



THE STONE WOLF'S
**REJECTED
MATE**

CATE C. WELLS

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THE FIVE PACKS

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WRENLEE

I HIDE IN THE SHADOWED CORNER OF THE SUPPLY SHED, MY heart pounding as I wait for Clay. I shouldn't be doing this. He's not my mate.

If Father knew, he'd send me to work with my sisters in the kitchens. Well, first he'd send me to the forest to pick a switch, but then it'd be off to the kitchens. No more hauling buckets of mortar for the males repairing the river wall. No more days spent in the shade of the scaffolding, sneaking glances at Clay as he works above me in silence, shirtless and sweating in the sun.

I hear his deep voice in the clearing outside the shed, and I swallow hard. Inside my chest, my wolf pops to her feet, her ears perking. Clay is talking to other males, or rather, other males are talking to him, and he's replying in sharp grunts. He's not a talker. I can probably count the words he's said since he noticed me.

Sit down before you pass out.

You help me now. No one else. When you're not fetching a bucket, sit in the shade.

Drink this water.

Were you waiting here for me?

Be quiet.

Give me your mouth.

Hush. They'll hear you.

All we've done is kiss, but that would be enough to trigger my heat if he were my mate, so he must not be. I try not to be heartbroken. Fate knows what she's doing. We're all her servants, and we cannot help but obey. At least that's what Mother and the alpha priest always say.

But I do wish Clay Pulley was mine, more than I've ever wanted anything. He's terse and surly, and I've never seen him smile, let alone laugh, but he's always patient and gentle with me.

Once, when I brought him a bucket of mortar that had already dried past usefulness, he didn't even yell. He told me to sit and rest, and he trekked all the way back up the long stairs to the supply shed for a new bucket. That was the day I waited for him, the day he kissed me for the first time.

I should have told him no, or run away. That's what a good female would do. But I let him, and in the end, he was the one who pulled away first. I faked sick the next day, I was so embarrassed, but Father wouldn't let me stay home a second day. *Ditches work or we don't eat.* He's drilled it into our heads since we were pups.

I wish I wasn't a Ditch. If I had been allowed to go to the Academy at Moon Lake, I'd know what to do about the slugs in my motherwort and the beetles eating my bloodroot. I've heard that Fields get to take classes in botany in a glass greenhouse almost as big as the pack's Great Hall. All I've got is trial and error, which takes forever when it comes to growing things, but if the female alpha of Quarry Pack can make her own money selling mushrooms and herbs, I can do it, too. I figure if I can grow weeds, then one day I can grow something I can sell.

That's far in the future, though, and right now, my secret garden isn't foremost in my mind. My wolf and I are on tenterhooks, our breathing shallow, waiting for the rough-hewn shed door to scrape across the packed-dirt floor.

We sense Clay's arrival before we hear the hinges creak, and a ray of late-afternoon sunlight falls across the stacked buckets, rows of wheelbarrows, and milk crates full of trowels,

jointers, and masonry brushes. Clay ducks through the frame, and my heart leaps.

He's here.

It's only been a few minutes since I left him straightening his worksite, but it feels like hours. *Days*. I greedily scan him head to toe like it's been years and I need to catalog every small detail I've missed or forgotten—the faded, worn strip where his buckle cuts into his belt leather, the chipped buttons on his shirt, the mismatched thread where his collar has been darned—by who? Jealousy streaks through me, hot and wild.

He's not mine, but dear Fate, he *feels* like mine, especially now when it's just us.

He's different when he's alone with me. Outside, he's blank-faced and stern, almost grim as he goes about his business, steady but unhurried. They don't feed you more if you work the fastest; you only make everyone else look bad.

But as he strides toward me, weaving through the precariously stacked crates, his face goes shy. He watches me from downcast eyes, as if he's aware of how much space he fills and he doesn't want my wolf or me to be scared. We're not. Our blood thrums in our veins, and we feel giddy and daring.

I don't lower my eyes. I track him, my lips curving. He doesn't stop until the toes of his boots almost touch mine. My back is pressed to the hard wall, and if it were any other male, I'd feel trapped, but it's Clay. I've lured him here to me by some magic I can't even begin to understand.

For a moment, we just watch each other, letting our scents seep into each other's lungs and wash away the day, the dust and grit and unrelenting sun. He smells like mint, the fresh kind that sprouts so readily in my garden, sprawling where everything else seems to struggle. The bite of it makes my throat tingle.

We have to be quiet. There are cracks and knots in the boards, enough to allow a breeze through to mix with the

damp, dusty air inside. My heart beats in my ears, almost drowning out Clay's ragged breath.

He leans down, but he doesn't break eye contact for a second. I know that just like me, he wants to look his fill after being so careful all day not to get caught staring. I love his eyes when we're alone. It's like someone threw the sash up and flung the shutters open, and we can see all the way into each other, as far deep as we go.

Oh. A thought rouses me from staring. I forgot about the cinnamon cake. My breath catches, and my lips curve higher as I remember. I've brought him a present.

I dig into my smock pocket and take out a small square wrapped in parchment paper. It's a little squished but not too bad. I hold it up. My heart sputters when his gaze drops to my hand, but as soon as he sees what I have, his eyes, creased at the corners now from the shy smile lighting his face, return to mine, and I'm floating again.

He raises a brow as if to ask, "For me?"

I hold the cinnamon cake higher.

He takes it from my hand, his fingers grazing mine. Shivers zip from the nape of my neck down to my tailbone. How are your fingertips connected to your spine? It doesn't seem like they should be.

He unwraps the cake carefully, the paper crinkling impossibly loud in the silence. The cinnamon tickles my nose. His smile widens when he realizes what I've brought, and his eyes light up like a pup's. I wish I'd noticed him when he was little, but Ditchside boys all ran in packs, grubbing for food and hustling for pennies. Except for the boys who lived on our lane, I couldn't tell them apart.

I can tell he wants to sink his teeth into the cake, but instead, he breaks off a piece and holds it to my lips. I press them together, and his eyes narrow. I brought it for him. My sister snuck a thick slice from a plate she cleared from the alpha's table last night. She gave it to me, and I saved it for him.

He's trying to summon up his hard, outside face, but he can't, not when I blink up at him with my mouth mashed closed.

He exhales slowly.

I blink a few more times, and finally, with exaggerated reluctance, he takes a bite.

Oh, he likes it. He chews slowly, and although he doesn't close his eyes and his gaze doesn't leave mine, not even for a second, he gets this transported look on his face. He *loves* it.

He dips his head, brushes his lips against mine, and while my stomach swoops, he pops the rest into his mouth, grinning mischievously. I can't restrain myself either with sweets.

There's a crumb at the corner of his mouth. I dab it and lap it off my finger with the tip of my tongue. His grin disappears. His wolf growls in the back of his throat. He steps forward, his hardness pressing into my softness.

This is what I love, when all his stony toughness falls away and he can't help himself. He's too hungry.

He takes my mouth, his tongue seeking mine, his fingers plunging into my hair, tangling in my braid. I'm not going anywhere—I couldn't even if I wanted to—but he wants to make sure I stay. His hips grind into me. Something pokes my belly.

He groans, and my wolf whines. My legs turn to jelly. I throw my arms around his neck to hold myself up, and to bring him closer, even though he's as close as he can get. I want more.

He grabs my thigh and tries to hike it up to his waist, but my shift won't let my leg go high enough, and there are too many layers between me and him—my smock and shift and underwear and his heavy canvas pants. My wolf grumbles in frustration, and his kiss curves into a smile.

"I know," he whispers into my mouth. I think he does know. I think he feels exactly the way I do, and it's terrifying and magical and impossible and *right* all at the same time. How is this male *not* my mate?

I'm sinking deeper, letting go, losing myself in this moment, his scent, his taste, when a sharp voice calls out from outside the shed. "Clay Pulley!"

Immediately, Clay jerks away and spins, blocking me, but the door remains shut as the male calls again, "Clay Pulley! Come out here!"

Clay's body grows tall and stiff, and he glances back at me, his eyes signaling for me to stay put. I don't recognize the male's voice, but he speaks like he's accustomed to barking orders. He's no Ditch.

My wolf's nose quivers. She scents trouble in the air. I grab Clay's arm.

"Clay Pulley! Last chance!" The voice is close. Right outside the shed. If they come in, if they find me here like this, I will never live it down. It's one thing to sneak off with your mate—people talk and laugh, but eventually, they forget. A female who meets other males though . . . there's only one word for her, and that's all she'll be known as for the rest of her life.

My heart begins to pound, and my stomach knots.

Clay stiffens and strides for the door. Before he opens it, he holds up his palm and gives me a smile, probably meant to be reassuring. *Stay here.*

And then he's gone. Outside the shed, the occasional murmur of folks trudging past on their way home has disappeared. Either everyone is gone, or they're watching something.

Who is it? What do they want with Clay?

Maybe it's the Claws again. They've been coming around, trying to talk to him since his fight with John Broom.

It was all an accident. John dropped a putty knife from his scaffold, and the handle clipped me on the shoulder. Clay turned into his wolf so quickly, leaping up and knocking John off his platform and into the dirt, it was almost like he flip-shifted, morphing in the blink of an eye from man to wolf, wasting not even a second in transition. No one can do that

except Killian Kelly from Quarry Pack and the ferals from the Last Pack, though.

The Claws found out, and they've been after Clay to apprentice with them. He should. It's a once-in-a-lifetime offer, a huge step up in rank. He'd be stupid not to do it. Three meals a day instead of two, and eventually, a room of his own in the Claws' bunkhouse.

My heart drops at the thought. No more kisses. No more company on the walk home. Clay's been following me to my house to make sure I get there safely ever since I got winged by the putty knife and he told me that I'm only supposed to help him. I guess I've been spoiled by the attention. Even though we can't talk or walk side by side, it's nice knowing he's behind me.

In the shed, a stacked wheelbarrow happens to shift, and I startle. How long can I hang out in here? If I leave and everyone's standing nearby, they'll know I was in here with Clay. But if I keep waiting, eventually someone will come in and see me hiding, and that would be even more humiliating.

I could slip out. They've probably walked off. No one hangs around the supply shed, not when it's dinner time. I strain to listen. I hear low, deep voices, but they sound distant. Maybe they're moving off toward town?

Clay wanted me to stay. I should stay.

My heart thumps harder, and it's so loud in my head now that the voices have faded completely. They must have gone. How long has it been? A minute? Five? It must be closer to five. I have to pee.

I hold my breath so I can hear better. It's silent. How much longer do I wait?

I can't bear hiding here, waiting to be found out. It would be better to go. I'll just keep my head down and hurry away. Everyone is exhausted at the end of the day and worried about getting home. No one will bother themselves with me.

Once I've decided, I waste no time scurrying across the shed and ducking through the door into the glaring late-

afternoon sunshine. The cobblestoned lanes and narrow houses of North Border rise above me, and down below, the river runs lazily along the bottom of the moat wall like a slow, green snake.

I realize my mistake immediately. No one has gone. Clay is still here, standing with three Claw males, their arms all crossed as they glare at each other. Clay's stone face is furious. Adrenaline shoots through my veins, and my wolf alerts inside my chest. She knows that when a male is angry, we get ready to run.

All four males turn their heads to stare at me, and I instinctively bow mine. Clay's wolf rumbles deep in his chest, and mine whines in response. There is danger here.

What do I do? I want to leave, but the Claws are staring me down, and they outrank me. I can't move. My legs won't do it. Even my wolf lowers herself to her belly.

"That's the female," one of the Claws says. "She's called Wrenlee."

His name is Isaac, and I don't know how he knows me. I'm a middle child in a low-ranking Ditch family. We don't even have a last name.

I shrink in my dingy linen shift while my wolf makes herself as small as she can. She even lowers her ears. Females are supposed to avoid male attention, and I might be bold enough to meet Clay in the shed, but *she* doesn't have a rebellious bone in her body.

Clay says nothing, but his broad chest rumbles like a rock tumbler.

Eldrick, the highest-ranking Claw in North Border, steps toward me in his heavy black boots. Clay steps forward with him. My wolf doesn't know whether to be comforted or alarmed.

"Is she your mate?" he asks Clay while scowling down at me, his harsh lip curled.

My throat clamps shut. The question seems to ring out in the clearing. For the first time, I notice the other Ditches

hanging around at the edges of the surrounding woods, gawping without an ounce of shame. My face bursts into flame. There will be no slipping away. Father is going to hear about this, and my name is going to be dirt.

I'm frozen, head bent, eyes burning, waiting, dread digging nails into my heart.

I know what Clay is going to say, and I can't even brace myself. I feel like I'm slip sliding down a wet slope, my heels digging uselessly into the mud while my arms flail for handholds that aren't there.

We aren't mates. When a male kisses his mate for the first time, she goes into heat. Everyone knows that, and Clay is too proud to lie.

"No, she's not," Clay answers, his face closed and hard.

"Well, she meets him in the shed. That sweaty one has seen her." Isaac gestures at my creepy cousin Emmett.

All the blood in my body drops to my feet. I clutch my smock and squeeze it in my tight fists. I don't know why. My brain isn't working my body.

"But she's not your mate?" Eldrick raises his eyebrows.

For a long second, Clay doesn't reply. My lungs freeze. My entire body knots with the tension. I want him to lie.

Please, let him lie.

Eldrick clears his throat.

Clay jerks his head. "No," he says, sharp and final.

"Then what's the problem?" Eldrick dismisses me in an instant, turning fully back to Clay.

"I build. I don't fight."

"You fought John Broom," Eldrick argues. "You flip-shifted."

"I'm telling you you've got it wrong. You're listening to bonfire stories."

“Amir saw it with his own eyes.” Eldrick hikes his chin toward the third Claw, who nods in agreement.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m a Ditch. I build.”

“If I take the matter to Alpha Fireside, you won’t have a choice. Ditches don’t get this kind of opportunity. You’re a fool to throw it away for a female who isn’t even your mate.” Eldrick talks like I’m not even standing here so close that their noses are turning up from the stench of my anxiety.

“If you’re worried about pussy, plenty of females give it up when you start winning against Salt Mountain and Quarry Pack on the circuit. Hot females. With rank.” Isaac sneers down at me.

Father is going to hear that, too. From the corner of my eye, I see Emmett moving his lips like he’s trying to memorize what’s being said, word for word. He’s not even bothering to conceal his glee. He loves it when the females in the house get the switch. He always tries to watch and disappears into the privy afterward.

My stomach knots. I’m in deep trouble. My wolf and I both instinctively look to Clay for help, but he’s glaring Eldrick down. Eldrick is the largest Claw, at least six foot tall and 250 pounds, but Clay’s people have been Ditches for generations, and our rank breeds bigger.

Eldrick’s chest begins to rumble, too, and he draws back his thick lips to show off his descended fangs. Claws never retract them. It’s meant to frighten folks into baring their necks, and it works. I duck my head even lower.

Clay’s wolf snarls back, barely muffled by his pecs.

“I said I’m not interested,” Clay says. He has to project so that he can be heard over his wolf.

For a moment, the reek of aggression is so thick in the air that I’m certain there’s going to be a fight. The gawkers shuffle backward and mutter among themselves. They’re probably placing bets.

Eldrick’s bulbous eyes shift to the crowd and then settle on me. A twisted expression lights up his blockish face.

“I would think again if I were you, Ditch,” he says to Clay. “If I were you, I would consider the going rate for a night fireside and what it would mean to turn down the lifestyle we’re offering you.”

I can’t follow exactly what Eldrick means, but the words land on Clay like a blow. His entire body hardens—his spine, his shoulders, and finally, his dark-brown eyes. A muscle at his temple tics.

He lifts his gaze to the steep slate rooftops high above us that rise from the dense green of the border forest. Past the rooftops, in the meadow between the town and the woods, is the field where the pack gathers around a bonfire on the full moon.

Is he thinking about what a seat fireside is worth to him? All the males I know would do almost anything for it. A feast, a cushioned chair, servants at your beck and call, and the rest of the pack scurrying out of your way. It’s the dream.

Clay’s jaw tightens. He blinks and refocuses on me. He’s a Ditch, through and through, so his face doesn’t give anything away.

That must be why I’m not bracing myself when he says, “Get back to your house, female.” Somehow, his face becomes even harder. “Go now before you ruin yourself beyond repair. You’re not my mate. You play free with your honor, lingering alone in the dark. You should keep company with the other females, as is right. Do you heed me, female?”

Every word he spits is harsher than the last until, by the end, he’s snarling at me. My wolf is frozen in terror and confusion. I don’t understand, either. I look for my Clay, the male I know, and there isn’t a hint of him in this male’s eyes or expression.

“Clay?”

He doesn’t answer me. He sneers like the others. He’s a stranger, and I met him in the shed, and I brought him presents, and I kissed him.

Shame broils every inch of my skin. I want to run, but Clay and Eldrick are standing between me and the path home, and my wolf's too scared, and I am, too, of this strange, cruel male glaring daggers at me as he drives his point home.

“Clearly this isn't the work for you, female. Go to the kitchens with your sisters. You draw attention to yourself here. You make males question your virtue. Do you understand?”

I can't nod or speak. My tongue is stuck. My voice is broken.

I stare at the only male I've ever let close enough to touch me as the scent of his anger and disgust chokes me.

He's not who I thought he was.

I risked my reputation, and for what? Because I thought I could force Fate's hand? Because I wanted to feel special? I'm not. I know that.

I'm a fool. All it took was a Claw offering him a seat in the alpha's circle and willing, higher-ranking pussy, and the male I chose is done with me, and *I'm* the slut. Not him, not the male who changes his tune the instant he's promised eager females and a *lifestyle*.

I never imagined he'd be this way, but how can I be surprised? Every male in North Border is this way, from the alpha to the lowest Ditch. Every single one would sell a female out to move up a rung on the ladder.

This is all my fault. I tricked myself.

“Save yourself for your mate, female, and go home before you get into any more trouble,” Clay growls. “Hear me?”

I know I'm dismissed, but everyone's eyes are still on me, pinning me in place, paralyzing my trembling wolf.

I'm not a troublemaker. Sneaking into the shed with Clay is the only bad thing I've done in my life, and I'm paying for it now. Oh Fate, I'm paying.

Clay glares at me. I bend my neck lower, but my fear doesn't allow me to look down, so I'm looking up at a crazy

angle, dizzy and burning with humiliation, and I can't even make my legs move to walk away.

“Go home now! Get!” Clay finally snarls, the words ringing out. It's a slap to the face, a switch to my wolf's haunches. I grab my skirts, trip backwards, dodge left, and bolt with the laughter of the males and gasps of the females nipping at my heels.

I run as fast as I can, but it's still not fast enough to escape the sound of Clay's wolf howling a clear warning in my wake.

Leave.

Go.

Don't come back.

Not my mate.

Not mine.

WRENLEE

I RACE UPHILL ALONG THE SWITCHBACK THAT LEADS TO TOWN, through the towering riverfront gates with the phases of the moon wrought in iron at the top—a symbol, we were always told, that North Border welcomes all shifters from every pack and continent, as long as they work and pledge their allegiance.

Flying down the grand boulevard, I pass the Hunters' hall and the library where the Books and Numbers hunch behind their big slab desks. I swerve around the big marble fountain and sprint straight through the market square. The shopkeepers have long since stowed their goods and lowered the sides of their stalls.

A wave of panic propels my feet as I cross the small arched bridge into Ditchside and dash through the winding lanes toward home.

I have to beat Cousin Emmett home. If he tells Father his version of events first, I'm dead. There's a joke that despite the dirt behind his ears, no one's prouder than a Ditch male, but it isn't funny; it's true. Father will not countenance the packmates on his crew whispering that his daughter is no better than a bitch in heat, and that's what they'll say.

I've ruined myself. And for what? A few kisses? What have I done?

I careen to a halt at our weather-beaten front door. The window sashes have been thrown up to let out the late-afternoon heat, and Mother's dingy but clean curtains snap in

the breeze. Voices drift out to the street. Loud. Angry. Father. My oldest brother, Dale. Emmett.

My wolf skitters backward inside me. I'm too late, but I never had a chance, really. Emmett can shift, and I can't, not until I go into heat, and I'm not going to go into heat. Clay Pulley isn't my mate, and everyone knows it now. Everybody knows what I've done. I'm going to be sick.

