back at the warmth of the house.

“You need to escape tonight,” he said. “Before Stone realizes what you’ve done.”

I stared at him in confusion. “I haven’t done anything. Stone should understand...”

I trailed off. I couldn’t even convince myself that was true.

“Focus,” he chided. “Aiden’s on his way now to rescue you.”

Terror still squeezed my chest, and I shook my head to clear it. It didn’t help. “I’m not ready.”

I couldn’t just carry Dylan out of here like a thief in the night, away from the family who had loved Brennan too.

“Look at your phone,” he told me. “He texted us both.”

“It’s hidden in my room,” I told him. I wasn’t going to risk being caught with the phone.

“Good, you can get it when you get Dylan. He’s already on his way, Amelia—and once he enters pack territory, there will be a dozen wolves catching his scent.” His lips twisted. “Teresa and Cole have more guards up than ever before. You’ve really thrown a wrench in my plans.”

“What *are* your plans?”

“If you don’t meet them,” he said, “then the wolves will converge. How long do you think Aiden will wait for you? Long enough for the King pack to rip them out of the car? What do you think Stone will do to Aiden?”

Joshua’s eyes were lit with malice that seemed to glow in the darkness.

“What are your plans?” I insisted again, an edge of fear cutting into my chest, darker and more intense than when I had just been afraid for my own life.

“And when Stone reads your text messages...and sooner or later, he will, if you don't get out of here... he'll find out Aiden is the one who told the Longroad pack where to find Brennan.”

The world turned to a hot blur. “He didn't...”

It was a question as much as it was a statement.

Joshua glanced at the house. It was bright and welcoming and it felt a hundred miles away even though it was just on the other side of a handful of trees. Stone, Cole and Teresa were deep in conversation not that far away. I could scream, and they'd come running.

But Joshua had laid some kind of trap for me.

“Why?” I asked.

“If Stone sees us, tell him you've been thinking about coming to work in the blacksmithing shop. After all, if you were going to stay here, you'd have to find a job.” He fixed me with a smile. “Don't worry, Amelia. I've thought of everything.”

Cold clarity swept over me. “What are you trying to do to Stone?”

“He's going to be so distracted when you run,” he mused. “I thought it would be bad enough if you escaped when he just was convinced you betrayed Brennan, but now that he's fallen in love with you... He's going to be destroyed.”

I thought of the relentless Stone who wouldn't listen to a word I said earlier. “He doesn't love me.”

“I guess we'll find out.” Joshua took a step back. “You'll need to meet Aiden and Rose down at the old stone bridge at the very edge of pack territory. You know the one, right? It's not far from Louisa's house.”

“You killed her.” I suppressed a shiver.

“If you think I'm Stone's only enemy, you're mistaken,” he told me swiftly. “Half this pack acts like he's god's gift, or just *god*, but he's not.”

He checked his watch. “I told Aiden you’d meet him at ten. That clock is really ticking down now...”

He looked back up at me. “You could tell Stone everything, of course. Trust that he’ll be reasonable. Put your sister and brother’s lives in the hands of the merciful alpha. But if you’re going to try that... make sure you read all your text messages first.”

He turned and strode away through the forest.

Horror swept over me and I gripped the trunk of the nearest tree, trying to hold myself up. My stomach rolled as panic swept over me, my heart beating too quickly.

Not a fucking panic attack.

Not now.

I focused on where I was, the ground beneath my feet, the roughness of the bark against my palm. The night air was cool, sending chills racing down my arms. I tried to focus on my breathing, but it felt as if it was hard to draw in each breath, so that didn’t exactly help.

I glanced at Stone, but I could’ve sworn when I saw his broad shoulders, his big, muscular frame, he could just as easily have been Nathan. I drew in a sudden, desperate breath, like a gulp after surfacing from the water. *God, calm down, Amelia*, I coached myself, but my fear of panic attacks made them even more potent.

I had to get to my son.

I had to protect Dylan, Aiden and Rose. I couldn’t even imagine talking to Stone now, but I could go to Shaw or Cole... but either way, I’d be putting my faith in them. They would go talk to Stone, or not. They would be in control.

But this was my life. My son. My siblings.

It was always my job to protect them.

I headed for the house. Teresa suddenly focused on me, her eyes snapping away from Stone’s face, and she watched me as I crossed the lawn. Every step seemed like it barely moved me

further when I was trying to pretend to be absolutely normal. Everything was fine.

When I reached the front door, Karissa hurried toward me. Her face lit with relief. “Oh, I was about to come look for you. I was worried.”

The dark-haired teen babysitter who had come over waved a cheerful goodbye to us both as she slipped past me in the doorway. A fresh wave of panic spiked through me as I looked desperately around for Dylan. I glanced through the doorways to the living room and family room, but didn’t see him. I ran into the living room, almost tripping over the toys scattered across the floor.

But he was just unusually quiet, lying on the couch paging through a picture book. He looked up at me, surprised by the way I’d burst into the room, and gave me a smile that I couldn’t return. I turned back to the entryway.

Karissa threw her a cheerful wave and gave her a big grin, then looked at me closely. Worry clouded her pretty features. “Are you okay?”

“Not really, no.” I didn’t try to hide how badly I felt after seeing Stone kill.

“It’s going to be okay,” she promised me. “Stone would never hurt you, Amelia.”

“Maybe.” The word seemed to come from far away. Stone *had* hurt me, and he hadn’t been able to promise he wouldn’t torture me again. What else would he do to protect his pack? “I’m going to take Dylan up to bed.”

“Okay.” Karissa’s face had fallen. “I’m here when you want to talk. If you ever want to talk about things.”

“Thank you,” I managed. The thought that Dylan could’ve walked out of the front door and seen his Uncle Stone, that he had come to love, fall upon a man and tear his throat out, sickened me. How long would it be until Dylan learned to be as violent as Stone? As Nathan?

We had to get out of here.

I turned back as I headed toward the living room. “Oh—do you have some apple cider I could use? I like it as a rinse for my hair. Makes it shiny.”

Karissa brightened, always happy to help. “Of course!”

I gathered Dylan up, despite his protests, and carried him off to our bedroom. I put him in the bath to help hide his scent, washing his hair with apple cider vinegar.

He complained about the scent when I mixed it with unscented lotion and rubbed it down his lanky little boy limbs. “It’s stinky!”

“I know it stinks now,” I said, helping him into his darkest pair of pajamas. “But it fades, and it’s perfect for an adventure. We might play hide and seek tonight, Dylan. And you know how well wolves can smell when they’re trying to find someone.”

He nodded as if that made perfect sense. His serious little face was adorable to me, and I covered his forehead in kisses until he squirmed away.

Then while he was watching a television show before sleep, I sat on the bathroom sink and scrolled through the messages on my cell phone.

Aiden really had texted me, and Joshua had texted back setting up the meeting.

But there were other, earlier text messages.

Someone had texted an unnamed number from this phone.

You have to promise me you won’t hurt anyone else in the King pack

Just Stone as revenge for what he did to our pack

It wasn’t anyone else’s fault

But I’ve run all over their territory. This is how their patrols work...

There’s a gap in their patrol route by the old stone bridge. That’s where you should pick me up and where your best chance is to come in...

Shit, the old stone bridge was where Joshua had set up my meeting with Aiden.

Horror swept through me as I understood.

Joshua had either texted the Longroad pack to help them attack us—or he was just pretending and texting some random number to set me up. But who was even left to attack the King pack? The Longroad pack had been decimated; Aiden had said half the men in the pack were dead.

Either way... Stone would read these as a chilling admission of guilt.

And beneath that, a text from a number that was labeled as Rose in my phone. It wasn't her number, but there was a string of texts from her.

Hey big sis! I miss you so much

Well, that didn't fit Rose, and the distance that had grown between us for the last five years. But I wished that was the way my sister really talked to me. There was a lot of chatter back and forth, stuff that would identify Rose as my sister even if I changed the contact.