I reach for the knob, but my hand shakes so much my fingers slip. I have to face things head-on. Dread is almost always worse than the thrashing, even with the belt. Nothing can hurt as bad as Clay yelling for me to get like I'm a mangy stray dog.

I suck down a deep, steadying breath, and my stomach knots.

The door flies open, yanked from my fingers. Before I can even throw my arms up, my father's palm cracks me across the face. "Whore!" he shouts.

I taste blood. Behind him, Mother screams.

I drop into a crouch, baring my neck, protecting my belly with my knees.

"What have you done, you stupid female?" He snatches me by the braid and drags me into the narrow hall. I clutch my hair so he doesn't pull it out, but I can't get a good hold, and it hurts; it hurts. My shoulder slams into the corner of the oaken table where Father keeps his hat. My feet scrabble on the wood floor, but he's too strong.

"Father, no!" my younger sister Annabel shouts from the stairs. She's his favorite, the prettiest of us. She still hasn't figured out that it doesn't matter, not when his temper is so far gone.

"Shut your mouth," Father yells. "And all of you look and see what happens if you bring shame to this house!" He hops on one foot, wrenches off his thick-soled boot, and swings it at me. Immediately, I tuck into a ball and protect my soft parts.

The hard rubber glances off the back of my skull, and my ears ring. I cover my face with my hands, my kidneys with my

elbows, my belly with my knees, but it's no use. I can't cover everything, and I can't help but jerk away, exposing my weak spots. He slams the heel against my back, my sides, my shoulder, my hips.

My wolf howls for help, leaping for the boundary between us, but she's stuck inside me, and I'm stuck in a ball, wedged between my father and the wall, as blows rain down on my soft human flesh.

Mother and my sisters scream and cry, crowding as close as they dare, reaching for me and then snatching their arms away when the boot whistles through the air. The wolves in their chests howl to mine, shaking dust off the rafters.

"Annabel, no!" Mother shouts, and I peek up in time to see my younger sister throw herself between the swinging boot and my body. The heel glances off her temple, and she staggers, collapsing drunkenly over the side table. Her recklessness has the effect of first blood.

Mother shifts. My sisters swarm, even the youngest who weigh hardly anything. They block Annabel and me with their bodies while they swing their fists like windmills and kick wildly, their screams mingling with the howls in their throats. Mother's wolf springs for Father's throat, but she's a small, scraggly creature, and Father easily backhands her into the wall. The drywall cracks. She knows she can't win against him. Mostly she doesn't try, but still, sometimes she does.

Emmett and Dale crowd into the doorway to the kitchen, shouting for us to stop, and Father trades his shoe for his fists. Mother shifts and lies naked, crumpled half against the wall, half on the floor. Somehow, between the arms and legs and flying braids, she catches my eye.

"Run," she mouths.

I can't leave them here like this. It's my fault. I brought this on us all.

With great effort, Mother bares her teeth, flashing her still-elongated fangs in my direction. "Run before he kills one of

the little ones,” she says, and even though I can’t hear her over the tumult, I can read her lips.

I force my aching, bruised body onto hands and knees. With my chin tucked and shoulders hunched, I crawl for the door. Over my head, my sisters launch themselves at Father with renewed energy, howling and screaming at the top of their lungs.

“She’s getting away!” Emmett shouts, but he’s too far away and my sisters are too frenzied for him to get to me. Soon enough, Emmett and Dale are sure to intervene and my sisters will scatter, but for now, the males aren’t rushing to Father’s rescue. You reap what you sow, and they know Father would let them fend for themselves if the positions were reversed.

Gasping for breath, I stagger to my feet as soon as I’m outside. I don’t have to think. There’s only one place I can go.

I limp as quickly as I can up the lane, ignoring the biddies peeking out their upstairs windows as I hurry past. Ditchside abuts the low wall that borders the town to the north, but you have to follow it a ways before you reach a gate. When I was a pup, I was confused as to why it was called the low wall when it’s twice as high as a grown male. I didn’t understand that it’s low in relation to the moat wall that rises almost five stories above the river.

The moat wall protects the alpha and his circle and their majestic riverfront homes. The low wall deters most of the ferals and other dangers that come from the forest, and those it doesn’t, the folks of Ditchside are supposed to distract and dispose of before they can reach the nice parts of town.

When I get to the old iron gate at the end of Cooks Lane, I suck in my belly and slip through. It’s rusted half open, and weeds have grown up around it, tethering it in place.

To the west is the manicured field, mowed in a checkerboard pattern, surrounding the alpha’s bonfire, but here, there’s only a yard or so of trodden grass and barren patches before the woods begin. There are a half dozen paths hidden in the undergrowth, trails to the clearings where the

moonshiners build their stills and to fishing holes where young Ditches try to catch dinner before it swims past to the Fishers' nets downstream.

The path to my hiding place veers off one of the fishing hole trails. All Ditch pups roam the forest when their parents chase them out from underfoot, and my sisters and I were no different. I found this path a long time ago. It leads to a pretty glade surrounded by gnarled oaks with grass as thick and green as velvet.

My sisters and I used to hide out here, playing *Mama Had a Baby and Her Head Popped Off* with dandelions and fighting each other with stick swords.

I thought since the grass grew so well that it'd be a good place to plant my herbs, but apparently, I was wrong. When I lurch into the clearing, huffing and holding my side, my garden is as sorry as it's ever been. There are a few spindly survivors here and there, but a lot more of what my Auntie Peg calls *invaders*. Thistle. Creeping Charlie.

There's a bit of comfrey still holding on, but its leaves are being nibbled. I've dealt with the slugs and the other crawlies. It's probably a rabbit, or Fate forbid, a rat.

All of a sudden, the adrenaline that got me this far leaks out in a great rush, and I collapse onto my butt in the lush grass beside my sad little dirt plot.

If I could shift, I could mark the glade, and no rabbit or rat would dare encroach, but my wolf is stuck inside me, huddled in a corner, shivering and scared. It isn't fair that a female's wolf can't come out until we find our mates. It isn't fair that we're designed to depend on the most volatile, undependable animal in creation.

I kick the dry garden soil with the heel of my leather-soled lace-up ankle boots. They even dress us to be weak. I couldn't hurt a fly with the soft sole of my shoe.

I lower myself to my back, every bone and bruise complaining, and stare up at the blue sky. It's high today, a faraway vault.

Some Ditches who build, like Clay, have steel-toed boots. I could figure that out. Hunt up some metal scraps from the junk heap behind the supply shed and sew them into the fabric. With my luck, I'd stub my toe and break it, though.

I turn my head, rest my cheek on the cool grass, and look at my palm, callused from the wooden bucket handles. I close and straighten my fingers. I wish I had claws. I'd rip Clay's face off. I'd see for sure if there is something under there like I'd convinced myself, or if he's just a male who was kind to me so that I'd let him ruin me for nothing.

None of my aunties or friends' mothers will invite me into their kitchens anymore. No one will sit near me at bonfires. It's acceptable to give Fate a chance, to keep respectable, arm's-length company with a male, but there is a line a female mustn't ever cross. Her future mate's pride must not be offended.

I know that as well as anyone, but I got too wrapped up in wishful thinking. I thought that since I wanted to kiss Clay so badly, he must be my mate.

Tears fall from the corner of my eye and drip into the grass. The kisses were so sweet. How could they be so wrong?

I can't bear this feeling, like discovering that my legs have fallen asleep and they won't hold me. Like I'm helpless. I'll give myself ten more seconds, and then I'm going to sit up. I'm going to rebraid my hair, and I'm going to decide what to do.

I am always stronger than I think I am, and I am not one to stay where I don't want to be. I was supposed to work in the kitchen, but didn't I convince Father to let me work with the builders when they asked for females and pups to run errands?

And when I got the idea for the garden, didn't I rustle myself up a shovel and a trowel? I found this spot. I sold good hunks of stone destined for the scrap heap to the bakers on Cooks Lane for their oven repairs, and I bought seedlings and the potting soil and a hoe.

I might not be strong or brave, but I'm intrepid for a female Ditch, and if that hasn't done anything for me yet, it will. The alternative is taking whatever gets dished out, day after day, year after year, until I'm the one collapsed like a rag doll, half on the floor, half propped against a wall, mouthing for my young to run because I'm too beat down to protect them.

I scrub the last tears from my eyes and exhale. It hasn't been ten seconds, but I don't need them all. I struggle to sit up, swallowing a whimper of pain, and scowl at my dirt patch. It's easy enough to know what to do next.

Weed.

I swear a dozen sprang up in the few minutes I was feeling sorry for myself.

I maneuver myself creakily to my knees and begin plucking them out by the root. Worrying about the future can wait. I can't stop the sun from setting or the ferals deep in the woods from howling. It'll happen no matter how I feel. Wallowing in fear isn't going to make anything come out right.

I keep telling myself that as wave after wave of rising panic crashes over me. I pull weeds and mutter to myself that nothing is ever as bad as I imagine it to be and then my brain spits up the image of my mother's wolf crashing into the wall, and I have to start telling myself all over again. I wish once you picked yourself up off the ground the misery would go away, but I've always found you're just as miserable when you're busy, it's just a slightly better misery than if you had no distraction at all.

I've got a good pile going when a stick cracks a few feet behind me.

My heart launches itself into my throat, and a voice, somehow wavery and rich at the same time, rings out, "Is it just little old you, then, Wrenlee from Ditchside? From the stench of fear, I thought I'd come upon a sacrifice of unmated females surrounded by a pack of ferals."

An old female with long silver hair strolls into the clearing. She moves as if she's decades younger, all swishing hips and grace. She's wearing a gauzy patchwork skirt, a flowing blouse, and a hip bag.

It's the gray witch.

Oh no, oh no, oh no. She only shows up when a female is in desperate straits, when a heat goes bad or a baby is coming out the wrong way. Somehow she knows when she's needed, and there's a knock at the back door, and all the pups are shooed up to bed early.

Males pretend they don't see her come and go in the shadows, and females only speak about her in whispers, and only after tossing a pinch of salt over their shoulders.

I must be in terrible trouble. Is Father going to disavow me? Am I going to be cast out to live among the lone wolves or traded to the Last Pack? Or maybe he'll throw me to the ferals, so they can rip me limb from limb. I should have never looked twice at Clay Pulley. I should have never wondered anything about him. I didn't mean to risk my life. We only kissed.

"Oh Fate. I am so sorry. Please help me," I say to the gray witch, my panic climbing to tsunami height.

"Actually, Wrenlee from Ditchside," she replies, cocking her head and sizing me up, "I was hoping *you* could help *me*."

Despite all the manners my mother taught me—and her admonishments about how to protect myself from the mystical, tricksters, and fae—I gape at the witch as I kneel in the dirt.

She raises her thin gray eyebrows.

My wolf yips in my chest. She seems to recognize the female.

The witch's wolf rumbles in reply, a fond acknowledgment, like a "There, there, I hear you." It relieves the tension enough that I can close my mouth.

Keeping an eye on me, the witch squats, brushing her gnarled fingers across the tops of my few clumps of comfrey. “Quite an accomplishment,” she says.

My face flames. I wasn’t prepared for sarcasm. I thought the witch was good, and that Mother’s warnings were more about treading lightly around all magical folk.

The witch frowns and then her eyes widen. “Oh no. You misunderstand me. The soil here is . . . persnickety, for lack of a better term. The fact that it let you have your way at all is a minor miracle.”

The heat leaches from my cheeks, but I’m still tense as a rusty tin man. “P-persnickety?”

The witch rewards me with a smile. “Finicky? Ornerly? The ground here is a son of a bitch, not to put too fine a point on it.”

I glance down at the dry clumps surrounded by lush green grass. I can’t lie; I’ve thought the same more than once.

“I think it needs watering more often than you’d expect. It sucks down moisture in seconds.”

The witch cackles. “It’s a contrary asshole. The more you water it, the drier it’ll get.”

I sigh, finally rising to my feet and brushing my dirty hands on my dirtier smock. This day cannot get bleaker.

The witch comes to stand next to me. She seems bent and slight, but when we’re shoulder to shoulder, we’re at eye level with each other, and she seems sturdier. Close up, the worst of her wrinkles somehow seem to fade. Maybe from a distance, shadows make them seem deeper. She smells like patchouli and coffee. Even though it’s a strange scent on a female—coffee is for males, and only those who are earning well—it feels familiar. Reassuring.

“The earth doesn’t want what you want.” The witch shrugs. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“What does it want?”

She grins, and a gold tooth in the back of her mouth catches the light. “That is exactly the right question to ask, my dear. What indeed?” She stares dreamily at the dirt for several long moments and then she turns to me. “What is it that *you* want, Wrenlee Ditch?”

Clay. I want Clay Pulley.

I want him to be who I thought he was. I want that feeling back, that no matter if the work is hard and hot, no matter that the day is long, he exists, and I found him, so there is something to look forward to in life after all. I want that not to have been one big, fat lie.

“Nothing that I can have,” I say instead.

The witch cackles again. “Well, you know what they say about doors closing and windows opening.”

My nose scrunches. I’m not sure what she means. You’re supposed to shut them both.

“Never mind,” she says. “It’s a human saying. I should get to the point. It seems I’m in need of a gardener with a very particular skill set and a very specific patch of ground, and you are that gardener, and this cantankerous dirt is that ground.”

“What is the skill set?”

“Determination and desperation,” she answers brightly.

I grimace. She has the right female.

“Why this place?”

“I’m happy you asked. You ask the right questions, dear. *Why? Why not?* You’ll find that those are the start of everything. Adventure. Progress. Trouble.” She smiles at me.

I wait.

She blinks.

Am I supposed to say something now?

She blinks again as if she’s waking up and gives herself a little shake. “Well, how to explain—” Her brow knits. “For a living thing to thrive, it needs good soil, right?”

I nod.

“And for soil to be good, it needs to have the things that a particular living thing needs to thrive, right?”

I nod again, although this is all beginning to sound like my uncle droning on beside the fire once he’s polished off a bottle.

“But some soils are bad, through and through, and some living things do not want to thrive. They’ve got bigger things in mind. Do you follow?”

I don’t, but I nod a third time.

“So what I have is a plant, a very, very valuable plant that I am going to need, well, *desperately* in”—she looks at her bare wrist and squints as if checking a watch— “I’d say about twelve months, give or take a year or two.”

She ducks down, grabs a stick from the ground, and pokes a clump of dirt by her foot. She’s wearing plastic clogs with a slingback and holes punched out of the top, I suppose for ventilation. They’re definitely human. I bet they’re easy to clean.

The witch continues, “This plant has schemes and dreams of its own, and right now, it needs a bitter soil, a hard soil, in order to grow. It needs persistence, you understand?”

My nod is more confident this time. I do understand. “How is it going to grow if the soil won’t hold water?”

She waves me off. “Now you’re asking the wrong kind of question. *How* follows *why*. You haven’t answered *why* yet.”

She waits, watching me expectantly.

“Why?” I finally ask.

“So it knows how strong it is, so it can be strong when it counts.”

For some reason, tears well, and bruised, raw feelings swirl inside me as if stirred by a rogue gust of wind.

“What do you want me to do?” I can’t follow the witch any farther down the path of this strange conversation. The sun is sinking, and in the distance, an eerie howl echoes deep in

the forest. My real worries bear down on my shoulders like a yoke. “I’m not sure what’s going to happen to me when I go home. If Father will even let me stay. I—”

I cannot tell her about the shed and the scolding and the walk of shame. I can’t tell her how I brought turmoil into the house, got my mother and sisters hurt, how I ruined myself for a male who wasn’t my mate—all because he didn’t yell at me and his muscles were beautiful and he smelled like cool stone and white water and icicles and when he followed me home, for a few minutes every evening, I felt special and safe.

“I made a mistake,” I say.

Her smile is soft and kind, but her eyes twinkle when she reaches into a clever pocket hidden in her skirts and plucks out a shiny gold coin. “None are so bad that this won’t fix it,” she declares. “Take this to that father of yours. Tell him it’s from the gray witch, and that you’re going to be helping me.”

“He’s furious. I shamed him. His pride won’t let him look past what I’ve done.”

She snorts. “He’ll soon find a way to buy his pride back. Mark my words. Now come with me.” She flips me the coin, I snatch it from the air, and she heads into the trees.

“I pulled up as close as I could with the trailer. You’ll need to carry the seedlings,” she says over her shoulder. We wind through the thick, towering elms, and she continues chatting a mile a minute as I follow her deeper into the woods. “Ashbalm is nearly impossible to cultivate, but the chance of finding it growing wild just when I need it is too slim. You’ll need to be tough as hell to get it to blossom, but I have full confidence in you.”

I have no idea why, but her gold coin is a lifeline, and I am not so much of a fool as to turn it down.

“What do you need ashbalm for?” I ask the witch when she reaches into the trunk of a car she’s somehow driven through the closely planted trees.

She hands me a cardboard tray packed with a dozen peat pots, each with a single white teardrop leaf poking from the

soil. “This particular crop? Revenge.” She grins, and in that moment, with a last ray of evening sunlight filtering through the canopy and lighting her face in mellow gold, she doesn’t seem old at all.

She seems vital and alive and very, very dangerous.

CLAY

“FOCUS!” ELDRICK CUFFS THE SIDE OF MY HEAD, BUT HE’S got to rise up on his toes to do it.

I am focused.

Way down below the training yard, Wrenlee is making her way up from the very bottom of the great stairs with a full bucket. She’s wearing a scarf today, and she’s stories beneath us. I can’t see her face. *Look up. Look up.*

“Get your head in the game,” Eldrick snaps as he huffs and puffs and bounces on his feet.

I swing a lazy blow toward him which he easily blocks.

“What’s wrong with you?” He pummels my stomach a few times. He can’t reach much higher without exposing his own midsection. My muscles flex out of instinct. I wish I could leave them soft and feel the pain. I deserve it.

Wrenlee isn’t my mate. I knew after that first kiss when she didn’t go into heat. A good male would have left it there, but I was selfish. The way she looked in the shed—flushed and happy, her shy smile, her arms winding around my neck, her tits pressed to my chest, her heart thumping through her shirt—made me think she had to be mine. One more time wouldn’t hurt.

I drive a fist into Eldrick’s face, and he goes spinning. His wolf snarls. Mine takes it as an invitation to let the entire yard know how he’s feeling, growling and howling and rattling my ribs. He knows we’re not where we’re supposed to be.

Isaac, Amir, and the others take uneasy steps back from where they've gathered to watch their leader school me in how shifters fight on the circuit.

They fight to lose. You don't start until a bell rings. You have to stop when it rings again. No strikes allowed to the neck, throat, spine, kidneys, groin, knees and below. No stomp kicks. You can't break bones on purpose. Eldrick does concede that *on purpose* depends on if the referee is friendly.

The referee today is an old Claw who's getting off on calling me out for every little thing. Rabbit punch. Finger stretched toward opponent's eye. Elbow strike. Headbutting. He's not friendly, but he's also not wrong. I am doing all those things. I want Eldrick to know that one day, I am going to kill him.

"Fists up. Defend yourself." Eldrick's voice is a nasal whine. It's hard to talk when your face is swollen to hell. "What's wrong with you? Are you stupid?"

Yes. Stupid. Reckless. Weak. I kept telling myself one more time. It'll happen. It wouldn't hurt anything.

Females are allowed to be courted. How else would males find their mates? We don't mix at the bonfires or the market or at gatherings. Females keep their own company, and we keep ours, but it is permitted for an unmated male to spend time with a female in plain sight. Look, but don't touch, and if Fate moves you to taste her, but she's not yours, you walk away, and there is no shame in it, for you or for her.

I fucked up, and she wouldn't even look at me when they asked if she was mine. If she had, I would have lied. I would have dishonored myself forever.

How is she not mine? She smells like she belongs to me. Like fresh air and breathing room and sunshine.

I glance over the edge of the training yard and find her in an instant. Eldrick slams a fist into my turned cheek. She's only a flight higher now. Why is she moving so slowly today?

My guts are a tangled knot, I haven't slept, and my nerves are on a hair trigger. Does she feel like this, too? Like

everything's fucking wrong?

"Keep your eye on your opponent, Ditch, or do I need to paint you a clearer picture of what will happen if you don't?"

No. I can see it. I can't get it out of my head. It's a worm, burrowing through my brain.

I don't need an eye on my opponent, though. My wolf can smell him fine.

Eldrick feints left, but it doesn't matter. While he swings, I come at him from both sides with my fists like cymbals, and when his blow glances off my pecs, I smash his skull, and he falls flat on his ass, blinking like an owl.

"You gonna call time?" I ask the ref. "Or should I keep going?"

"Take five," the old wolf says, shaking his grizzled head as he goes to check on his boy.

Claws are always surprised when a male from another rank can tussle, and I'll never understand why. While they're in the gym lifting weights, we're lifting logs and stones. They're fighting for points, and we're out here scrapping for meat and a place close to the woodstove to lay our heads, so we don't freeze to death in our sleep.

They don't get to compete for fat purses on the shifter circuit because they're better fighters. It's because their daddies and granddaddies marked the territory decades ago, and Ditches are too busy fighting each other for scraps to realize we could take them out if we tried.

I never cared too much before, because I like working outside, and on big projects like the moat wall, if you know what you're doing, they leave you alone.

While the old Claw checks Eldrick's pupils, I walk to the low railing that overlooks the river and scan the site I've been working ever since I can remember. There she is. She's reached where she was headed.

She's waiting for a male to throw a rope over his scaffold so she can tie it to her bucket, and she's standing in the sun

like she's got no sense. A step to the side and she'd be in the shade.

There's nothing wrong with her physically, but she's a female, and she hasn't shifted yet. Her arms are weak, her hands aren't callused enough, and she's in the middle of almost a dozen brothers and sisters, so she doesn't get enough meat. Females and pups pass out all the time on the wall on a hot afternoon, and the last place you want to do that is high up on the workman's ledges or on the great stairs.

She doesn't drink enough water. I got her a canteen and a strap to wear it across her chest, but she forgets about it. She's not wearing it today. And she is walking slower than usual. My wolf whines. He wants to investigate. He doesn't understand that'll cause even more problems.

My father came by the bunkhouse and gave me a real beating last night after he heard what had happened at the shed. He said he'd raised me better, and he's right. He said I'd made Mother cry.

Wrenlee almost cried yesterday. Her soft brown eyes filled with tears. Remembering makes me want to puke and punch someone.

She almost cried that day when the putty knife hit her, and John Broom nearly died over it. I'm lucky he doesn't hold a grudge. He was so impressed that I flip-shifted that he's taken to following me around. Last night, he said he'd keep an eye on Wrenlee since I won't be on-site.

I don't want him watching her, but that's what life is now, doing shit I don't want to do. And I have no problem with that if they leave her alone. If they keep her off the alpha's radar.

"Hup, hup," the old wolf calls from the ring they've got marked off in chalk. Amir has taken Eldrick's place. He's younger than Eldrick, about my age, and he's got the dark tan and brownish-black hair of folks from the desert packs across the sea, but he speaks like any North Borderer, so if he wasn't born here, he's been here since he was a babe.

His father or grandfather must've been a hell of a fighter. The alpha talks a good game about earning rank, but most of those who come from other packs don't rise very far no matter how hard they work.

While he waits, Amir smooths back his hair into a tight ponytail and dances on his toes, shaking out his shoulders. The scent of his fear tickles my nose, even all the way over here by the railing.

He's the most decent male out of all of them. I've got the sense he doesn't much want to be doing this, either.

I shake my own shoulders out and join him. We touch fists. That's another thing you'd never do if you actually wanted to win a fight. Might as well sniff ass.

Amir gets himself into position and gives himself a few smacks, psyching himself up. Over by the water bucket outside the corner of the chalked-off square, Eldrick has recovered enough to stand with his head together with a few of the older males, eyeing me head to foot, probably talking about me like I'm livestock and they're gauging my haunches. Fuck this shit.

"Ding, ding," the ref says, mimicking the sound of the bell. I swing, connect with Amir's jaw, and knock him out cold. When he hits the ground, a small cloud of dust puffs into the air. I stare at Eldrick and curl my upper lip to show him a blunt human incisor. His face blooms purple.

He comes for me, his males following in his wake. My wolf leaps to his feet, and my heart rate actually picks up. I want this showdown. I want an excuse to let this rage and shame out. Maybe when they're all in the dirt, this horrible clutching in my chest will ease.

He stops a foot away. Why is he stopping? I don't smell fear.

"Since you're stupid, Ditch, let me spell it out for you. You are going to learn the circuit rules. You are going to forget all this back-alley brawling bullshit, and you are going to develop *discipline*. And if you're a good puppy and you can pull that

flip-shifting trick out of your ass when it counts—in the ring with Killian Kelly—then you’ll come back here with a big bag, and you can fuck any male’s mate you want. They’ll serve them up on a platter and thank you for the privilege of dipping their dicks in your sloppy seconds afterward.”

My wolf growls in his throat, so I know he’s ready whenever I am. He and I have always been of one mind. He doesn’t understand why I’m holding him back. He only understands the threat, not the words, and he doesn’t know there’s a second part coming.

Eldrick takes a half step closer. “But if you keep going like you’re too good for the *sport*, too good to learn the rules, then you’re still going into the ring with Killian Kelly, but you’re going to lose.” He lowers his voice so what he says next is almost a purr. “And I’m going to have a little conversation with that piece-of-shit father of that female you’ve been fucking. I’m going to tell him how much Alpha Fireside pays for a night with a female who’s ruined anyway.” He flashes his elongated fangs. “I’ll tell him how much he pays if things get a little out of hand.” He shakes his head, and his eyes glint. “Ditches disappear sometimes. We all know that. Who can say where they go?”

“She’s innocent.” My wolf garbles my words until they’re barely comprehensible, but Eldrick is reading me like a book.

“Now, you know no one will believe that, but if it’s true —” Eldrick smiles ear to ear. “I’m sure Alpha would pay double. Of course, you have no say in the matter. You aren’t her mate. And somehow, I suspect that when her true mate does find her, he won’t be too pleased that another male tested out his property. If there is no one with rank to stay him, he might hand her over to Alpha for free.”

My wolf is still and silent. I can hear everything. A hawk screeching above the temple’s highest tower. Trowels scraping against stone a hundred yards below us. The blood running cold in my veins.

I do what I have to do.

I tilt my head. It's the closest to baring my neck that my wolf will allow. And I take my place in the middle of the chalked square. I place my feet shoulder-width apart, one in front of the other. I point my front foot at a 45-degree angle, bend my knees, and distribute my weight evenly between my legs and the balls of my feet.

Isaac joins me. I tap fists with him, and I wait for the ref to make his ding, ding sound. And then, abiding by every rule they've told me, correcting every misstep and conforming to every suggestion they bellow at me from the sidelines, I beat him into a bloody pulp until the referee calls time.

The entire time, I hold Eldrick's gaze so that when he closes his eyes tonight to sleep, he will think of the face of the male who will kill him.

I hold Eldrick's gaze, and I listen for voices lifted from below on the wind. I listen for Wrenlee, and even though I can't hear her, I don't lose focus. Not for a second.



WHEN THE SUN begins to lower in the sky, Eldrick tells us to hit the showers. I wait for the others to haul themselves, groaning, into the locker room, and I bail. I understand that I'm supposed to eat and sleep and shit when and where they say now, but I've also had the chance to test all the males of fighting age at this point, and none can beat me.

I had no idea I was good with my fists. Before, I've only ever used them to make a point or shut an asshole's mouth for him. I've never fought to figure out a male's weakness. To work out how I'm going to kill him when I get the chance.

The Ditches are finishing up the day's work on the moat wall, and Wrenlee is dragging herself up the stairs toward the shed with an armful of empty buckets. I shouldn't talk to her. I can only make things worse. She's favoring her left leg, though, and I still can't see her face. Her scarf is pulled too far forward.

I hang back until she's rinsed her buckets and started down the path to town. There are a few packmates around, but when my wolf growls at them, they bend their necks and hang back. Wrenlee hears him. Her spine goes ramrod straight, and her shoulders rise to her ears, but she doesn't stop. She keeps hurrying on her way.

Her anger and hurt burn my nostrils, but I also smell sunshine, and for the first time since she ran off yesterday, I can breathe.

"Wrenlee," I call.

"Get away from me," she hisses over her shoulder.

"What's wrong with your leg?" I slow my pursuit so she doesn't push herself so hard to get away.

"None of your concern." She stumbles over an exposed root and finally stops, but she doesn't face me. "Just leave me alone before I get into any more trouble."

I don't dare take her arm and turn her around. Her wolf is rumbling faintly in her chest, and mine is agitated as hell, looking for an excuse to burst free and tear something to pieces. He's confused. He smells her fear and doesn't get why I don't kill whatever is causing it. If I touch her and she screams or struggles, I don't know what he'll do.

So I jog ahead and block her way. Her head's down, but she's not bending her neck. She can't bear the sight of me. I stand taller. I can handle it. If she's safe, I can handle anything.

"Look at me," I say, stern and cold. I've never been harsh with her before, but there's ice trickling down my spine. Something is very wrong.

She lifts her chin, playing like she's tough, but her pupils are wide, and her bottom lip betrays her with a wobble. There's a handprint on her cheek.

My wolf sees red. He leaps for our skin, letting out a howl that rustles the branches overhead. I stagger. Wrenlee stumbles backward, tripping over the hem of her dress and landing against a tree trunk. She grabs its sides, pressing her back into

the wood like she thinks that if she tries hard enough, it'll open so she can hide inside.

She doesn't run; she doesn't fight. She's completely vulnerable, and even though we're alone, it scares the shit out of me.

I wrestle my wolf into submission, and I force myself to swallow the fear and master myself so that when I speak, my voice doesn't make the tears swimming in her brown eyes fall.

"Who did this to you?" I finally manage to ask, standing at a respectful distance while she still clutches the tree trunk. "Who hurt you?"

"You did," she says, eyes averted, cheek nearly pressed against the bark. It's a direct hit, knocking the wind out of me. I know all of this is my fault, the result of my weakness.

"Was it your father? Your brothers? Which ones?" They're ass-kissers, eager to show neck. Those are always the males who need to tear into a female or pup to wash down the taste of boot in their mouth.

"What did you think would happen if we were found out?" she asks.

I wasn't going to let that happen. It was only a few kisses. I was a fucking idiot.

"Tell me who." I let my wolf's growl infuse my voice.

"What are you going to do? You're not my mate. You have no rights. You can't keep me here." Her voice trembles, and the pulse in her delicate neck flutters faster.

She's so fucking pretty. You wouldn't notice her if you didn't have cause to look. She wears her brown hair in the same single braid as all the other Ditch females, and she has the same brown eyes. Her ass is a little rounder than most, and her tits are a little smaller, but she's average height, and her lips are neither plump nor thin, her legs neither long nor short. But once you notice her—

She's beautiful. The browns aren't ordinary browns. Her hair shines like lacquered wood, and her eyes are alive and

dark and deep. She calms your heart when you look at her, and at the same time, she makes your blood race.

She's bold. She made eyes at me first. She dragged her feet so she'd be right ahead of me when we made our last trip up the great stairs at the end of the day.

She's scared, but still, she waits for me in the shed, and her whole face lights up when she sees me. She makes me feel twice as tall, and weightless.

But she's not mine. I have no rights. I've already made things bad enough, and I should walk away now, but I can't. The best I can do is step to the side so she knows she can go.

She stops clinging to the tree trunk and straightens. My stomach plummets. I brace myself to let her pass, and to muscle my wolf into allowing it.

She doesn't go. She readjusts her blue patterned scarf and smooths her dirt-smudged smock. The pulse in her neck throbs and throbs.

"So you're a fighter now?" she asks. Her eyes are still cast down, but she darts them up at me, and each time, a new wave of blood rushes to my cock and my wolf rumbles. To him, we're too far away. She needs comfort, and he does not understand why I'm over here, hands at my sides and with a hard-on.

"I am."

"You're going to fight on the circuit?"

I jerk a nod. I want her to keep talking. She can ask me anything if she just stays here. How in the world is she not my mate? I've been drawn to her since the day I first noticed her watching me at the base of my scaffold. There is no bond, though, no tether between us that allows me to keep hold of her. I can't hear her thoughts. She's not begging me to mount her.

My hands flex. Her gaze darts down. Her face flushes bright red, blanching the outline of the mark on her cheek. Clearly oblivious to what it does to me, she bites her lip. Despite the funk of her fear fogging the air, I catch a whiff of

her pussy, and I'm hard as a rock. I don't want her to be afraid. I step further to the side until I'm standing in the brush that edges the path.

She stands a little prouder. Her wolf gives a muffled yip. My chest lightens.

"Will you put your money on me?" I ask.

"Father doesn't let us keep our coins," she says. Her eyes lower. It was him. He lay his hands on her. Because of me.

Her nose quivers, and her wolf whines. She scents my anger. Shit. I flatten my arms against my thighs. How can she smell my aggression over the reek from sparring in the sun all day?

She wrings her smock.

I lower my voice, careful to keep any roughness from it. "Will you say prayers for me, then, Wrenlee?"

"You're not my mate," she answers quietly.

"Even so," I say.

"If my cousin sees you here with me, he'll tell, and I'll get it again."

"You won't." I can't keep the edge from my voice.

"You can't say that." Her chin firms. "You have no right to me." Her beautiful brown eyes darken to black pools, but still, I make out a glint of pain. "You're playing free with my honor, Clay Pulley. You said it yourself. Males will question my virtue. Let me go, and don't follow me anymore."

With that, she presses her lips flat, and on wooden legs, she walks past me and then breaks into a run, her wolf's sweet, muffled howls trailing in her wake. Mine howls back, promising her that she won't get far.

We wait to strip until she disappears around a bend. I hang my pants and shirt from a high branch on a tree a few yards off the path. If a Ditch sees them, they won't be here when I get back.

My wolf more or less bursts out of my skin. There's a blinding flash of pain and then the rush of sensation—the gathering dew as evening falls, the tang of smoke carried on the breeze as females stoke their dinner fires in the town proper. I expect that Wrenlee will head that way, but she surprises me.

She veers west, cutting through the sparse woods that run between the river and the field where the alpha's bonfire is held. She skirts the open ground and follows the low wall running along the back of town until she comes to a weed-choked trail. My wolf is like a pig in shit. He's outside, and he's stalking a female. I am going to have to fight him to get our skin back.

Wrenlee doesn't even pause to sniff the air. She has no idea she's being followed. It makes my gut ache.

What is she doing out here? Meeting a male? She wouldn't.

Still, even the idea sends adrenaline crashing through me. My wolf surges forward. An image flashes in my brain—he tackles her, driving her to her hands and knees as he snarls and roars and sinks his fangs into that pulsing neck until her fear seeps strongly enough from her pores to calm him. I want that. I *need* it. But she isn't ours.

She isn't ours.

A female who allows herself to be marked by a male who isn't her mate is beyond ruined. She has no value. No protection.

I hold him back by the skin of my teeth. And he holds me.

Of course, there isn't another male waiting for her when she finally gets to her destination. There's a garden. A very small, sad one.

The dirt is cracked, more like dried putty than earth. There are tiny green buds planted in neat lines, but they don't look like they're doing very well. The ones still upright are drooping. A few have given up the fight and laid themselves flat.

Wrenlee mutters to herself as she grabs a big metal watering can and heads toward the river.

It's a terrible place for a garden. The tall trees provide too much shade, and the soil is obviously garbage. The grass around the plot is strangely lush and green, but it must be sucking all the water because the plowed square is parched.

I follow Wrenlee, pissing on trees as I go, and investigate the nooks and knolls while she makes trip after trip to the river. It seems like every time she waters a patch, it turns light tan and dusty again by the time she comes back to water its neighbor.

There aren't any predators in the area if you don't count possums. My wolf and I consider the hollow log where a possum has slept recently for a long while before we decide that maybe we do count them—they've got sharp-ass teeth and do that hissing thing—so my wolf takes a shit on his doorstep. I'm sure he has other hidey-holes, but none so close to Wrenlee's territory.

I have no idea what she's doing out here, but while she weeds and fusses over her doomed baby sprouts, my wolf curls under an elm, and we listen to her murmur.

“Persistence, you understand? You're strong. Stronger than you know. You can't give up. Okay?”

Her voice is beautiful. Gentle and sweet and a little throaty. I've never heard her talk much. I'm usually up on the scaffolding, and she's down below. We don't waste time talking in the shed.

She lectures the dying plants for another half hour, and when the temple bell rings the dinner hour, she pops up and rushes back to town. I watch her disappear down Cooks Lane before I make my way back to my shucked clothes. I take my time getting back to my new bunkhouse. It's in a fancier part of town. There are green spaces for the pups to run around and landscaped flower beds.

The sun is setting, and the lamps have been lit when I let myself into the courtyard. I hear the thump, thump of a

basketball. Amir is shooting baskets in the near dark. The gears in my brain, which have been grinding since I saw Wrenlee's cheek, click into place.

"Hey," I say. I clap and hold out my hands.

Amir passes the ball.

I shoot. It bounces off the rim.

"Did you sleep through Human Sport?" Amir asks. He dribbles, shoots, and the net goes swish.

I catch the rebound. "I'm a Ditch, remember? I never went to the Academy." I shoot again, and this time, the ball falls straight through the hoop.

"You learn quickly," he says, picking up the pace. Our wolves get excited and start making themselves heard.

"Yeah. I guess." I feint left and knock the ball out of his hand. "Kind of funny. Yesterday, I was a mid-rank Ditch. Today, the way I figure it, I'm the top-ranked fighter in North Border."

Amir looks at me and snorts. "Maybe, but Eldrick is top Claw."

I shrug and hold the ball. "Today. Maybe."

"You got a point?" Amir stands toe-to-toe with me, unblinking.

"I will beat Killian Kelly and then everything will change. I'm giving you the opportunity to place your bet early."

"Yeah? And what do I get if I put my money on you?"

"It's easy. You just have to look handsome tomorrow when I go down to you in the third round."

Amir's smirk disappears. "Claws don't throw fights."

I bare my blunt teeth. "I'm not a Claw."

He rests his hands on his waist, tilting his head back, catching his breath. He's doing the math. If I'm number one, and on occasion, he can take me, that makes him number two.

It's pretty easy fucking math. You don't have to have gone to the Academy to do it.

“What do you want?” he asks.

“I want you to bump into a certain Ditch male who lives down by the low wall, and I want you to take offense, refuse his apology, and break both his arms and all the fingers in both of his hands.”

Amir cocks a dark eyebrow. “Is that all?”

“And his legs.”

“All right, man. Arms, legs, and fingers.”

“And one other thing.”

Amir shakes his head. He clearly thinks I'm crazy. “And that is?”

“I want you to come with me to dig up some topsoil from those flower beds over there and haul it out to the woods behind town.”

“You're a strange wolf,” Amir says as he turns, tossing the ball over his shoulder. The net swishes. “And I'll help you haul, but you're doing the digging.”

“Not a problem,” I say. “I am a Ditch.”

And if I need to be a Claw, I'll be one, and if I need to be a gardener, I can do that, too.

I'm not Wrenlee's mate, but I swear to Fate, she will not want for anything or come to any more harm, not as long as I have fight left in my body.

WRENLEE, THREE MONTHS LATER

THE FEMALE SNEAKS A GLANCE AT ME FROM THE CORNER OF her eye. “She used to hang around in the shed, waiting for him. He had to tell her to her *face* that they weren’t mates, and she needed to leave him alone and stop throwing herself at him. It was so embarrassing,” she whispers to a new worker who just started on the wall.

At least unlike a lot of folks these days, she’s *trying* to talk about me behind my back. The breeze is blowing in my direction, though, so I can hear everything. I pretend I don’t and keep my head down, but if anyone’s looking, my burning face will give me away.

“I saw him at the fight Friday night,” the new female whispers back. “I’d stalk him, too. Did you see him lay out that male from Salt Mountain?”

“The beefy one or the blond one?”