Fuck Joshua. Just like Cliff, that bastard was going to find out just how murderly I could be.

And then...

Aiden told me what he did to Brennan. I'm so sorry. Does that mean you won't help us after all?

And my number had texted back: *I'll always be there for you, sis*

Fuck, fuck, fuck. My fingers shook as I tried to frantically erase the text messages.

But even though I erased each one, I couldn't shake the feeling that if I backed out, Joshua would find a way to get these messages to Stone. My eyes blurred frantically as I deleted the last one and flung the phone away from me as if it were cursed. It hit the tile with a thud, and then I scooped it up again almost immediately to check the messages again and be sure they were really gone.

Leaving the door open so I'd hear Dylan if he stirred, I frantically took my own shower and scrubbed my skin and hair with apple cider vinegar. It would help block our scent in the woods. Stone wouldn't know if it was us for sure, and the vinegar might be its own scent, but it was hard for wolves to track. It hurt our noses. It seemed so fucking flimsy, but it was all I had right now.

I slipped the damned cell phone into my bra and dressed in fresh leggings and a black hoodie of Brennan's. I checked the time once more. I had to get us out of here before Cole took his post outside my door, watching over me. Karissa would assume we'd gone to sleep, or at least that I was hiding in my room because I didn't want to see Stone, and she would tell the others.

It was time to run.

The horrible memories of the time I'd run from Nathan rose in my mind like ghosts, whispering panic into my blood. The way I'd fastened Dylan's car seat straps with shaking hands. Nathan's headlights blinding me the second before he accelerated into the back of our car. The look on his face before he sideswiped me. Dylan screaming in terror.

I made myself smile. "Time to turn off Bluey and play our game!"

I convinced Dylan to sneak out of the house with me. I turned the lock before I pulled the door shut quietly between us, sealing us out. It would be hard to explain what we were doing now.

The two of us made our way quietly out, slipping down the back stairs while I heard Karissa talking in the entryway with Cole. We made it out the back door, leaving behind the bright lights of the house for the darkness of the yard. The creek's cheerful noises felt jarring and wrong as we hurried over the little bridge and into the depth of the forest.

Dylan clung to my hand. "When does the game start?"

"It's already starting. We have to make it to the bridge before anyone else. Listen to me, let me tell you how to get

there so you can win even if we get separated!” I tried to tell him how to get to the bridge, but it was impossible to tell how well Dylan was listening at the best of times. Four-year-olds are impossible. It made me want to shake him, but if things went wrong...

“I love you so much honey,” I told him, my vision blurring. I’d done this before, before I got into that car with Nathan, before the King pack kidnapped us. I’d told him messages I hoped he’d remember forever.

“I love you too, Mommy. How much further to the bridge?”

Hope gripped my heart, and I repeated the instructions to him. Then I added, “But that’s just if we get separated! Hopefully we’ll be together the whole way.”

He didn’t answer this time, but his little fingers squeezed my hand tight, as if he were clinging to me. I’d tried to make this into a game, but he’d known too much fear for a four-year-old. I wasn’t sure if he entirely believed me.

Together, the two of us plunged into the darkness.

CHAPTER 50





S tone

KARISSA TRIED to block the door to my own damn house yet again.

“Where’s Amelia?” I demanded.

She crossed her arms and stared up at me belligerently. No one did belligerent like my sister.

“What are you thinking?” she demanded. “You couldn’t deal with Hunter quietly? You had to terrify her?”

“She has no reason to be terrified if she’s not guilty.”

“You are so—”

“Enough.” I let my alpha growl rise through the words, and Karissa flinched just for a second before she raised her accusatory pointer finger once again. “Amelia isn’t the helpless little lost wolf you think she is. She’s a strong, clever woman, and she’s manipulating you.”

“Stone,” she began, but I wasn’t listening. I slipped past her and headed up the stairs.

Brennan’s door was closed.

I tried the knob. It was locked.

“She went to bed,” Karissa said. “She’s traumatized by seeing what you did. I mean, she just escaped this alpha—”

“The Longroad pack was finding out all the details about her life here, about where she might be vulnerable,” I cut in. “There’s something going on. Something Shaw and Tee didn’t uncover.”

“How do you know that?” she demanded.

I pulled Hunter’s phone in its baggie out of my pocket and passed it to her.

Karissa opened the text messages, her fingers clumsy through the plastic. “Tell me what I’m looking for?”

I pointed her toward Hunter’s messages with the Longroad pack.

“Okay,” she said, frowning down at them as she scrolled. “Tell me you have more than this. You killed him over text messages?”

“Of course not.” I frowned down at my sister, who apparently thought I’d suddenly become either unjust, or an idiot, or both. “For one, he left pack territory those specific times that were arranged.”

“Still flimsy.”

“But second of all, I didn’t kill him.” What the hell was wrong with Karissa? Was this really how my own family saw me? “I don’t have enough evidence for that, not without Louisa. He ran, he fought me, so now he’s sleeping off a concussion in the jail. But he’ll live... for now.”

Once I confirmed he had conspired to hurt Amelia, though, I’d take great pleasure in replaying today’s earlier chase... and ripping out his throat.

She handed me back the phone and made a disgusted sound. “Do you really think Amelia’s in danger from the Longroad pack? You destroyed so many of their fighters. Unless...”

“Unless Nathan’s still alive.” Liam said quietly from behind us.

Both of us turned to see him standing on the stairs. He wore only jeans, but at least that was a step up; sometimes he wolfed out for so long that he forgot about clothes all together. His hair was wild, his crazy dark curls matted from sleeping out in the forest, and a twig stuck rakishly out from above his right ear.

“She needs me,” he said, his eyes wild. “I have to make it through the visions. Guide them. See if Nathan is really dead.”

“Sure.” My tolerance for Liam’s insanity was at its fracturing point. Then Karissa glared up at me, and I managed to summon a little more patience for my older brother. “You do that. You can help her if you help yourself.”

None of us knew how to get through to Liam, to keep him grounded in this world.

“If Nathan’s alive, I’d like to murder him,” Liam said with thoughtful seriousness. “But it should be Amelia who finishes him. She needs to know she’s really free.”

“Sure,” I agreed again. I banged my hand on Amelia’s door, and Karissa grabbed my elbow and yanked my arm down, too late. I didn’t want to wake Dylan either, but this couldn’t wait. I needed to talk to her about what was going on in the Longroad pack. “Amelia. Open the door.”

There was no answer.

“She’s not in there,” Liam observed. “You were supposed to make her feel safe, Stone. But you made yourself into just another common nightmare.”

I gritted my teeth and slammed my fist into the door again. The sudden feeling that Liam was right sent a rush of fear through my gut. “How do you know that? Did you have a vision?”

My voice only sounded a little bit mocking.

“No.” Liam used a condescending tone that I thought was a bit much, coming from a man who clearly hadn’t had a close encounter with a bar of soap in quite a while.

I slammed my shoulder into the door. Karissa let out a yell, but I couldn’t shake the feeling Amelia was in danger. I needed to get to her.

The door splintered open with the second slam. My shoulder ached as I stumbled through the remains of the door.

I took in Brennan’s room in a rush. The guitars, the big bed. I’d avoided this room because it was full of memories.

But right now, it was empty.

I quickly headed to the bathroom, then checked the walk-in closet, just in case. The scent of apple cider vinegar hung in the bathroom.

I turned to face Liam. “You didn’t have a vision?”

He shook his head.

“Want to share what you did see?” I demanded tartly.

Liam met my gaze evenly. “That depends. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to make sure she’s safe.”

“So that she feels safe, or so that you feel she’s safe?”

“Liam!” I raked my hand through my hair, then gave up on him. I headed out of the room.

“I saw her leave,” he said behind me, too fucking late. God, he killed me. “She’s scared of you.”

“I don’t care,” I ground out.

“Then you’re crazier than I am.”

But I was already chasing after her.