“Well, he beat them both, but I’m talking about the blond one. It got so vicious that I thought Clay was going to rip his throat out. The bell rang and they kept going, and all the males sitting ringside had to jump in to pull them apart.”

The females shudder exaggerated little shivers and giggle, moving along the ledge with their empty buckets, taking their time. The wind is whipping hard today, coming down from the north, carrying voices from the training yard above and making the scaffolding creak. I can’t hear Clay, but I know he’s there.

Sometimes, I glance up and catch him at the railing, staring down. I always look away quickly, an irrational wave of anger squeezing my throat shut. All the whispers and snickers and lecherous stares from the males are his fault. And mine. I'm angry at myself, too.

At least none of the males try to corner me. I was expecting it. That's how they are when you get a reputation, but I only have to deal with leers and the occasional muttered *slut* or *whore*. Probably because the day after Clay disavowed me, my father got into a brawl at the Spade and Shovel, and a Claw broke almost every bone in his body. Dale and Emmett jumped in and got it pretty bad, too.

Clay wasn't there, but the timing was suspicious, and the damage was bad enough that no one's willing to chance messing with me.

The worst part of it is that I miss Clay. I miss sitting in the shade of the scaffold while he worked overhead, how all the ordinary things were sharper and sweeter. The sunshine was softer, the air was purer, and the taps of chisel on stone were clear as bells. I miss having something to look forward to. Everything is back to normal now, dull and dusty.

At least the ashbalm has finally taken root. I have Clay to thank for that, and I'm angry about that, too. His wolf marked a perimeter around the garden, so the rabbits are no longer a problem. More mysteriously, he did something to the dirt. It's mostly still dry and inhospitable, but he's mixed it with what looks like the soil used in the town's landscaping, so it holds just enough water to let the seedlings grow. He must feel guilty, and that makes me feel sad and pathetic.

I don't want to owe him anything, and I don't want him to know about the ashbalm. I want to be able to hate him, free and clear. I knew it was wrong to meet him in private; I knew it could come to no good. But at night, sleepless in my top bunk, listening to Father's piteous groans, I replay that scene at the shed over and over in my mind.

Eldrick asks, "Is she your mate?"

And this time, Clay says, "Yes."

He lies. For me. Because saying I'm *not* his is an even bigger lie.

I know that a righteous male always tells the truth, even in the face of death, and I know that such a lie would inevitably be discovered, and the shame would be a hundredfold, and that even wanting him to tell such a lie for me is vile and dishonorable.

Still.

When I've mashed one ear into my lumpy pallet and smothered the other with my thin pillow, trying to muffle the sound of Father's wolf howling his impotent rage and the neighbors pounding on the walls, I imagine Clay saying, "Yes. She's mine."

And my heart beats faster, and my chest tightens, and I'm not sure if I want to cry because it would have been so sweet or because it's so impossible.

And I'm so angry, too. I'm furious that he's up there with the Claws, looking down on me, and that his name is on everyone's lips on Saturday mornings after the fights, and they say things like he has the confidence of a young Alpha Fireside, and that at the end of the season, when he faces off against Killian Kelly, the legendary flip-shifter of Quarry Pack, it'll be even money on who wins.

The more important Clay gets, the smaller and lonelier I feel, the more *left behind*, and I'm angry because I didn't feel that way before. I was fine, and now I'm not. Even my wolf is irritable, pacing all the time and craning her neck. She's only calm at the garden when she can scent him, even though he's never there.

Another strong gust of wind blows through the valley created by the wall and the river, and the scaffolding clanks and complains.

A loud thunk a few feet away on the ledge beside me nearly startles me out of my skin, and a half-full bucket of mortar rolls perilously close to the edge.

“Goddamn it,” John Broom swears. His round, chapped face appears over the platform twenty feet above me. “Wrenlee, I’ve got my hands full. Can you bring that back up?”

I’m already hauling myself to my feet. I’ve never had a problem with John, despite the putty knife incident, and lately, he’s been downright kind. He and his brothers keep me busy most days, and they don’t ogle me or call me names. They don’t try to talk to me either, and that’s fine.

I grab the bucket, hook it over my elbow, and then twist the bottom of my shift and tuck it into my smock strings, freeing my legs to climb. Since the temperature has been dropping by the day, I’m wearing my thick woolen tights, so at least the gawkers won’t get much of a show. The bosses don’t like females climbing the scaffolding, but sometimes, it’s unavoidable.

I’m careful as I climb, holding the metal bars with both hands and wedging a foot firmly in each crosshatch before I haul myself up to the next. The wind is constant now, calming to a stiff breeze and then swelling to a gale before gentling again. High overhead, the tops of the trees towering over the town’s steep roofs sway and toss their red, orange, and yellow leaves like lions’ manes. Every time I inhale, my lungs fill with cool green river water, fallen leaves, and crisp northern air.

It’s beautiful, even more so because my heart is raw. I keep my eyes glued on my handholds, but I can feel Clay’s gaze on me. Somehow, I can *feel* anxiety knotting his gut as I swing the bucket over the edge of the platform, and I hope it’s not my imagination. I hope he cares and he’s sick with worry.

I should climb right back down, but the air’s too clean up here. I can think for the first time in months, and my wolf is strangely silent and on edge. She senses danger, and so do I.

John Broom glances over his shoulder and grunts in surprise as I haul myself up next to him. The wind whips my shift against my tired legs, and the scaffold creaks. My blood

pumps faster with fear, and it's a relief. The thrill of danger sweeps away all the hurt and loneliness and shame.

A male shouts from above, but a gust carries it away before I can make out the words or the voice.

"Best get on down now," John calls over. "I'm coming down myself just as soon as I finish this here." He's wedging a stone into place, his brow furrowed in focus.

The platform sways, but they're designed to. The brittle bow breaks; the supple bow bends. I gaze down at the lazy, sparkling river, flowing mutely eastward, and the forests past it that sprawl all the way to the horizon, as far as the eye can see.

I know that Salt Mountain, Moon Lake, and Quarry Pack lie in that direction, as well as the forests where the Last Pack live burrowed in dens like we're told our kind did a hundred years ago. There are human towns and cities, too, teeming with millions of souls starving for connection to the earth and the animal selves they lost touch with sometime during prehistory when they became one thing and we became another.

I've never seen any of these places with my own eyes, and I've never longed to visit like my sister Annabel, but on a day this clear and lovely, I can't tear my gaze from the horizon where the faraway forest smudges into the sky.

Another gust kicks up, plastering my shift and smock to my back, and then reverses direction, loosening the fabric and setting it to snapping.

A howl somehow rises above the rush of the wind, and my wolf leaps to attention. A moment later, the plywood sheet I'm standing on lurches, knocking me to my knees.

"Get down!" John shouts, but it's too late. In slow motion, everything pitches forward. The platform tips away from the wall, teetering at an impossible angle as the bucket slides slowly like a pat of melting butter toward the edge. "Wrenlee, jump!"

John races the same way as the bucket, and an instant before he leaps, he shifts. The last I see of him is the hindquarters of his mottled brown wolf disappearing over the edge.

I can't jump. I'm falling. The scaffold is tilting over, crashing to its side, and I tumble into the air, my arm somehow hooking over a metal bar. I swing, dangling into nothing as the river winds several stories below my kicking feet, screams and wind roaring in my ears.

I'm hanging by my armpit. I flail my other arm, but there's nothing to grab, nothing to pull myself up on. My wolf scrambles inside me, helpless and terrified, and my legs pump in midair like a thief's doing the hangman's jig. I'm going to die. The fall is too far.

I did this to myself. All my misery and misfortune—all of it is because I reached for something I shouldn't have. I don't want to die feeling like this, like everything was for nothing. I swing my legs harder. My shoulder is seconds from popping out of the joint; I can tell. Even if I survive the fall, I won't be able to swim. The river will sweep me away.

I don't want to go so soon, alone, with a broken heart.

There is a thump. Shouts. The scaffold lurches. I scream.

Clay's head and chest appear over the platform edge, now vertical above me. He reaches for me, straining, but I'm much too far below.

"Hang on," he yells and then hollers over his shoulder, "Hold tight." The others must be using their weight to keep the scaffold from toppling the rest of the way into the river.

The bar slips, or I do. My numb arm shakes, threatening to give out. Above me, Clay gauges the distance, scouring the plywood for handholds, but there aren't any, and it's too far.

I'm happy that he is here. That I get to see him before I go. His face is hard and sharp, and it hurts to know he isn't mine, but still, he's beautiful. I wanted him to notice me, and he did. For a little while, I was the center of his attention, and I'm grateful for that at least. I try to smile so he knows.

Our eyes lock. His pain and desperation tear into my chest like grappling hooks. Metal screeches. The males erupt in shouts.

The scaffold tips forward into empty space.

“Wrenlee, shift!” he roars, and he leaps.

My limp arm slips free, and I’m falling, but it isn’t painless. My bones snap midair. My muscles tear, and I scream, but my voice is gone, and the color of the world is wrong. I flail, but I have no hands; I’m upside down; I’m going to crash into the river, but no, a split second before I hit the green surface, I’m snatched from the air and tucked against a hard chest.

Clay catches me, and in that instant, he twists so that his back slams against the water and I’m cushioned from the impact by his body. We rocket straight to the bottom. The cold stops my heart, and I can’t breathe. I can’t see. I struggle, but he’s got me in a firm grip, and he’s pushing up. We burst into the air, and it’s even colder, and bright, and folks are shouting high above, running down the great stairs.

With pained effort, Clay swims us to the shore with one arm. His other cradles me close. The echoes of his fear scream inside me. I can *feel* him.

He crawls onto the rocky shore that runs along the wall and collapses on his side, gasping for breath. My wet wolf wriggles free from his hold and stands on her own legs for the first time. They wobble. They’re thin.

As if Clay were a small hill, my wolf carefully descends from his chest, hobbles through the stones to the riverside, and peers into the water. Her soaked fur is matted against her shivering body, so there is no hiding the fact—she is a runt. Her ribs are the biggest part of her. Her haunches are puny, her head small, her legs even spindlier than my mother’s. She’s the size of a pup with the proportions of a grown female.

She stares down her reflection and realizes it, too. There’s something wrong with her.

Our wolves are supposed to be strong and fast and vicious. That's the deal. Even the lowest female Ditch has a beast inside her. But I guess not me.

My wolf peels back her thin lips. Her teeth sport tiny points, not much sharper than the tip of a fork tine. They're hardly fangs at all.

I didn't know. She didn't feel small inside me.

My wolf looks behind her at the male pushing himself onto his knees. He's made of muscle, and his soaked jeans cling to his thick thighs. His tank top sculpts the slabs of his pecs and ridges of his abs.

He's our mate, and that's what we wanted more than anything, and he's extraordinary. Everyone says he's going to be a legend among the Claws, and I'm a runt, and he almost died because I was stupid and reckless. I almost died. My heart sticks in my throat like a lump, and I shiver. Drops of water patter on the stone shore.

Clay rises to his feet and takes a step forward. His boots crunch.

My wolf cowers, her ears flattening. She inches backward toward the river.

"Hey, you're safe," he says, reaching out a hand, palm open.

My wolf whines, scooting back until her tail brushes the water. She knows who he is to her, but he rejected us in front of the other males. He told us to *get*. Because he knew she was puny?

Before, she didn't understand that she was weak, but now she does, and she is scared. She licks her fangs, and they hardly scrape her tongue. They're not nearly long or sharp enough to tear through fur or skin.

Clay takes another cautious step. My wolf backs into the cold river up to her haunches, crouching, her head tucked between her shoulder blades. She's trembling so badly that the water ripples.

Clay squats and draws his hand back. “We’re fine,” he says. “Come out of there now.”

My wolf doesn’t budge or blink.

He reaches out again.

She whimpers and scuttles further back.

People are arriving. A male mutters, “What’s wrong with her?”

Clay turns his head and snarls, and they’re smart enough to stop where they are. They cluster and whisper and stare. Here we are again. My wolf bares her teeth.

Clay takes an exaggerated step backward. “Please,” he says quietly. “Come out. It’s cold.”

My wolf is not going to be tricked by him. She’s surrounded, outnumbered, and so very, very small. He hasn’t protected her before. He sent her away.

“All right, then. Have it your way.” Clay blows out a breath, reaches behind his back, and peels his shirt off over his head.

My wolf cocks her head. His skin is goose-bumped, his dark nipples beaded. His hands move to his belt. Neither of us look away. He shucks his jeans and boots and stands barefoot on the cold pebbles, his long cock pale and dangling between his hairy thighs. He cracks his neck and rolls his shoulders.

With a final deep exhale, he breaks in front of us, elongating, lowering, changing. The air rings with the crunch of bone, but he doesn’t make a sound, then his wolf is standing there on four legs, shaking out his thick, shiny pelt. I’ve never seen his color before. He’s white on his muzzle, inner legs, and chest, but his nose and haunches are almost orange, and the rest of him is rich brown mixed with a rusty red.

He’s massive. He could eat us in two bites. My wolf whines and bares her neck.

His wolf chuffs a few times, ignoring her completely, and trots into the river about ten feet downstream. He’s quick about it, dashing back to shore as soon as he’s dunked himself.

Then he strolls back to where my wolf is frozen, huddled half in and half out of the water. He stares majestically into the middle distance as water drips from his magnificent pelt.

My wolf peeks up at him. She's ninety-nine percent terrified, but there's a spark of curiosity in her. His coat is very pretty. It's even shinier wet.

He slides her a glance from the corner of his somber golden eyes and then he gives himself a huge, unnecessarily vigorous shake. Drops fly, splattering the stones and the river and my wolf. She gets a face full, and she sneezes, swiping at her snout with her paw.

And that, apparently, is enough for her. She clambers onto her shaking legs, picks her way onto the shore, and gives herself a good shake, too.

Clay's wolf sits back and watches her.

She begins to lick her fur.

Clay's wolf saunters over—close, but not too close.

She keeps licking, but she's watching. Her heart is pounding, but it's not all fear now. She likes how he smells, even though he smells like wet fur and river water.

Clay's wolf settles himself on his stomach, head high and alert, but otherwise like he has no worries or place he needs to be. I can feel him in our chest, though. He's wired.

My wolf finishes fussing and decides she'll settle herself on her belly, too, close to Clay's wolf, but not too close.

The bosses shoo away the folks who came to see our shattered bodies. They grumble and trudge back up the stairs to the scaffolds, a few of which are tipped over. The one I fell from is upside down, its metal legs sticking out of the middle of the river.

Staring ahead as if lost in thought, or at least not at all interested in the small, wet, raggedy critter beside him, Clay's wolf wiggles an inch over. And then another.

My wolf yips, but softly. Clay's wolf rumbles.

My wolf's ears perk. He rumbles louder.

She wriggles the last inch until they're lying flank to flank.

My wolf yawns.

Clay's wolf nudges her with his head until her muzzle is tucked under his. He is so warm.

Her heartbeat finally begins to calm.

By some miracle, we're alive, and we're mates. What does it mean? And what happens now?

I don't know, but for this minute at least, as the wind dies and ordinary, everyday sounds reach our ears—the temple bell ringing the hour, the calls of workers high on the ledges, the rush of the river—I don't need to. I can lie here and listen to my mate's tail swish and thank Fate for all of it.

CLAY

I'VE NEVER BEEN THIS HAPPY BEFORE. IT FEELS STRANGE AND really fucking precarious.

Wrenlee's wolf is resting, almost dozing beside me on the rocks. She lets my wolf lick her coat smooth, but if his tongue ventures near her face, she shoves her muzzle into the crook of his neck. She's ticklish.

I want to give her more time. Hell, I want to lie here forever despite the hard rocks and growing chill in the air, but Amir is standing a yard away and has been for about a half hour. He seems willing to wait, but as the minutes pass, he darts more and more anxious glances up at the training yard.

My wolf slowly extricates himself from Wrenlee's, but when her nut-brown eyes narrow on him petulantly, I have to wrestle him the rest of the way. As I lumber to my feet, I fight him for our skin. It's only when I throw up a memory of Eldrick leering at her by the shed that he surrenders.

I snatch up my clothes and boots on my way to Amir, and I can only be grateful that Wrenlee is a wolf while she watches my bare pale ass hop on the rocks as I stuff my legs back into a pair of soaking wet jeans. I keep my body between her and Amir, blocking his view. Something deep inside me doesn't want any male to even look at her. She's so small, the exact size and shape of prey.

When I reach Amir, I walk him a little farther off, but I also can't stand the distance from her. She's mine, and despite how badly I've fucked up, she's not hurt. I owe Fate more than

I can ever pay, and my heart is full to bursting with gratitude and terror.

I have no idea what to do next.

I take a minute to tie my boots and run my fingers through my damp hair until it's out of my eyes. Amir waits patiently in a wide stance, arms crossed, as is his habit. He's got a lot of pride for a male climbing his way up the ladder. In that way, he reminds me more of a Ditch than a Claw. Even though Claws rank higher, their arrogance reeks of insecurity. Amir doesn't have that stink.

Finally, I make my way to his side, and we stand together, silent for a moment, considering the upside-down scaffold in the middle of the current. Eventually, he sniffs, and his nostrils flare.

"She's your mate," he says.

"Yeah."

"You said she wasn't."

I shrug, although it sure as hell doesn't feel like nothing. "We'd kissed. Nothing happened."

Amir nods. "You know, that 'first kiss' thing is North Border bullshit. Probably because most females here make you wait until they're damn sure before they let you close enough to ruin their reputation. None of the other packs believe in it. Where my father's from, you don't kiss until the binding ceremony, and you're mated by then, trust me."

"Seriously?"

Amir grunts. "Eldrick sent me," he says, changing the subject.

"I figured as much. He's got a message?"

Amir blanks his face so that I understand these words aren't his own. "He says get your ass back up the hill. You can bring the female and put her in the groupie pen until she goes into full heat. Says to remind you that the fight at Quarry Pack is two weeks away, and there's no time for bullshit."

Amir subtly shifts his stance and drops his arms to free his fists, just in case I swing.

My wolf surges forward. *Kill him. Rip his throat out.*

My wolf doesn't differentiate between the messenger and the message. I seize the animal, wrestling him back with all my might, as I try not to look like a madman and make myself heard over the snarling in my throat.

"Tell Eldrick I'll be back when I've got this sorted out."

Amir shakes his head, but he's not stupid enough to argue. Instead, he gazes past me toward the river where I left my mate. Immediately, I throw my shoulders back, step into his space, and bump him with my chest.

He raises his palms in the air. "Whoa, friend. I get it. I won't even look."

He meets my gaze. His wolf glares out of his glowing bronze eyes, ready and eager to seize their skin but restrained by an unexpectedly iron will. For a moment, our wolves size each other up, and then as if by mutual agreement, we both take a step back.

We take a minute to make sure our wolves are stepping back, too.

"She's small," Amir finally says, breaking the silence.

My wolf growls.

"No offense intended," he adds. "My cousin was a runt."

"She's just small." I know that's not what they'll call her, but whatever they say, it'll be behind my back. The way my wolf is tearing up my insides, anyone who calls her *runt* in my hearing is going to lose their face.

"Hey, man, it happens. Someone's got to be the smallest. My cousin was late to shift, too, but he's doing all right."

Wrenlee's wolf is going to do better than all right. "Is his wolf bigger now? Did he, like, bulk?"

Amir shrugs. "To be honest, he's still pretty small. I don't know what my uncle did. I tell you what, though—if my mate

were a runt, I'd sure as fuck put some meat on her bones. You need to track down some boar. Maybe pheasant."

He's got a good point, but I don't see how I can hunt *and* prepare to get my ass beat by the Quarry Pack alpha. Wrenlee will be going into heat, too, and I'll need to tend to her. My cock stiffens against the icy zipper of my freezing, wet jeans. The cold does not deter my hard-on in the least.

Amir clears his throat and lowers his voice. "If you can't fatten her up, I'd forbid her to shift and get her a gun."

Our eyes meet. Except for the alpha and his guard, guns are forbidden. The punishment for possession is exile. The sentence for dealing is death.

Amir's black eyebrow arches ever so slightly.

I incline my head the same degree. I think we're beginning to understand each other.

"Where are you going to take her?" he asks. "Your parents'?"