CHAPTER 51





*A*melia

DYLAN and I rushed through the woods. His hand grew sweaty in mine, his fingers slipping away from mine a few times before I grabbed his hand again tighter. It would have been easy for me to race to the bridge if I'd been able to shift, but Dylan couldn't shift, and it would scare him if I did. He'd never known me as a wolf. And how would I carry him, anyway?

A long howl behind us sent a chill sweeping up my spine, and my legs turned to jelly for a second, but I stumbled forward. Stone. I could feel his alpha power in that howl, and it swept over me. Dylan glanced back over his shoulder, but there was nothing to see but the white birches shining slightly under the moonlight. The forest was dark.

There was no turning back now. Stone would see me as a traitor, and I already knew how he dealt with traitors.

Dylan stumbled over a root. Our hands slipped apart, and I tried desperately to grab him, but he fell and landed heavily on his knee. He let out a wail, and I scooped him up in my arms, shushing him desperately.

"Remember our game," I said brightly. I didn't think he believed me for a second, but I had to try.

He clung to me, weeping into my neck, as I ran with him through the woods. My legs burned with the effort and my night vision didn't seem strong enough when I expected Stone to leap from behind a bush at any moment. How far behind us was that howl? It wouldn't take long for a full-grown alpha wolf to catch up to us.

Terror swept through me. My breathing came short and wild, and I clutched the back of Dylan's head, trying to shield him from the branches that smacked me in the face.

In the distance, through the trees, I caught a glimpse of the worn old road, the abandoned stone bridge. We were so close.

Something broke the silence right behind me.

A broken twig under a paw.

I whirled to see red eyes glowing from within the branches behind me. Slowly, the wolf slunk out of the underbrush—an enormous black wolf with eerie eyes. The one who had watched me before. I'd felt safe with this wolf watching me, but now I knew better.

The rogue.

I staggered back a step, almost fell, then whirled and kept running.

I was afraid, but I was more afraid of Stone at that moment.

And then Stone rocketed out of the bushes toward Dylan and me.

CHAPTER 52





S tone

AMELIA'S SCREAM echoed through the forest.

Then she raced frantically away from me.

I chased after her, determined to shift back once I got between her and the road. She needed to listen to me. She couldn't leave. Fury warred with my protective impulses.

Mine. She was mine. Mine to punish, if she betrayed Brennan. But always mine.

Most of all, she was always mine to protect.

And if she managed to escape our pack territory, my enemies would steal her from me. If those messages were true... Amelia was in danger when she left our pack's grounds.

Why the fuck had she chosen *now* to run? When Louisa was gone?

I leapt in front of her. She came to a halt, her eyes wide and terrified, and slipped. She landed heavily on her side, rolling to shield Dylan.

She looked frantically up toward the road. "Help me!"

I started to shift back, desperate to talk to her.

But the next second, something barreled into me.

The rogue.

I'd been so focused on the tiny trail of scent she'd left that I hadn't realized the rogue's scent trail was new, not old. I flew sideways, driven by the rogue.

He snarled at me as he leapt to pin me, but I dodged to one side. The two of us faced each other, both of us snarling.

The rogue stood his ground, teeth bared, hackles raised. I growled deeply, my voice reverberating in the clearing. All I

wanted was to run after Amelia, but I couldn't turn my back on this rogue. He would attack me then move on to Amelia.

The image of her being ripped open by the rogue rose strongly in my vision, even as she was racing frantically toward the road.

The rogue and I circled each other, then he lunged, claws outstretched. I leapt back back, barely dodging the attack as the rogue's claws raked through my fur.

I lunged, teeth bared and snarling. I crashed into the rogue, knocking him to the ground. The rogue rolled, snapping at my face. Pain burned through my face before I realized I was bleeding. The rogue had managed to draw blood, but at least he had missed my eyes; I could've lost an eye to his fangs.

I snapped at the rogue's throat, but the rogue was too quick. He rolled away and launched himself at me again. As his teeth locked on my shoulder, sharp pain ripped through my shoulder. I turned and sank my teeth into his throat, and the two of us slammed into the ground, ripping at each other.