I consider it, but it won't work. "They've still got a bunch of pups at home."

"So what's your plan?"

We both know I'd never let my mate near Eldrick and the others. If I were still a Ditch, I'd be due a room in a boardinghouse once I mated, but I'm a Claw now, and they don't give you shit except a bunk until you win a few purses.

I'm also not letting Wrenlee anywhere near her father or the brothers who did nothing to protect her. Or that greasy-ass cousin who checks out her ass. I don't want her near anyone who could hurt her. My nerves won't fucking take it.

An idea forms in my mind, and I see her little struggling garden in the middle of that lush green clearing. I've cleared the woods for a half mile in every direction, and nothing's been stupid enough to cross the perimeter since I marked the territory. It's close enough to the river. Water wouldn't be a problem.

“I need you to get me some things.” I picture my few possessions stowed at the Claw dormitory. “I need my clothes, my duffel, my pallet, blankets. My mess kit. A pot. My utility knife.” I’ll need some canvas and rope, too, but I know where I can get that.

Amir folds his arms again, his gaze sharpening. “I think I can handle that . . . but I’ll need you to do something for me.”

“Just tell me what round you want me to go down.” We’ve gotten good at our subterfuge. Amir isn’t bottom of the heap anymore, and whenever I go down, my next sparring partner always gets a little unearned confidence, and I get the pleasure of wiping it off his face.

Amir shakes his head. “No. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“If you want coin, fine, but you’ll have to wait.” Fate knows, I’m not walking away from the Killian Kelly fight with the purse, and even with Eldrick’s boot in my ass, I’m sure it’ll be at least a few weeks before I’ve recovered enough to get back into the ring.

“No, man, I need you to go down to the Blind Cockerel. There is a certain male who frequents the establishment, and I want you to bump into him and take offense. Don’t worry. Unlike your mate’s father, this male won’t apologize.”

“And you want me to break his arms and legs?”

“If you can’t see your way to killing him, I suppose his arms and legs will do.” He flashes a bitter grin.

Yeah, we’re definitely beginning to understand each other.

“Eldrick and the rest are idiots, but you do realize this shit is obvious as hell.” I mean, I’ll still do it, but I feel like I should point that out.

Amir’s grin widens, flashing his descended blinding-white incisors. “I’m not trying to be subtle. I was figuring you weren’t, either.”

True enough. “Should I even ask what this certain male has done?”

His grin disappears. “He’s keeping something that belongs to me, and he needs to be reminded to handle it with care.” Amir’s face says he’s done talking about it.

“It’ll have to wait until my mate is settled.” *My mate*. It’s the first time I’ve said it. I scrub my chest where the bond between us flows, sure and steady. I can’t fuck this up, not any more than I have already.

“Of course.” Amir claps me on the shoulder. “That was a badass dive, by the way. And you made me fifty notes.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“When the scaffolding fell, Isaac said, ‘I bet they’re gonna have to drag him out with a net.’ I said, ‘Fifty notes he swims out,’ and he said, ‘Deal.’ The second the word was out of his mouth, you popped up and started swimming for shore.”

“Easy fifty,” I say.

He grins again. “It was.” His gaze darts to where my mate still crouches by the river behind me, and my wolf rumbles a warning. “I’ll scrounge up some shifts and smocks and whatnot, too.”

“Obliged.”

Amir jerks his chin and heads off back up the great stairs. I turn back to Wrenlee’s wolf. She’s trembling and eyeing me with more suspicion than has ever been directed my way, but at least she hasn’t backed herself into the water again.

Just to be on the safe side, I stay where I am and call to her, “We’ve got to go, Wrenlee. Can you shift back?”

Her wolf glares, and she hunkers lower to the ground.

Shit.

“I’m not going to hurt you, baby.”

Her wolf’s ears flatten, and she bares those teeth about as small and sharp as corn kernels. I’ve never seen such contempt coming from a critter so tiny and harmless.

High above us, the temple bell rings the end of the working day. We need to get out of here before Eldrick and the

others decide to trek their asses down.

“Wrenlee, please. I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

Her wolf snorts, and it’s dainty and sassy and adorable as hell, but we do not have the time.

“You can make me sorry for this later, okay?” I say, and before she can even try to struggle to her feet, I scoop her up and tuck her into the crook of my arm.

She yelps and tries to nip me, but I’ve got her neck between my thumb and index fingers, so all she can do is snap the air. Her scrawny back legs pump, and occasionally she nails my side. It feels like being pummeled by a newborn babe.

“Hush, sweetling. I’ve got you.”

By some miracle, as I carry her up the stairs, past the shed and the path to town and then down the trail that leads around the outer wall, she calms. Her head droops, and after a valiant fight, she rests it on my wrist. Her legs and tail dangle from my forearm, and her eyelids drift closed.

In my entire life, I have never felt taller or prouder or luckier.

Or more aware of what I am capable of doing to anyone who threatens the tiny female in my arms.



WRENLEE’S WOLF won’t shift back. I got her to the garden, and that made her happy. She leapt out of my arms to snuffle around her sad little plants, sneezing when dirt got in her nose. Every time I get near her, though, she growls and trots off to sniff something else.

While she was still conked out on my arm, I dropped by my uncle’s house. He’s the Ditch’s quartermaster, and when he saw the state of affairs, he let me into the main supply building and looked the other way while I helped myself to a few tarps, pails, a hammer, and a length of rope. Since Wrenlee’s wolf

doesn't want anything to do with me, I busy myself picking out a likely site and pitching a tent.

I feel a little better when she begins to follow the perimeter I staked out and piss on the trees I marked. She'd probably turn beet red if she fully realized what her wolf was doing. Wrenlee is a shy female. These past three months must've been hell with all the whispers and stares. I dealt with what I could, but folks are cruel, especially to lone females, and especially when they're from Ditchside.

Guilt turns like a screw in my chest. I should have lied and said she was mine. I've played the moment over in my head a thousand times. The instant I denied her, I knew I'd made the worst mistake of my life. What if she never forgives me? What if she chooses to stay in her father's house? She has that right.

I glare at the tarps I've hung from a cord between two trees. I'm making a piss-poor showing of myself so far, that's for sure. She must be hungry. I fetched some water when we first got here, but she's ignored it. She's probably thirsty, too.

I abandon the tent and stalk her down. She's wriggling on her back in the dark-green grass, gazing lazily at the sky flushing pink as the sun sets.

"You need to drink some water," I tell her from a fair distance.

She scrabbles to her feet, ears perked with alarm.

My chest twinges. I didn't mean to ruin her good mood. "The pail is over there." I set it by a stump. I'm pretty sure she can drink from the bucket if she stands on her hind legs, but it'd be easier from a step up.

Her eyes narrow into slits. She makes no move toward the pail.

I sigh. "You're not hurting me by making yourself thirsty."

Her snout goes up. Without further ado, I am dismissed, and she slinks past me with her tail waving, deliberately casual and unconcerned. I'm careful not to let my lips curve. She walks straight past the water pail and through the loose flaps of the half-pitched tent. I suppose she's small enough that

there's more than enough room for her, even though the edges aren't pegged into place yet. Not enough room for me, though.

I don't hide my smile as I go to collect a few sticks that'll make good stakes. She might be a runt, but her confidence is full-grown.

Why won't she shift back? Is it because she doesn't know what to say to me? I don't know either, except I'm sorry. I've never been sorrier in my life, but that doesn't feel like anywhere near enough. She trusted me. In that shed, she welcomed me into her arms. I didn't have to coax her mouth open. She was hungry for me.

Will she even want to touch me now? She'll have to—her body will make her once she's in full heat—but will she hate it? The idea makes me want to puke.

How the hell do I make this right?

I'm worrying about that and throwing away perfectly good sticks, pitching them as far as I can out of pure frustration with myself, when I hear Amir call, "Hey ho! Hold your fire!"

He emerges from the trees, laden with packs like a street peddler, and immediately drops my stuff on the ground.

I rush to help him before he dumps my pallet in the garden dirt, too. "They give you any trouble?"

He grunts. "They would've if I hadn't gotten in and out while they were all at dinner."

A yard away, the tarp rustles, and a small wolf snout appears between the flaps.

Amir notices, but he doesn't let on. "I stopped at home and begged these off my sister before I came," he says, digging in my duffel and pulling out a plain linen shift and a pale-blue smock. He lays them carefully on top of the stack of sacks.

"My thanks." I extend my hand. It throws him for a second, but he takes it. Clasp hands is a Ditch custom. Claws don't touch other males except to beat on them.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," he says. As soon as I go to walk him back to the path, Wrenlee's wolf darts out and races

toward the supplies. She snatches the shift and smock in her little fangs and hightails it back to the tent.

Amir is smirking as he heads back to town, and I have to muffle a chuckle as the sides of the tarp bulge and muttered curses float from the flaps.

When Wrenlee finally emerges, my breath is sucked from my lungs. Her hair is down, hanging in soft brown waves that frame her face. Her cheeks are flushed pink. Amir's sister must be young. The shift hits just above Wrenlee's knees, showing her bare calves and feet. I can't help but stare as she wiggles her toes in the grass.

Heat courses through me. She lowers her eyes, and her hair falls forward and hides her expression. I can't stand it. I need to know what she's thinking.

I close the distance between us and tilt her chin up with my finger. She still won't look at me. She glares past me at her garden, but she doesn't move away.

I can feel her in my chest. She's scared and hurt and angry, but amid all that, she's curious, too.

She sneaks a glance up at me.

What the hell do I do now? If this were my mother, scared and angry, my father would tease her, nip her on the butt until she shrieked and took after him with the broom.

If it were my aunt, my uncle would make himself scarce down at the pub until he caught sight of the pup she sent down to see if he'd managed to drink himself to death out of spite yet. He'd sober up with a swim in the river and then drag himself to the kitchen door with a bouquet of wildflowers and a hangdog expression that could make a stone heart weep.

As far as I can make out, the mated Claws don't bother themselves if their females are out of countenance.

At a loss, I follow my instincts. I grab Wrenlee's hand and lead her toward the water pail, stopping to grab my mess kit. I sit her down on the stump, and thank Fate, she goes along with it. I fetch a tin cup and dip her a drink.

She accepts it, careful to make sure our fingers don't brush. She sips primly, but she doesn't stop until she's drained it.

I refill it as soon as she's done.

She keeps peeking up at me, her cheeks blushing darker and darker. I don't know what to do with myself. I feel hulking and ham-handed and exposed. I pretend to look at something past the tree line in the woods, but I'm stealing glances at her, too. She's pretty as a picture.

Her shift is tight, squishing her breasts down and creating a deep crease where they're squashed together. She doesn't have a lot up top, so she doesn't spill out of her dress like some, and I've never seen this much of her. I've felt her though. She let me cup her when we kissed. She was panting so hard, whining in her throat, so beautifully carried away that I wondered afterward if she even noticed, and I felt guilty for going too far.

I'm the male. I'm supposed to do the right thing. Provide for her. Protect her at all costs. How the hell do I do that in a tent in the woods?

She's in heat. Soon enough, she's going to let me touch her all over and look at her all I want. Before my father found out and beat the fact that it's wrong into my head, I watched the videos that the higher-ranked males would bring back with them on their phones from Moon Lake. Females in heat aren't shy at all. They get on hands and knees, thrust their pussies in the air, and beg for it.

I rotate my hips so that my hard-on isn't waving in Wrenlee's face. The back of my neck is probably bright red. I'm not totally inexperienced. I did it once with a Ditch widow who lives on East Gate Lane and another time with a ballsy Blade female whose mate had set her aside. I know what to do with my cock.

If I keep telling myself that, maybe I'll be able to pull myself together. Maybe I'll stop feeling like I'm out of my depth.

I should focus on the important things. Wrenlee needs food and shelter. Shelter first. Night is coming on quickly. Already, the woods have cast the clearing in shadows, and the evening star is shining low above the horizon.

I can't bring myself to walk away, though. Not when she's darting those glances at me. At my bare forearms. My tented jeans. My mouth. My cock aches. I want her to beckon me over like she did in the shed.

I should say something. Tell her how fucking sorry I am. Promise her that no harm will ever come to her again. Swear that I'll make her happy even if it kills me.

I clear my throat, coughing into my fist. She finishes her second cup of water, sets it down next to the pail, and gazes up at me expectantly. I'm supposed to know what to do now. It's my job. I'm the male.

I grab her hand again and urge her to her feet. A straggling wind from the north tousles the treetops and whips her hair in her face. As it dies down, she plucks strands from her mouth. She always wears it in a braid.

I have an idea, and so help me, I'm so lost for what to do next, I go with it.

"Turn around." I take her by the shoulders and gently move her to face away. She's wary, but she does as I ask. Before I begin, I extend a fang and score the hem of my shirt, ripping a strip free.

"Stay still," I tell her, gathering all that shiny hair and dividing it into three parts. I've never done this before, but I've seen my mother and sisters do it plenty after they dry their hair in front of the fire on a Sunday evening.

Wrenlee's hair is slippery and soft and smells like her. The strands slide through my fingers, and I lose focus. Her breath is coming faster, and the sensations flowing through the bond are bright and sharp and needy. I fumble, and my work all falls apart.

"I'm sorry," I whisper in her ear.

She shivers.

“I can do it myself,” she says quietly, as if we’re in the shed and trying not to draw attention.

“I know.” I divide her hair again, and this time, I make myself ignore how it feels and how she smells, like evening dew tinged with pussy, and how I can hear her heart thumping double time. My wolf rumbles, and hers kind of squeaks in response.

I weave, over and under. I run out of one chunk of hair well before the other two, and the whole thing has a kink at the base of her neck, but it’s done, and since it’s on the back of her head, she can’t see it. I tie a bow at the end with the strip of shirt, but since it’s so wonky, a lot is hanging free. I twirl a loose end around my finger.

She pulls it away as she turns to face me, and I let my arm fall to my side. Her eyes are shining. I’ve no doubt that mine are, too. Our noses are quivering. We aren’t moving, but somehow, every second, there is a little less space between us.

“I’m so angry at you,” she says, staring at my chest.

“I know,” I say, even though she’s not. I can *feel* her now. She hurts. She trusted me, and I broke that, and knowing exactly how it feels is like shards of glass scraping my skin. “I’ll be sorry until the day I die.”

Her big brown eyes well. “I don’t want that.”

I find the end of her braid again and pull it over her shoulder, teasing the bristly ends with my thumb. “I’m going to keep you safe.”

She frowns. “Am I in danger?”

In an instant, my brain dumps a hundred images—ferals and lone wolves, rogues from Last Pack, the floods in spring, the blizzards in winter, wasting sickness and moon madness, the witch who skulks around the alleys late at night and smells like bitter herbs and other females’ fear. Vipers, bears, and natural wolves, rabid foxes and raccoons, rusty nails and strong winds that blow scaffolding into the river. Eldrick’s sneers. *The going rate for a night fireside.* The scent of the

Claws' mates—the terrible mix of despair, drying seed, and the cutman's epinephrine.

“No.” I do not allow my voice to betray me, not by the slightest quaver, but I have no control yet over the bond. She can feel my fear as easily as I feel her pain.

Her lips spear down, and her brow knits.

I can't bear it. My mouth is on hers before I form the thought, and she is sweet, sweeter than I remember, than it's possible to be. She tastes like soaring. Like home and freshness and everything I ever wanted.

She pushes me away, hard, panting.

I trip back, raising my palms. We freeze.

A bewildered look of loss flashes across her face, and it's all I can do to stop myself from scooping her back into my arms, but I stay right where I am.

“You're still angry.” I don't want to tell her what she feels, but now I can feel it, too, sharp and spiky where it flows through the bond between us.

She sniffs. “You said I ruined myself, that I played free with my honor. You told me to *get*. Like I was an animal.”

I want to hang my head, but she doesn't need me weak. I hold her gaze and say, “I did. I wanted you out of there. I wanted you too scared to let yourself be alone with any male again.”

“Because you thought I was a slut.” Her lower lip wobbles a moment before she stiffens her chin.

I press my fist to my chest, trying to stem the terrible ache. “Because you're the most precious thing in the world to me, and since I wasn't your mate, I couldn't protect you. Eldrick said—he threatened you.”

“How?”

I can't tell her about the alpha and his purchased females and how they're found. I won't be the one who puts that into her head, not when I can't assure her there's no danger. “He

insinuated that he'd do things. It doesn't matter. You're my mate. No one will touch you now. You're safe."

She peers up at me with those soft doe eyes, and sheer terror grips my heart. I can't possibly guarantee what I said. As perfect as North Border appears on the surface, with its pitched fairy tale roofs and whitewashed walls, it's rotten to the core. For every picturesque square, there's a back alley, a windowless room, a closet at the end of a hall with a thick door and the smell of fear wafting from under it.

She lives here, too. She knows some of it, but as long as I have breath in my body, I'm going to protect her from whatever I can.

"I'm sorry I said those things. I hurt you."

She looks so small and vulnerable standing there with her arms wrapped around herself. I want to hold her again. Any distance feels way too far.

"You're lying," she says softly. "About being safe. I can feel it." She taps her chest.

"But you can feel the rest is true." I take a step toward her. "You know I'd take every word back if I could."

I get into her space, so close that I can hear her shallow breath, but I don't touch her. Her pupils widen.

"You can feel that you're mine. Here." I gently rest my fingertips on the skin just below the base of her throat.

Her lungs hitch.

"You feel that I mean everything I say." I lean down. Her eyes drift shut. "Forgive me," I whisper, my lips brushing hers.

She moans.

My wolf growls.

I can't hold back a second longer. I wrap an arm around her waist and hoist her up, slipping my knee between her legs and settling her onto my thigh. I pause, my brain kicking in a moment too late, but she's with me. She whimpers, looping her arms around my neck, arching into my chest, chasing my

kiss, welcoming me. Her tongue slicks against mine, and our teeth click. I have her, and it's been too long. It's been for-fucking-ever.

I can't sip from her; I can't slow down. Her braid is undone, her hair threaded through my fingers. She pants into my mouth, and I groan into hers. The pallet is rolled up. Everything is still packed.

The grass is soft. There's not too much dew yet.

I can't fuck my mate on the ground. She needs to build her nest, and she's going to need more than a woolen blanket and a worn flannel flat sheet.

She drives her nails into my scalp, as if she's afraid I'll try to get away. I'm never leaving her. When I'm old, I'll rock by her kitchen fire and bother her. When I'm dead, I'll be her shadow.

I drag her closer, grasping her hips and jerking her forward. She gasps. The scent of pussy floods my nose. Oh, hell, yes.

What do I do next?

I have no idea, so I keep her steady with my hands on her waist, and otherwise, I don't move. Her shift has inched its way up as her hips work and she grinds herself against my flexed thigh. I don't stop kissing her. I couldn't even if I wanted to. I want to see, to watch, but all I can bring myself to do is smooth my hands lower to squeeze her sweet, ripe ass.

"Clay," she says, alarmed. Her brown eyes fly wide and find mine.

"Say it again," I say between kisses.

Her brow wrinkles. She doesn't know what I mean.

"Say my name again, Wrenlee." There's a resonance in my voice that I don't recognize. An authority.

"Something's happening," she gasps. Well, if it's authority, she doesn't recognize it, but she's clinging to me even tighter, so I don't care. "What's going on?"

Shit. I hope she's coming, but wouldn't she know? Females aren't supposed to touch themselves, but they sure do in the videos from Moon Lake and in the barn shows after the full-moon runs.

"It's all right, baby," I tell her, forcing myself not to throw her to the ground and mount her like every cell in my body is screaming to do. She's going to have a goddamn nest with nice, clean blankets and pillows, and it isn't going to be in the woods outside the wall, either. I'm a male, not an animal, thank Fate, because my wolf has no idea why I'm not balls deep in our mate's pussy by now.

"Clay, it's coming." Her breath is ragged, and her eyes are round and sparkling. I want to memorize her. My cock wants to burst through my zipper.

"Let it come, then."

She screams, a sweet little shout of victory, and then she trembles head to toe and collapses against me, limp and sweaty and smiling like a sleepy kitten.

I am brilliant.

I do not know what I did—if I even had that much to do with it at all—but Wrenlee smells like cum and satisfaction, and she's plastered against me like she never intends to move. Fine by me.