He leapt up and frantically scrambled away.

I backed away, blood dripping from my mouth.

He lunged again and we clashed in a flurry of teeth and claws. Blood streamed from my shoulder, and my muscles responded more slowly to each attack. As the rogue's fangs flashed in the darkness, the sudden reality I could die here, tonight, rose in my mind.

I could die with Amelia thinking I hated her.

Suddenly, the rogue broke away. He streaked away into the darkness.

I staggered toward the road just in time to see headlights racing away into the night.

Amelia was gone.

My mate was gone.

She had to be my mate. I couldn't understand how, but her loss ripped through my chest, more powerful than the rogue's

fangs.

I raced after the car, feeling more blood pump from my body with every desperate leap forward. I had to catch her.

Only one thought pulsed through my mind now.

Mate.

CHAPTER 53





Amelia

I SCRAMBLED up the embankment to the old stone bridge with Dylan's feet kicking against my thighs with every movement. My heart beat wildly in my throat as I reached the car. Aiden was already out of the car, his eyes wide, racing toward me. He reached to grab Dylan from me, but my arms were locked around my little boy and I couldn't have let go of him.

"Go, go, go!" I cried as soon as I reached the car and bundled Dylan inside, the two of us climbing into the rear seats. Aiden slammed the door shut. Rose looked back at me from the passenger seat, her eyes wide with fear.

Aiden didn't question me. He leapt into the driver's seat and threw the car into gear. We lurched forward, hurtling over the narrow little bridge and driving desperately down the narrow road.

I could feel him coming for me.

"Shit." Aiden's eyes were wide in the rearview mirror, and I turned to see what he was seeing.

Stone, racing toward us through the darkness. There was blood all over his fur—my heart lurched to see it, who else had he killed tonight—and his lips were peeled back in a snarl. Fear seized my heart.

"Let's get your seatbelt on," I told Dylan, trying to keep my voice calm and cool as I reached across him and frantically yanked it across. What if Stone flipped the car, just as Nathan had forced our car to flip all those years before? My hands were so clumsy with panic that it took me more than one try to get the seatbelt clipped in, the seatbelt popping loose over and over until it finally hooked in. Then I reached for mine.

"Amelia, what's going on?" Rose demanded.

"The King alpha is trying to stop us," I managed.

“Fuck!” Aiden cried out as a dark shadow raced past us.

Stone was even faster than the car.

I closed my eyes, waiting for him to leap on top of the car, to slam into it and make us fly sideways, to do something horrible.

He leapt in front of us. Aiden spun the wheel frantically, just barely avoiding the alpha. We bumped over grass and he cut the wheel over sharply. I threw my arm around Dylan, trying to protect him as we jostled back and forth, but then we were on the road again.

A long, desperate howl rent the air, and it raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I turned back to look.

But I couldn't see Stone. The only thing I could see out the rear window was darkness.

I was finally escaping all the alphas who had tried to control me.

A NOTE FROM MAY

I hope you enjoyed meeting Amelia, her men, and Dylan! The adventure continues with The Unbound Moon.



Join my Facebook readers' group, [May Dawson's Wild Angels](#), for exclusive excerpts, giveaways and discussion!



ALSO BY MAY DAWSON



All I care about is saving my little sister from the mansion of horrors where we've been raised. Enter four alluring men, who seem to be determined to protect me... if I can trust them. But they're hiding secrets of their own.

 books2read.com/wanderingqueens

Five years ago, I was found wandering in the woods with a sword, a note, and no memories. Now four Fae kings have come to find me... but these ex-lovers of mine are determined to punish me for sins I don't remember.



*Dragon shifters are always male. They're always royals.
They're always assholes. Until my first shift, when I
grow wings, breathe fire, and throw the world into chaos.
Now I'm partnered with five of those cocky royals for
military training... but I have to pretend to be a man.
Even as these forbidden royals fall in love with me when
I'm a girl...*