I wrap her in my arms, lowering us to the ground so I can hold her better, and I keep kissing her—her mouth, her cheek, the line of her jaw, her neck. She giggles and squirms, and I stop immediately. I don't want to give her any reason to draw away.

Nearby, her sad, struggling flowers flutter in the cool breeze. "Why are you growing those? Why not squash?" Squash will grow anywhere. You can't stop it. It's good eating, too, in a soup or roasted with butter.

"I'm growing them for the gray witch."

I tense, adding the witch and the flowers to the list of worries in my mind. "Are they poisonous?"

She shrugs. “Maybe. The witch says she needs them for revenge.”

“You should not do business with such females. It’s dangerous.”

She wriggles out of my arms to climb on top of me, propping herself on my chest to glare down into my face. “Just because you’re my mate doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do, Clay Pulley.” She’s not really mad. Her heart’s thumping, but it’s excitement. When I shift my hips under her, I can make it thump harder.

“Say it again,” I demand.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” she says, her voice softening.

“No, say ‘my mate’ again.”

She blushes and nestles back against my side, hiding her face under my arm. “Mate,” she whispers. My chest glows.

Outside this patch of grass, there are killers and Claws and wicked folk, bent on their evil machinations, and soon enough, I’ll have to turn my mind toward them. But for now, in this moment, I will not worry. I will breathe my mate in with the brisk evening air, as happy as a male has ever been or could ever hope to be.

WRENLEE

CLAY HAS GONE TO HUNT OUR DINNER. ON THE ONE HAND, I need time alone to get myself together and to suffer through the worst of the embarrassment at rubbing myself against his leg, but on the other hand, neither my wolf nor I like him being out of our sight.

He said he wouldn't go far. He saw deer signs earlier on the far side of the river, and he figures he won't be more than a few hours since he's hunting as his wolf. He wasn't shy at all when he stripped and shifted. He didn't bother picking up his clothes either. After he left, I folded them neatly and tucked them into the little nest I'm making in the tent.

Nests are weird. We're wolves, not birds, and even if once upon a time, when we lived in dens, it was sensible to make a soft place for newborn pups, we have beds and cradles now. And yet females from the higher ranks have dower chests that they fill with fine linens and beautiful embroidered cushions to build their nests. Ditch females make do with the worn sheets and blankets their mothers and grandmothers rescued from the rag bin.

It doesn't make sense to ruin perfectly good sheets, but it's okay to pile old ones on the floor and have sex on them? It's weird.

My brain still thinks so, but a need inside me that's just now waking up demands we find ourselves some decent blankets. I have a pallet, two flat sheets—plain and scratchy, but they smell like Clay—and a drab woolen blanket that must

be great against the elements but intolerable against bare skin. I've got that rolled up in the duffel to make a pillow.

The only other things I have are Clay's clothes—a few shirts, two pairs of jeans, socks, and underwear. The shirts are faded, the jeans are threadbare at the knees, and the whites have that dingy grayness of everything that goes through the laundry on Bristle Lane, but they're still my new favorite things.

I lay the jeans flat and lie on top of them, lining my legs up with the denim. Clay is a good deal taller than me, and wider, too. I cover my top with one of his shirts, pulling the collar to my nose, and I breathe in the lingering scent of mortar that never washes out. My body flushes and unravels at the same time, and I can't tell whether it's anticipation or a fever coming on. I suppose it could be both.

I am aware that I'm being weird, but also, I did not understand before how important it is to make a good nest. It has to be *perfect*. I don't have enough materials to do the job, but when Clay comes back, I'll tell him, and he'll fix it.

I have no reason to have such absolute faith in him. My wolf suddenly has a lot more of a say in our thoughts, though, and while she has zero faith in the man, she has absolute confidence in the wolf.

Good mate. Red fur. Red-furred pups.

She is the most excited about pups. I'm a little less enthusiastic. I'm going to need to get a job in the kitchens. I can't wear a pup on the ledges, not when scaffolding is falling into the river. That means I won't see Clay all day, even at a distance. I never wanted to do kitchen work—it's hot and hectic and tempers flare. I can do it if I must, though. My mother, aunts, and sisters do.

I don't want to raise a pup around the Claws. They do what they want, and pretty much the worst thing an unmated Ditch female can do is catch the eye of one. If her father doesn't act quickly enough, or if he doesn't bother protecting her, there are rumors and tears and, in the worst cases, a visit from the gray witch.

It's good that her finicky flowers are coming along. If Clay wins a few purses and I can harvest the ashbalm, we can rent a room in one of the cheap streets. The Claws are clannish, but maybe they'll make an exception for Clay if he does well for them. I'm sure he will. I saw him with John Broom. Clay fought like a machine, quicker than your eyes could follow, stronger than your mind could conceive.

I shiver and sit up. His shirt falls, bunching in my lap. Do I want this?

When Clay and I were working together on the wall, I dreamed about being his mate every night. Lying in bed, before I fell asleep, I decorated our home, named our babies, and picked out the flowers I'd weave into my hair on the day he presented me to his family. It was all exquisite and raw and precious because it was never going to happen.

But Clay Pulley is my mate, and a few months ago, he rejected me. The Claws offered him a seat with them fireside, and he dropped me like a hot potato. He told me to go work in the kitchens and stop drawing attention to myself. He said *my* behavior made males question my virtue, as if he wasn't in that shed with me. He *said* those things, and now, because he's my mate, all of that is erased?

He saved my life. He risked his life for mine. Doesn't that erase it?

He apologized. Isn't that enough?

I don't want to mistrust him. I want to wrap myself in these things that smell like him and float away on that hot buzzing feeling inside me. I want him to come back. I don't like him being where I can't see him. What if a feral attacks him? What if he disappears and never comes back—plenty of folks do, especially on nights close to the new moon—and I'm curled safe in the tent he pitched, nursing bitter feelings?

I need air. I jump to my feet and slip out into the dark. There is a small glow from the fire Clay built before he went after the deer. The stars are out but they're fuzzy and distant tonight. The dew is cold on my bare feet, but I don't mind. I'm sweating from being cooped up under the tarp.

I'm stretching, drawing the cool night deep into my lungs, when a stick cracks. My wolf's ears shoot straight up. I dive back into the tent, scrambling for the knife Clay left, but even as I do, my wolf reassures me—

Family.

“Wrenlee? Don't be scared. It's me,” Annabel calls out from the shadows. She says don't be scared, but her voice shakes, and she reeks of fear.

“What's wrong?” I hurry to her. She's alone, but I can scent my mother and sisters on her smock and in her hair. They're terrified. “What happened?”

“It's Father,” she says. “You have to come. Someone gave him a gun. He's going to shoot Mother. Please, he'll listen to you.”

I grab her hand, and together we race down the path toward town. “H-he w-won't listen to me,” I gasp as we run. “W-we h-have to get Uncle Morris.” Morris is Father's oldest brother. If anyone can talk him down, he can.

“N-no, he'll listen to you. Your mate is a Claw. You rank now.”

I guess that's technically true, but I've never seen a female pull rank on a male, not even a female from the alpha's family. But then again, I only see them on feast days and at bonfires and full-moon runs. Maybe they do.

While I push my legs as hard as I can, I reach for the bond and try to give it a tug to let Clay know I'm going. I don't know if I'm doing it right. It's like grabbing a rainbow.

“W-who gave him a gun?” I ask as we squeeze one after another through the low-wall gate.

“I don't know. Emmett, probably.”

It's not until my feet hit the cobblestone that I realize I'm still barefoot. I'm not even wearing my smock. I left it hanging outside the tent. I didn't want too much of Amir's sister's scent in my nest.

I run as quietly as I can. Most folks are still awake at this hour, gathered by the hearth to chat and play cards. I don't need to set off an alarm. Part of me would love to see Father exiled, but we'd lose the house and then what would happen to Mother and my younger sisters? I'd like to believe my brothers would care for them, but the older ones have families of their own, and to be honest, I don't know if they would, push come to shove.

Father's probably drunk. I need to tread very carefully. Show my neck right away.

I yank on the bond again, and this time, there is a tiny tug back. Relief floods my chest just as we round the corner to our lane. Reading each other's mind, Annabel and I duck down the alley, take the back steps two at a time, and burst into the kitchen.

Father is propped in his rocking chair, his arms and legs in dingy white casts. There is no gun. He couldn't even hold one if he tried.

Mother is on the floor beside him, weeping. Her left eye is swollen shut.

My other sisters are clustered by the pantry, clinging to each other, their wolves whimpering, their necks bared.

The table has been turned over. Dirty dishes are broken and scattered across the wood floor. In the middle of the braided rug, Eldrick stoops with his arm slung around the shoulder of my youngest sister, Laney, hooked so that her slender neck is pressed into the bend of his elbow. One of my brothers is collapsed against the cabinets. His head is tilted at an unnatural angle, but his chest is moving.

A half dozen Claws stand in a half circle behind Eldrick, leering at my huddled sisters.

"Well done," Eldrick says to Annabel. "You can fetch as well as any other bitch, I see."

"Let her go." Annabel reaches out for Laney, but even with all her bravado, she's too scared to get within arm's length of the Claws.

Eldrick laughs. “I am a male of my word.” He flexes his bicep, drawing Laney closer to his chest. Her little fingernails dig into his beefy forearm. He drops a kiss on top of her head and lets her go. She tumbles to the rug like a rag doll, flips to her knees, and scrambles as fast as she can to Mother.

Annabel and I circle slowly to our right until we’re standing between Mother, Laney, and the Claws. We don’t have a chance against them, but we can slow them down. I need Clay. I reach for the bond, but I can’t focus. It slips through my fingers.

“So this is the little slut who thinks she can take my fighter.” Eldrick stalks toward me, sneering. I hold my ground. I don’t want him any closer to Laney. “A fucking runt, no less.” He spits on the rug and then leans over to whisper in my ear. I don’t want to bow my head, I hate myself for doing it, but the instinct is too powerful. I clutch the sides of my shift in my fists.

When he speaks, his breath is hot and soggy. “You belong to me now, runt. That mate of yours is going to come back, he’s going to show *fucking* neck, and he will train like he’s *fucking* serious. He’s going to beat Killian Kelly, and we’re going to bring home the fattest purse this pack has ever won. And then, I’m going to throw him off that goddamn wall with a few hundred-pound weights chained to his ankles, and you’re going to spend the rest of your days on all fours in the groupie pen, working off every *fucking* second I’ve wasted on this goddamn *aggravation*.”

I am grasping the bond, curling my fingers around it, jerking backward with all my strength, when Eldrick draws back and swings. My jaw explodes with pain, and everything goes black.



I WAKE up on the dirt floor of a dim room that smells like blood and old fear, and my heart nearly punches through my chest. I leap to my feet, my wolf and I searching the shadowy

corners for danger, but we're alone. My pulse pounds in my ears, and my breath is harsh in the damp silence.

There's a heavy wooden door. It doesn't have a knob. A piece of board has been nailed over the hole where the knob should be. I rush to it, trying to open it anyway, pushing with both palms and then slamming my shoulder into it, but it doesn't budge.

There's a small rectangular slat at head height, and I pry and shove, but I can't open it.

I'm in a basement. Black mold creeps up the walls from rotting baseboards. The room is fairly big, as large as the supply shed, but there's only one high glass-block window. Although it's thick with dust, it lets in some light. It's morning. How long was I out?

Where's Clay?

My panic swells, and I grab for the bond and pull and pull. I know he's there. I can feel him, his fury and anxiety, but I can't tell if he's close or if he feels me.

My jaw throbs. My face is swollen, my right eye puffed into a narrow slit, and I'm scared.

The room is empty except for a pile of stained sheets in the corner. Something terrible has happened there. It's clearly a nest, but it's been fouled. Instead of one male, it smells of many. The cotton reeks of terror and pain. It's been ruined, everything intentionally kicked out of place. There are small dirt footprints, no bigger than my own, stomped into a pale-blue thermal blanket.

I don't smell death. The female who made the nest survived. She walked out of this room. I will, too.

I try the door again, turning to kick the bottom with my bare heels, but it doesn't give. The window is too high. I still jump for it, but I'm a good foot away from reaching the ledge, and even if I could break the glass blocks, I'm not sure I would fit. My wolf could squeeze through it. Maybe she could leap to the ledge.

I eye the distance from the door to the window. Maybe twelve feet.

My wolf dashes around inside me, yowling up a storm. She wants to try. She's so very small, though. I don't think she has the strength to break the glass, and if Eldrick and the others come back, I would be even more vulnerable. The blow I took to the face would have killed her, without doubt.

I'll try the jump again myself. I back up to the door and take a running leap, and this time, my fingertips skim the ledge, but I can't get a grip. I back up, try again, and fall. Then I pound on the door again until my shoulders and my heels are bruised. I can't stop. If I give up, this is real, and I can't let that be.

Time ticks by, and slowly, the room gets brighter. I give the nest a wide berth. My wolf and I are in accord—it's tainted.

Eventually, my shoulders and fists can't take it anymore. My legs collapse under me, and I end up cross-legged in the middle of the floor. Where is Clay? What are they doing to him? Maybe they didn't catch him. Maybe he caught wind of what they were doing and he ran. The thought comforts at the same time as it cuts.

I try to still my mind and focus on the bond. It's hard to sort it out from my screaming panic, but if I picture the bond flowing from me to him and think really hard, I can trace it.

I feel his rage and terror, but as I turn my attention inward, those feelings become muted, and a new note emerges. It's almost impossible to describe. It's not a sensation, more of an impression, and if I had to name it, like a pup finding animals in the clouds, I'd call it a wolf ripping through another wolf's throat. The feeling doesn't frighten me, though. It calms my heart and evens my breathing. Clay is close. He hasn't abandoned me.

The room is dank and cold, but I'm sweating. I shouldn't be. I've been resting for a while, now, but I'm not cooling down.

And my body feels strange, almost like it's plumping. My breasts are heavy, I'm tender between the legs, and my skin is tight because every curve is swelling and ripening. There is no comfortable way to sit, and I am so thirsty. I'd give anything for a cup of water with chipped ice, or sweet juice, maybe grape or apple, frozen to an icy slush. I groan. The sound is too loud and obscene so near a stranger's filthy, ruined nest.

I sit very, very still. I can't go into full-blown heat here.

I grab the bond. That strange impression flows into me, bloody and violent and reassuring. I can visualize it wrapping around my wrist and winding up my arm into my chest like a strong and healthy vine as it whispers images into my head of a wolf with red-tinged fur tearing another wolf apart.

Clay will come for me. And what will happen then?

He can't take them all out.

I hang on to the bond as the daylight fades and my wolf paces back and forth, back and forth. I drift off to that kind of sleep where time slides forward, and even though you're aware, you aren't awake.

Hours later, when it's pitch-dark, I'm startled alert by muffled growls and voices, and I surge to my feet. The rectangular slot on the door scrapes open.

Clay.

I start for the door.

He snarls, "Get back."

I stop so quickly that I rock back on my soles. I don't understand. He's here. I'm safe.

My wolf notices the other scents before I do. There are other wolves close by. Males. Eldrick. Isaac. Others. Their scents are familiar. They cling to the soiled nest. They're also strangely rotten, like sour sweat and decay.

All I can see through the slot are Clay's eyes, and there's something wrong with them. It's like they've been wiped blank and painted over. I don't see him in there, or his wolf, either.

Dread grabs me by the throat. He's on the other side of the locked door. Have they made him another offer he can't refuse?

"You see her," a snide, sneering voice says from the hall. It's Eldrick.

My wolf whines and lowers her head, and I hate it.

"Where is her food and water?" Clay asks without tearing those strange vacant eyes from me.

"You want her fed, too," Eldrick answers, "you're gonna need to earn it."

Clay turns until his head is in profile, and if I did not see it myself, I would not think such a perfectly empty face could communicate such unmistakable contempt.

Eldrick goes on, unaffected. "Last full moon, the Hunters trapped themselves a feral out by the bogs. We've been keeping him on ice for a special occasion. I figure if you can take him out, Killian Kelly should be no problem for you, eh?"

No. No one goes against a feral alone. Even Hunters go after them as a pack, and they take nets and knives and iron pipes. Ferals are infected, stuck between man and wolf, stronger than both, driven by madness and rage at Fate.

"Clay, don't," I say. He shows no sign that he hears me.

"Kill the feral, and we'll keep her as full as she can handle." Eldrick snickers, and my skin crawls.

Clay's jaw tightens. "I feed her. You don't go into this room. None of you."

"You think you're in a position to negotiate, Ditch?"

"I think you said you'd bring me down here if I could take out your three best fighters in three rounds, and now I'm standing here, so yeah, I think we're negotiating."

There's a moment of silence, and my stomach coils into a knot. Clay doesn't blink.

Finally, Eldrick's mocking voice floats through the open slot. "Smell that, Ditch? I know you do. Did you know the

young males dare each other to come down here at night? They swear that on a full moon, you can hear the echoes of the female's screams."

Ice runs through my veins. Clay stares steadily in the direction of Eldrick's voice.

"We're such a superstitious lot. The female's not dead." Eldrick chuckles. "But I'm sure she wishes she was."

Clay doesn't betray a single emotion, not by the slightest twitch or wince, but the bond crackles, whipping and sparking like a live wire. I clasp a hand to my chest as if I can tamp it down.

Finally—I guess when Eldrick grows bored with the stony silence—he laughs and says, "Let's see how cocky you are when a feral takes a bite out of you. Something humbling about watching an animal chew and swallow your flesh in front of your own eyes. Right, Amir?" Eldrick snorts, and a hand appears in the small window, and as suddenly as it was opened, the slot slides closed.

The male voices quickly fade, disappearing down the hall. I don't even get a last look. My heart gallops, and a bead of sweat drips down my clammy back.

I don't know what to do, so I sit down again. Hours pass. Eventually, exhaustion and all my aches and pains become too much, so I lie down on my side, resting the uninjured side of my head on my forearm. I tuck my knees to my chest and listen to the bond. It's a jangling roar, furious and bloodthirsty, but as long as it's strong and steady, I'm okay. Clay's alive.

He hasn't given me up. He wants me fed.

The sun goes down, and the room cools. The concrete floor grows icy against my burning body. My shift is soaked with sweat. I can't drift off to sleep now. Instead, I float in a fever dream. My bones and muscles hurt, and my breasts ache, and my shift chafes everywhere it touches my skin. I shiver, my teeth rattling, and I can't tell if it's from the heat or the cold.

The witch's words repeat in my head. *Right now, it needs a bitter soil. So it knows how strong it is, so it can be strong when it counts.*

I don't know how to be strong. I'm scared, and I hurt, and if I could surrender, I would, but I have no choice.

Is that strength? Living through it when you have no choice?

At some point, much later, there is noise at the door. I don't jump. I'm too stiff, too out of it. The hinges creak, and the room floods with the harsh light of the fluorescent bulbs from the hallway. I have to sit up. I can't lie here curled into a ball. I shove myself up on my hands and sit back on my heels, but my legs are too wobbly to stand. The room tilts, and my stomach roils.

"Wrenlee." Clay rushes in and kneels in front of me, dropping a brown paper bag to the ground. His hair is wet, and he smells like mint and soap. I drag him into my lungs, expelling the lingering reek of the males from the hall.

"Clay?" I clutch his forearms. He steadies me, pressing his cool forehead to mine.

"Five minutes," a male barks from the door.

Clay takes a water bottle from somewhere, unscrewing the cap as he pushes it into my hand. I don't need encouragement. I gulp it down, chugging until I'm forced to stop to breathe.

"Here." Clay digs a hunk of meat wrapped in cheesecloth from the bag. Venison.

My stomach rumbles, and my wolf howls.

Clay rips off a piece and places it between my lips. "Eat," he says softly, bending close to me again, brushing kisses across my forehead as I chew. As soon as I swallow, he offers me another piece.

While I eat, his fingers skim my swollen jaw. He brushes matted hair off my face and smooths his hands down my arms as if he's reassuring himself that I'm here, and he's here. We're in one piece.

“You have to run,” I whisper to him.

He hushes me, feeding me another bite.

“You can’t beat a feral by yourself.” He has to know this. When they get over the low wall, the males go out in posses to hunt them down.

“I just did,” he says, kissing the tips of the fingers I’ve pressed against his chest where the bond sings back and forth between us.

My eyes well. “They’re going to kill you. After you fight Killian Kelly, they’re going to throw you into the river with weights tied to your ankles.”

“No, they’re not.” He holds the bottle to my lips, and I drink. “You are going to be brave just a little bit longer, and you and I are both going to walk out of here together. I promise.”

“They tricked me,” I say, tears dribbling down my face. “They hurt my mother, and they were going to hurt my sisters.”

Clay wipes my cheeks with the sleeve of his gray Henley. “Your family is safe now. I made a deal. No one is going to touch them.” He presses another piece of meat to my lips, but I can’t eat. I need to talk. Tell him what’s happening.

“I’m so hot. My brain isn’t working right.” I grab his hand and press it to my chest above the neckline of my shift. I want to show him how I’m burning up, but once his rough palm touches my skin, I lose track.

“I know.” He kisses the corner of my mouth and offers the venison again with his free hand. “Eat this for me, sweetling, so I know you’re fed. Please.”

I do, shivering and huddling against him, holding his hand against my heart, and when he offers me the water again, I drink.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he murmurs. “I just have to do some things and then they’ll let you out, and I’ll take you

home, and all of this will be in the past, and you'll never have to think about it again."

"What things do you have to do?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. You just make sure you finish this meat, and there's an apple in the bag, too, and a chunk of cheese. You'll eat it all, won't you, Wrenlee?" He catches my gaze and tries to look stern, but it doesn't work. His wolf is in his eyes, greedily watching me with a longing that makes my heart ache.

"What things?" I ask again.

There's a nasty chuckle from the doorway.

"Time's up, Ditch," an unfamiliar male voice says. "Don't worry, female. Your mate doesn't have to do much—only knock out Killian Kelly in the first round come Saturday night. Shouldn't be hard. Nobody's done it, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. And he's got an incentive, doesn't he?" The male laughs again. "Your heat will hold out till Saturday, right?"

His laughter still plays in my head long after Clay is forced to leave, and I finish my meal and curl up on the floor again, shivering.

And sweating.

WRENLEE

TIME CREEPS ALONG. MY CELL GROWS BRIGHTER AND DARKER, but it's never fully lit, because of the dirty window, and never completely dark, because they've left the slot open and the fluorescent light from the hallway filters in.

For a long time, I don't have to pee since I'm sweating so much, but eventually, I can't hold it in anymore. I pull myself together enough to call for help, but no one comes. In the end, I wee in the far corner and cover it with a rag from the desecrated nest.

I'm scared, and if I try to listen for Clay, the bond thrashes and roars, which scares me more.

I fall into deep, feverish dreams and wake in ringing silence with my pulse pounding. At one point, I'm roused by growls and the mingled scent of Clay, venison, and that terrible male stench that makes my stomach lurch. The mating stink is getting stronger. I thought my older sisters were exaggerating, but it's even worse than they say.

Mother said that when you go into heat, Fate makes your mate smell sweeter than all others so that you know him, but Clay smells like sweat, liniment, and fury, and the other males stink of death.

When I see him, I cry out, but they won't let him into the room this time. I have to drag myself to the door, and he passes chunks of meat and a fresh bottle of water through the slot. He doesn't speak. His wolf rattles his throat and chest so hard that I don't think he can.

After they wrestle him away, I curl back up in the middle of the floor, the venison resting in my stomach like a rock. My entire body has gone haywire. My womb is cramping, worse than during my monthlies, and I'm swollen and slick between the legs. Every so often, I'm racked by shivers that shake my bones. My wolf curls in on herself, too, shivering and whining.

My thoughts grow muzzy, disconnected, and frantic.

We need to make a nest. There are sheets in the corner, but they stink of shame and despair, of something gone terribly wrong. All of this is wrong.

This dirt under me isn't *earth*. The black mold on the walls is alive, but it doesn't *grow*; it creeps and rots. Worst of all, there's an electric buzz coming from the hallway, and it scrapes my nerves incessantly, back and forth like a knife on a strop. My wolf grinds her teeth. I would kill whatever's making that sound if I could, but we're trapped in here alone.

Where is our mate?

He comes to the door again, but before I can stagger to my feet, he howls with rage, and other males drag him away snarling.

Why doesn't he kill them and let me out? He's stronger than them. I can scent their fear, even in here, even over their stench.

My mouth is so dry that my lips stick together, and my skin is so sweaty that it's mixed with the dirt, and now I'm covered in a grimy paste that itches like crazy.

I can't take it anymore. I peel my wet shift off and scrub my skin raw, but my shift is dirty, too, and now everything is worse. I wad it into a ball and place it carefully in the middle of the floor, but it's nowhere near enough.

And I *hurt*. I clutch my breasts and squeeze them tight to my chest, but it doesn't help. Neither does clenching my thighs together. I need Clay. Where is he?

My wolf howls, but no one comes. She doesn't give up, though, calling for him with all her might until her voice fades into a raspy croak.

I ache. So bad. I try to ignore it. I mustn't touch myself. It's filthy and wrong and a female must never, ever play with herself there, but eventually, I cannot bear it a second longer, and I shove my hand between my legs and press the palm of my hand against the place that pulses with need. It doesn't make me feel better, so I press harder.

I need my mate. It's wrong to keep him from me. It's unnatural. I cry and lower myself to my elbows, lifting my bottom, because if I present, he'll come. He must. He'll scent me and nothing will be able to keep him away.

My joints grow stiff, and I rock, arching my back, and I wait, my brain breaking into pieces. The misery will not cease. All hurts ebb, but not this one. It ratchets higher, hotter, sharper.

The room begins to dim again, and there are footsteps in the hall. Pounding. Running. Chasing.

Mate.

I whine, sliding my knees wider.

The door rattles in its frame, its hinges creaking as a heavy boot lands on it, again and again.

There are shouts. A roar. A snarl. A scream.

A male hollers, "Fetch Eldrick now!"

I smell blood in the air. My mate is coming for me.

I rest my cheek on my folded arms and crouch lower. I'm so exhausted. He'll understand. He took so long.

I drift off to the sounds of a terrible scuffle and then, after how long I could not say, Clay's voice calls me back to myself.

"Open it," he demands. A shiver zips down my spine. They'll do what he says. Who could help but obey that voice?

Eldrick replies, but I can't make out his words. He's arguing, threatening, but his fear is crystal clear. Why won't he do as Clay says if he's so afraid? Is there a male he fears more? He shouldn't. Our mate is the most dangerous male

here. The others know it, too. Their stink has grown faint. They've retreated, saving themselves.

"Tell Alpha that when he asks why I won't fight," Clay says in response to whatever Eldrick said.

This time, I can hear Eldrick's answer. It comes after a long pause. "You can have her this night. We'll be back for you at dawn."

"Not here," Clay replies immediately.

Eldrick's wolf growls.

Clay's snarls right back, twice as loud, and Eldrick's shuts up as if someone clamped its muzzle closed.

"You can take her to the dormitory," Eldrick concedes. "If you try anything, you understand what will happen to the sisters and the mother."

Clay's wolf growls again, and mine lets out a broken cry. Clay won't let them hurt my family. We have to trust him. He's strong and brave. He saved us from the river. He'll keep us safe. I have to believe it.

The males must have reached a silent accord, because footsteps are receding down the hall and the dead bolt clicks. The door swings open, and Clay fills the frame. I hike my hips higher. My wolf can be wary if she likes; I have no choice. I need him to make this better.

I moan, grinding my palm against the place that throbs. What is he waiting for? His cock is hard, tenting his jeans, but he's standing in the doorway like a statue, muscles tensed like he's braced for a beating.

"Do it," I pant. "It hurts. Make it stop."

I watch him over my shoulder as he peels off his white T-shirt. Finally, I can breathe. He's going to help me.

He comes over and lowers himself to his knees, but he doesn't unbuckle his belt. What is he doing?

I rock and whine. I know he can smell me. My musk is thicker than the mold in the air.

“I’ve got you,” he says, and with clumsy hands, he hoists me up and back until he’s sitting on his heels, and I’m cuddled on his lap. For a long minute, he does nothing but hold me there, shaking, his breath ragged. “I just need a minute. I’ve got this. We’re good.”

I grind my palm into the swollen bud that aches so bad, and he groans as if in pain.

“Soon, sweetling. I promise.” He gently pries my hand from between my legs, lifts it, and rests it on his shoulder. Then he runs his nose along the edge from my wrist to the tip of my pinky, and his wolf rumbles like an earthquake.

“Fuck, focus, fuck, goddamn,” he mutters and grabs my other hand, raising my arm so that he can pull his shirt on over my head.

It’s not what I want. I hate the cotton against my skin, but at least it smells like him. I tuck my knees to my chest, stretching the fabric over my legs so at least it doesn’t touch my breasts. They’re so sensitive and achy I could cry.

“Okay, we’re going to go now,” Clay says. His voice is confident and no-nonsense, and I know he’s trying to comfort me, but I can hear his fraying nerves underneath—I can *feel* them through the bond. “I’m going to take care of you. Everything is going to be fine.”

He continues to reassure himself as he lifts me and carries me out of the foul basement, up the stairs, and through what must be the Claws’ main hall. I can’t see anything, but I can smell them all and hear their snickers and whispers. He tucks my face close to his chest, hiding me from sight as best he can, and he murmurs in my ear, “Almost there. You’re safe. Everything is going to be okay. I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.”

Every time we pass a male, his wolf snarls, and every single one shuts his mouth. Each sudden silence soothes my wolf’s hackles.

Good wolf mate.

Clay carries me up another floor and down a long hallway. The horrible stench fades, and I crane my neck to peek. From the fetid basement, I wouldn't have guessed the place would be this nice.

The floors are wood, worn but polished, and the white paint is fresh. There are no decorations, no punched-tin or dyed hangings like you'd find in a Ditch home, but the halls are wider, the ceilings are higher, and from the quiet, it's clear the walls are made of something thicker than particleboard.

We climb yet another stair, walk to the end of another hall, and Clay kicks a door open with his foot. It's an attic dormitory, four bunks on either side, each with a metal footlocker at the end. It stinks.

Three males startle and stand. Two were playing cards on a thin mattress. One had been lying down. A fourth male, the one named Amir, drops from where he was lifting himself on a bar hung across a closet door. All the males except Amir duck their heads and avert their eyes.

They're baring their necks, but they aren't making a show of it like they would with the alpha or a ranking packmate. It's the slight acknowledgment the pups will give the male known as the best scrapper when they pass him in the lane, more due respect than deference.

My wolf puffs up with pride. She is pleased that they recognize her mate's strength. Her fear eases, and so does mine.

"I need the room," Clay says, his voice an octave deeper than it was even a few minutes ago in the basement.

"Shit, uh, yeah." The males hurry to grab their cards, their jackets, their water bottles. Clay sets me gently on my feet and moves so that he's blocking me from the others.

"Leave the water," Amir barks. He isn't gathering his things. He's going from footlocker to footlocker, throwing them open and digging out any blankets or sheets. He's trying to help. My eyes prickle.

"I'll need you to guard the door," Clay says to Amir.

Amir grunts. "I'll put these here." He places the stack of linens he's gathered on the bunk farthest from the door. "She might not want them. They smell like us."

I don't want them anywhere near me, but my wolf and I understand the gesture, and we're grateful.

"I owe you," Clay says as Amir takes his leave.

"I'm counting," Amir says, but his lips curve. It's the saddest smile I've ever seen.

Then he's gone, and we're alone, and my legs give out. I sink to the floor, and with the last of my energy, I stick my bottom in the air. I can't push up on my hands. I can only lie on my chest, my cheek resting on the hard wood.

It'll be over soon and then I can rest.

"Oh, sweetling, no." Clay is sad, too, but there's nothing I can do for him. He needs to help me.

My wolf growls at him, but her voice is so faint I can hardly hear it inside my own head.

"Just hang on," he says, and yet again, he scoops me off the ground.

He carries me into another room, a plain but immaculate bathroom. There are two stalls, a urinal, sinks, and a tiled shower large enough for several people to bathe at once.

"Stay here," he says, and sets me against the shower wall while he unlaces and kicks off his boots. I'm not going anywhere. It hurts worse when he's not touching me at all.

He comes back, lifts me by the waist, and walks us under a shower head. I wind my arms around his neck, and my fingertips find the slight curls at his nape. The cords of his neck tense under my touch.

"Not much longer," he pants, and he fumbles at the knob. Warm water hits my back. I moan.

"Okay, okay," he mumbles, and reaches for the lever of a plastic container attached to the wall.

My knees buckle.

“Let’s try this.” He lunges a thigh forward between my legs, propping me against the wall. Now the water is streaming on him, trickling down his hard chest and the ridges dusted with dark hair that tremble as I stroke them.

“Wrenlee, please,” he groans.

“Uh, huh.” Despite the denim, his thigh feels so good, way better than the heel of my palm. I grind down, and it’s everything. I’m not hot anymore; I’m on fire. Droplets splash off Clay’s bunched shoulders and sprinkle my face and neck, and it feels amazing. It would feel even better on my bare breasts. I wriggle out of Clay’s soaked T-shirt and drop it to the tile.

“Oh, please, sweetling, stay still,” he begs, furiously pressing the plastic lever, filling his hand with a green gel that smells like fake pine trees.

I arch my back. The spray splatters on my hard nipples, and suddenly, my insides are coiling. I want something—I *need* it—and Clay is supposed to be helping, but he’s *not*. He’s rubbing his hands together until he’s got a good lather and then he’s touching me all over. He tries to work methodically, one arm and then the other, shoulders and bottom and thighs, but I can’t stop squirming and rocking. I’m so close, but I just can’t get where I need to be.

He pushes me back against the wall to try and get to my front, and he’s so careful to be gentle, but my wolf’s temper is piqued. She doesn’t want gentle.

Bite him.

Good idea.

I do. I sink my teeth into his shoulder and get a mouthful of soapy tree.

“Oh, fuck, Wrenlee.” He grips the back of my head and holds me tightly in place so I can’t even spit the nasty taste out. “Do it again. *Now.*”

Now is a growl, a rolling, thunderous command.

I bite harder, and he sinks to his butt and then he's on his back, knees bent, and I'm straddling him, bearing down, rubbing myself against his drenched jeans as he bucks his hips. He lathers my breasts, plucking my slick nipples, stroking my soapy ribs and waist, digging his fingers into my bottom, slipping them between the cheeks. I ride him, water flowing down my back, rinsing the cleft of my ass, and it feels so good, and I'm so close to something, so agonizingly close.

"Clay," I cry.

"Yes, beautiful. Yes. Show me how you come. Sweetling, do it now. *Now*." His hips thrust, and I shriek.

His *now* snaps the knot inside me, an explosion of pure pleasure bursting from my core through my limbs to the very ends of my fingers and toes. I throw my head back and dig my nails into his pecs. My insides spasm and shudder, and it feels so good. I want to cry, or laugh; I'm not sure which.

Clay lets his hips fall to the tile, and he grins, broader than I've ever seen. His wolf is in his eyes. He plucks my hand from his chest and pulls my fingers to his mouth. My nails are gone. There are little pointy claws in their place. He kisses one sharp tip after another, nipping them with his teeth.

His fangs have descended, too.

With my free hand, I rub the red marks I left on his shoulder. I didn't break the skin. I wish I had. I want that more than anything, with so much ferocity it scares me. I frown.

Clay's smile fades, and he reaches up to trace my bottom lip. "What's wrong, beautiful?"

I blush. I'm naked, on top of a male who's still half-dressed, and his cock is poking me through his wet jeans, but my cheeks are heating because he called me *beautiful*. I shake my head. "Nothing."

I cross my arms over my breasts. They still ache, but not so bad as before. My brain is clearer, too. I look around for a towel. There's a stack folded on a shelf by the sinks.

I brace with my hands on Clay's hard stomach to push myself up, but he grabs my wrists before I can.

“No.” He sits up, and in one smooth maneuver, he rises, still holding me, his hands cradling my butt. I wrap my legs around his waist. It’s either that or let them dangle.

He turns off the water and walks us to the towels, finally lowering me to my feet. Somehow, I got squeaky clean, but he’s a mess. The back of his hair is plastered to his head, but the front is still dry. His jeans are soaked and dripping on the floor. There are still swaths of soap suds across his chest.

He wets a cloth and scrubs himself down while I pat myself dry. The towel smells faintly of other males, but I can deal with it. I scoop the whole stack into my arms and follow my nose back into the empty dormitory. Clay follows at a respectful distance.

On my way to his bunk, I throw open all the dormers. We’re high enough that there’s a good breeze, and it doesn’t take long for the air to sweeten. I’m happy that his bunk is at the end of the room. There are two windows and a perfect empty space where the eaves lower. The floor is wood, but it’s clean.

Clay’s bed is on the bottom, so it’s easy enough to push his mattress into my new little den. He makes as if to help, but when my wolf gives him a yip or two, he knows enough to back off. This is *our* job.

First, I take the woolen blanket and sheet from the mattress and put them on again the *right* way. The towels go in a nice messy pile. While I’m arranging them, Clay brings me the clothes from his locker. They’re good, too. He hands me a few items and then passes me a water bottle. He won’t give me more until I drink, no matter how my wolf grumbles.

Every so often, a lovely night wind blows through the window, cooling my bare skin.

Clay leans against the metal bunk and watches. He’s smiling again, but it’s a gentle curve of the lips. He has the best lips, soft and firm at the same time.

“I loved to kiss you,” I tell him as I try something different with the pile I made with his shirts. “Back at the shed, I

mean.”

“I lived for it,” he replies softly.

“It made my stomach feel strange.” I’m aware that I’m sounding like my brother Dale when he’s been smoking the skunkweed, but I can’t pay too much attention to what I’m saying. I’m building a nest.

“It made me feel invincible,” he says.

I gather all the shirts into my arms and move them to the other end of the mattress. “I missed kissing you when you sent me away.”

“I missed everything about you.” He comes to squat next to the nest so that we’re eye level. I’m too busy to stop and look at him, though. “I missed you humming under your breath. I missed how you’d spot me when I climbed the scaffolding even though if I fell, I’d squash you. I missed how you shared your bread and butter at lunch.”

“You’d never take it.”

“I would never take food from your mouth, Wrenlee. Mate.” He holds out a hand.

I put the shirts down. I suppose they’re fine where they are.

“Let me kiss you again.”

I scoot back into the middle of my nest. It’s perfect.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

I nod.

He fumbles at his buckle, and it takes him a minute, but he gets rid of his belt and wet pants. He climbs toward me on all fours.

My wolf whimpers.

We’re safe, tucked back here, high above and far away from anyone who would hurt us. I lie back.

Clay prowls on top of me until we’re face-to-face. He’s hot against my breasts and belly, but I don’t mind. It’s a good heat.

“Wolves don’t do it like this,” I say.

He braces himself on his forearms. “We do it like this. So I can see your eyes, and you can see mine.”

“You have beautiful eyes,” I tell him. They are the very best shade of brown.

His lips twitch, and the corners of his beautiful brown eyes crinkle. “Thank you, mate.” He lowers himself, slowly, bit by bit, until his lips brush mine. “Will you spread your legs for me?”

My heartbeat picks up. He kisses me again, longer, sweeter. His hardness pulses against my belly.

I wriggle my thighs apart, and he settles his thickness between them. My hips cradle his. My nervous hands fly to his shoulders. He nibbles along the tender inside of my upper arm, and it tickles, but it’s also wonderful.

I giggle. “Are you going to do it?” I ask.

“Do you want me to?” He kisses me, so I can’t answer right away, and by the time he stops, it takes me a second to remember the question.

“Yes, but be careful.”

“I will,” he says solemnly, and very gently, he lifts my right thigh and then I can feel him, hot and hard at the entrance to my core.

I gasp.

He doesn’t move. “If it hurts, you can punch me after, okay? To make it even.”

I start to smile, but then I realize he’s totally serious. I crane my neck and kiss him.

He draws in a breath like he’s about to jump off a cliff and pushes himself inside me.

And oh, it’s tight. It almost pinches, but I keep breathing, and by the time he’s all the way in, it isn’t so bad. He stops there, frowning as he studies my face. “Will it be better if I stay like this or if I pull out?”

There's a sheen of sweat all over his body. Every muscle is flexed. His body is amazing. I can't help but smile. My mate. He's inside me right now. No one can take him away from me. He's mine.

"I think it'd be better if you kind of moved in and out," I say.

He groans, but he does what I said.

At first, it stings, but I was right. Soon enough, the feeling from the shower gathers low in my belly, twisting and aching in the most exquisite way. I'm sweating now, too, and rocking my hips in time to his. He kisses me, and I kiss him. In between, we breathe together.

When I don't think I can feel any better, he sneaks his hand between us and finds the swollen nub that aches, playing it, strumming it, and the tension inside me coils tighter and tighter until I can't hold back. I buck my hips, and he surges forward, again and again until I explode.

He gives a hoarse shout and shudders as if his arms are about to give out, but they don't. Hot wetness spurts inside me, and he stills. My breasts are squashed by his chest. His hip bones grind into mine. I wrap both legs around his waist.

He brushes the tips of our noses together and smiles against my mouth. "Now you're mine. My mate. My brave, perfect, beautiful mate."

I hum in agreement.

"No, say it." He nips my swollen lower lip with his teeth.

"I'm yours. Your mate."

"Yes, and brave and perfect and beautiful."

"That, too," I agree drowsily.

"You are so strong, so lovely. Fate has blessed me. My mate. My beautiful Wrenlee."

I fall asleep with his words in my ear, and if he repeats himself, I don't care. I could listen forever.

I sleep so deeply that I don't hear the door open. I don't hear the tread of boots or click of claws on the floor.

I don't wake up until Clay's wolf howls to the rafters as his fist cracks against one of their jaws, but it's already too late. There are too many of them, wolves and men, swarming him with tire irons and weighted nets. Still, by the time he goes down, the wood floor is slick with blood.

Only then does Eldrick stalk into the dormitory. He leers at me where I cower in my nest under a pile of towels and then he smirks down at Clay.

"Hope you're rested," he says to Clay.

He raises his lecherous gaze to me again. "You keep that nest exactly how it is. If your mate here doesn't take Killian Kelly down in the first round tonight, we're going to carry him back here so he can watch each one of us show you how a real male fucks a female."

Clay's roar is so loud it echoes long after the Claws drag him away.

CLAY

I STILL SMELL LIKE HER. MY FINGERS. MY COCK. MY HAIR smells like her nest. I stand naked behind a closed door, every male Claw in formation behind me. Through the gray metal, the scent and sounds of a thousand shouting shifters and humans seeps through, but I focus on her. If I don't, I'll shift and kill as many of these pieces of shit as I can until they put me down. Then, they'll make her pay for what I did.

There is only one way out of this. Do the impossible. Drop Killian Kelly in the first round.

Maybe I could if I'd trained for years, or if I could flip-shift at will, but no matter how they bait me, I can't do what I did that day on the wall when John Broom dropped his putty knife. I don't know how I did it, and my wolf would do it again if he could, but he doesn't know, either.

Even if I managed to flip-shift again, I don't have a prayer. This is Killian fucking Kelly, undefeated heavyweight champion of the circuit since he first stepped into the ring. He's the largest male wolf in the five packs, the alpha of a pack whose leader is chosen by combat, not bloodline. He's fought for his rank, and he's held it since he was not much older than a pup.

I cannot win, but I'll die before I let them hurt her, and so I'll die, and she'll be alone and helpless, and I can't fucking bear it.

My gaze careens around this narrow corridor. There's no way out, nothing I can use as a weapon. There are two-dozen

males behind me, reeking of aggression and the chemicals they inject in their asses in the locker room. I can't fight my way through them.

The booming voice of the announcer crescendos, and the doors to the arena fling open. The howling of the crowd crashes over me.

Eldrick prods me forward. "Showtime."

I have no choice but to walk down the sloping concrete aisle. I have no choices at all. On either side of my path, bleachers full of howling humans rise to a second and third tier that disappears into the rafters. They stomp their feet and swill beer and shout down at me. They don't know who I am. They're cheering because they know they're about to see Killian Kelly tear me limb from limb.

On numb legs, I stride to the low stage where the officials make a show of weighing me and checking my mouth for contraband. Usually they pat the fighters down, too, but there's no need since I'm stripped naked. North Border has promoted this fight as the old guard versus new blood, flip-shifter versus flip-shifter. Boxing trunks would only get in our wolves' ways.

I could shift now, run hard and fast, follow the bond to wherever they're keeping Wrenlee. Make it so that they kill me right in front of her.

I steel my spine. A deafening roar erupts from the other side of the arena. Killian Kelly must be making his way to the ring. My gaze lifts to the jumbotron. The camera has zoomed in on his face. He's older than me, and he's bigger, too. He's got every male in North Border beat for arrogance. He strolls down the aisle alone, and although the people scream his name, no one dares crowd too close.

The cameraman zooms in on his swinging dick, and the arena goes crazy. He's grinning when he ducks between the ropes and raises an arm in acknowledgment. I guess he's above having to weigh in and stick out his tongue.

Eldrick slams his palm into my back. "Get in there. You have five minutes to knock him out."

I start for the ring, but before I can take a step, he jerks me back by my arm. “If you don’t, I’m going to be the first in the ring with your sweet little mate, and she’s gonna wish she only has to go three rounds. Understand?” He flashes his fangs.

I stagger as my wolf leaps for Eldrick’s throat and barely catch him before he breaks out of our skin. I grapple him to the ground, pinning him inside with all my strength, and still, he almost gets free, but then he catches a scent, somehow, amid the beer and body odor. He’s instantly distracted.

“Save that energy for Kelly,” Eldrick says, and slaps my back again.

I don’t hesitate in climbing into the ring so I have a better vantage point of the arena. A ref guides me into the center, and he’s talking, but I have no idea what he’s saying. My nose has caught the scent, now, too, and it’s her. Wrenlee. I scan the rows and rows of screaming males, the rail where bets are still being furiously placed, and the back sections reserved for females. I can’t see her.

I close my eyes and reach for the bond. I’ve been ignoring it with everything in me so that I don’t go mad, so it takes a second to tune in, but when I do, heat suffuses my chest. It’s pure sweetness. Not cloying or sickening, not like candy or syrup. Like honeysuckle. Light and airy. Delicate. My heart cracks. I didn’t have enough of her. Not nearly enough.

The bond leads my gaze straight to her. She’s close, huddled in a folding chair in the row surrounding the ring that the alpha added so he and his cronies could sit in front of the filthy rich humans who purchased front-row seats. Eldrick sinks into the seat next to her, smirking at me. Isaac is on her other side.

They’ve given her a dark-brown cloak, and she has the hood pulled forward to hide as much of her face as possible. She’s the only female outside the designated section, except, no, as I scan the area, I see she’s not.

There’s another female at the other end of the row, plain faced with a long braid. She’s wearing a cloak, too, but hers is a vibrant red. The Quarry Pack beta, Tye, sits to her right. I

recognize a few of their other fighters, Ivo and Gael, standing behind her. She must be their new alpha female, the one with the bad leg.

“How about you look at your mate, and I look at mine, eh?” Killian’s voice booms in my ear.

Before I can respond, the announcer taps his mic, and feedback screeches through the cavernous hall.

I’m out of time. My gaze flies back to Wrenlee. Her face is white with fear, and despite the heavy wool, I can tell she’s shaking. We don’t have a choice. She’s going to have to run. I’ll create a distraction. I’ll shift and go for the Quarry Pack alpha female. Draw everyone away. It’s our only play.

I try to communicate the plan through the bond. *I attack. You shift and run.*

There’s no understanding in her eyes.

I focus harder, picturing it as clearly as I can in my mind. Her tiny wolf darting under the chairs and between legs, escaping through a back exit.

I attack. You shift and run.

Her chin wobbles. She’s scared, and she’s not picking up what I’m sharing. Damn, but she’s the most beautiful thing in creation. The most precious. My wolf howls to hers, and I know that hers calls back, but there is no way her small voice could be heard over this cacophony.

The mic screeches again, and the announcer’s voice echoes from the rafters. “Ladies and gentlemen, males and females, it’s fight night!”

The people erupt in howls, human and shifter alike.

Killian studies me, his lip curled. It’s clear he sees no competition.

I gauge the distance between me and his mate. I’ll have to clear the ropes in a single bound and get as close to her as I can in a second leap. His people will pile on me as soon as I hit the floor. Wrenlee will have a fraction of a second to realize what’s happening and run. She’s only shifted once, and

it'll cost time, but she has a thousand percent better chance of escaping through the crowd as her wolf.

I catch her eye again. *I attack. You shift and run. Shift and run.*

I shout it down the bond, but all she does is study me as close as Killian does. Closer. Like she's memorizing me.

The announcer blathers on and on—and *representing Quarry Pack, ten-time heavyweight champion, Full Moon belt recipient, and uncontested, undefeated holder of the record for most shifts in a single round.* I'm vaguely aware that Killian is following my gaze, but I don't care.

Wrenlee's eyes are on me, and until the very last second, mine will be on hers, even though I don't have to memorize her face. She's etched into every atom that makes me.

Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I see Killian reach out and grab the mic, plucking it from the announcer like a bottle from a babe.

"Give me a minute," he says, and jerks his head toward the ropes, shooing the announcer to give us space.

The male scurries away. The crowd hushes, but there are too many souls packed too tightly for the arena to become quiet. It's just a duller roar.

Killian steps into my line of sight, blocking Wrenlee. My wolf snarls. His snarls back louder. I expect my wolf to subside and show neck, but he doesn't. He goes harder, gnashing his teeth and snapping them in the air.

Our wolves keep at it, rattling our ribs and tearing at our throats, until Killian pounds a fist against his chest, and I drag my wolf from the border between us and heave him into the dark distance of whatever world it is that he inhabits.

Killian grins. "New blood, eh? What are you? Fireside's bastard?"

Bastard young aren't common, but they aren't unheard-of. I'm my father's spitting image, though. I shake my head.

"Can you really flip-shift?" he asks.

“I did once.” I wish he’d shut up and move to the side. He’s wasting the little time I have left.

“And you think you can beat me?” He cocks an eyebrow.

I amuse him. His smirks, his arrogance effortless. I’ve never met such a male. Even Alpha Fireside is careful of his pride. He’d never stand in the middle of a packed arena, hands on his hips with his dick out, amused.

“I have to,” I answer him. What can the truth hurt now?

His smirk fades, and he glances over his shoulder—at Wrenlee. My wolf surges to the fore again, prickling against the inside of my skin. When Killian looks back, his blue eyes are ice-cold. “Your mate?”

I grunt. “Yes.”

“You’re going to let her watch ringside while I make you bare your neck?”

I clench my teeth, and my wolf howls.

Killian’s brow knits, and something almost like remorse flits across his face. “You don’t have a chance, young blood. Whatever they’ve told you, whatever they’ve promised you, you won’t win.”

Up at the rail in the second tier, a bookie rings the bell signaling the last chance to place a wager.

A mad, wild, impossible idea bursts into my head. “Want to bet?”

The smirk is back. “What could you have that I’d want?”

Before Wrenlee, I never had anything of value. I’d never even touched something worth enough to interest an alpha. But I have now. In the forest, there’s a plot of pretty white flowers worth a hell of a lot to a very powerful witch.

“Ashbalm,” I say. “If you win, my mate will lead you to a garden of ashbalm on the verge of full bloom.”

“Ashbalm,” he repeats. He knows what it is. Under the arrogance, there’s a note of interest in his voice. “My own mate is fond of growing shit.” He glances in her direction, and

his attention is instantly captured. He has to shake out his arms to refocus himself. “And what do you want if you manage to do what no other shifter has ever done? And your first time in the ring, no less?”

“I want you to take my mate with you back to Quarry Pack.”

His smirk slowly disappears. I watch as he does the calculations in his mind. He looks at Wrenlee again. His gaze rakes from my head to my feet. His nostrils flare. “We don’t take in males from other packs. You’d give her up?”

“Never. But I would give her into your care. If you take her to Quarry Pack, make sure she’s fed and warm, I’ll get you the ashbalm.” My fists clench so tight that my nails draw blood. “She’s a good female. A hard worker. She won’t be a burden. If—” I drag down a breath. “If she is with child, the pup will be a good worker, too. Ditches breed strong.”

“Your alpha would let a female of his pack leave?”

“My alpha could stop you from taking her?”

Killian considers me. A pulse tics at his temple. Finally, he grins. “Well, if you beat me, maybe that old windbag could take me, too. I guess we’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.” He slaps his hands together and calls to the ref. “What are you waiting for, ref? Are we going to hold hands and say a prayer? Sound the buzzer. Let’s go!”

Everything bursts into motion. The crowd surges to their feet. The ref shouts, “I want a good, clean fight. Touch fists.” We do. The buzzer sounds.

Killian swings.

Wrenlee screams.

Knuckles bulldoze into my jaw.

I wake up. I’m a Ditch. I’ve been fighting to keep my bread since I was old enough to waddle away from my dam. He’s bigger, and there are more eyes on us, but I’ve done this before.

I go for him, fists flying, and as soon as I get within range, I headbutt him. It's like ramming my skull into a brick wall.

He bursts out laughing.

The ref blows his whistle. The clock stops. "Foul. Butting with the head."

Neither Killian nor I stop. He drives an elbow into my throat. The ref blows his whistle again. The clock is still paused.

"Foul! Twelve to six elbow, throat strike."

I hack, tears streaming down my cheeks, as I wildly knee him in the gut. I miss and nail his nuts. He howls.

The whistle tweets on and on. Killian sweeps my leg as he clutches his dick.

"Fighters to your corners!" the ref shouts. "Corners, now!"

We ignore him, grappling, testing each other, searching for weakness. He has none. I have too many. He finds each of them and hammers them. I swing. He ducks and drives a fist into my rib. I kick, and he grabs my leg midair and flips me to the mat.

I'm losing, but that's fine. Inevitable. I cannot win against this male. I have to survive him until Fate gives me an opening. It's my only chance. Skill and courage and strength cannot help me now. It's down to faith, so that's how I'm going to win. I am going to *believe* harder than this motherfucker.

I take blows to the face, the gut, the head. For every punch I land, I swing wide twice. I stumble into the ropes. I fall to my knees. The ref raises his whistle to his mouth. I stagger to my feet.

And then, from a distance, a buzzer cuts through the screams of the crowd and the roaring in my head. Killian drops his fists to his sides, rolls his shoulders, cracks his neck, and strolls to his corner. I stagger to mine.

I stand alone, propping myself up on the ropes, sweat dripping down my body, blood blurring my vision, my skin

blossoming in bruises. I swipe my eyes and find Wrenlee. She's crying. My guts twist, and I gasp from the pain.

Eldrick's face is contorted in fury. The entire arena is alive—reenacting what they've just seen, raising their mugs for refills, laughing, opining—except the contingent of Claws seated around my mate. They scowl. A few are tinged gray or green. The odds of me knocking Killian Kelly out in the first round must have been a thousand to one. If they had won, they'd have been set for life. For *generations*. If they bet it all on me . . . they were fools.

Broke fools are dangerous.

I keep my eyes on Wrenlee. The only way out of this is through.

Eldrick bares his fangs, and slowly, so I am sure to track the move, he wraps an arm around Wrenlee, hooking his elbow around her neck. She becomes very, very still. I cannot smell her fear, but I can feel it rushing through my own veins.

There is a yard between us. I could cover it in two bounds. My wolf bounces on his paws. He's ready.

And then, a male holds the ropes and a human woman in a neon-pink bikini swings herself through. She lifts a card high over her head that reads 2 and struts around the ring. Shouts turn to howls and echo from the rafters.

Killian and I move to meet in the center. His team has wiped him down and sutured the quickly disappearing cut in his eyebrow. He's as fresh as a newborn babe.

I grasp for strength, summoning what little stamina I have left. I take a last glimpse at Wrenlee and try to channel my rage at Eldrick into my muscles and blood, but it's her wet cheeks that catch me up. That unman me.

Killian slaps my chest, drawing my attention back to the moment.

"I have a question, pup." He skewers me with his ice-cold blue gaze. "If another male is touching your mate, why are you in the ring with me?"

The blow lands harder than any so far, crushing my lungs. I wait for the big-breasted woman to round the last corner and the buzzer to sound, but when she steps down to the floor, Killian holds his palm up, and the entire proceedings pause.

He wants an answer.

What does he want me to say? I'm weak, unequal to the gift Fate has given me? I know it. My pride is nothing, though, if Wrenlee is not safe. Shame is the easiest price to pay.

"This is where she needs me." It's all I can say. It's the truth.

He doesn't seem satisfied, but he waves toward the male who pushes the buzzer. It goes off, and the clock begins its countdown.

Killian swings, I block, and we dance, back and forth. He's done with testing me; he's settled in to wearing me out. He gets me against the ropes, and somehow, I duck away. He knocks me to the ground, and I drag myself up. He pins me, and at the last moment, when the ref is on the ground beside me, his palm raised, ready to slap the mat, I wrench myself free.

And all the while, whenever he's near my ear, Killian peppers me with questions. "Why do those males by your mate smell like they've just lost big?"

"They bet I'd beat you in the first round."

"Are they stupid?"

"No. Greedy."

"But seriously, why the first round? That's fucking nuts."

"The odds were longest. The payout was huge."

"Well, you shit the bed, my friend."

"Maybe."

"I don't go down."

"Not in the first round." I grant him that.

Killian snorts and slams a fist into my jaw. The buzzer sounds.

I spit blood onto the mat and brace myself on my knees. “You will in the third,” I say between gasps. “*Friend.*”

Killian throws his head back and laughs, hands on his hips, dick dangling.

The woman in the pink bikini climbs into the ring again. When she passes, I rest against the ropes, or rather, my body collapses, and the cords hold me upright. My eyes find Wrenlee. Hers are already on me. We hold on to each other.

She’s not crying anymore, and she’s not shaking. Her shoulders are square, and her face is hard like it was that day at the shed when I turned away from her.

Does she know I’d give anything to take that back?

She is so brave and strong. If Fate has blessed us, she will be the best of dams. I wish I could see her grow round. She’ll be beautiful with a big belly.

I think she knows. It’s flowing between us, maybe along the bond or maybe in the understanding we wove together as we worked alongside each other all those long days, as we stole kisses from each other in the dark.

I’m a lucky male. The luckiest.

The buzzer jolts me alert. The woman with the card is gone. Killian is waiting in the center of the ring. I haul myself straight.

I have five minutes. There will be an opening, and I will seize it. This cannot unfold any other way.

Killian seems almost reluctant as I swing. He bats my arm away and lands a blow to my gut. I grunt, but I don’t fold. I hardly flinch. I can’t live in this body anymore; the pain is too all-consuming. I have to hover above it and watch, wait. There will be a moment. He will blink.

We trade punches and kicks. He’s not having fun anymore. His face is grim, almost thoughtful. One minute passes. Two. Three.

My mind might be above bodily concerns, but there is a point that I cannot ignore that I'm made of mere flesh. There is a broken bone in my left leg, and no matter how hard I focus, it won't hold weight. I can hardly see out of my right eye. My fingers and toes are shards. I throw them against Killian, but I'm not doing damage; I'm just grinding them down into finer pieces of dust.

At four minutes, Killian plants a heel in my spine, driving me to my knees. He follows it with an uppercut. I slump to my side, and momentum rolls me onto my back.

On the jumbotron above me, I see myself lying flat, my leg twisted at an unnatural angle, my skin mottled red, my chest barely rising with each excruciating intake of breath. My face is meat.

Killian leans over me. High above on the screen, I see the back of his head. His sweat drips on my chest.

"Stay down, friend," he says.

I tilt my head, blinking blood out of my eyes, searching for Wrenlee. If I see her, I'll be able to stand. She's magic. The brightest light in the whole fucking world.

And she is there, reaching for me. Eldrick and Isaac hold her back, and she doesn't have room to struggle, but she's leaning forward as much as she can, fingertips stretching.

I can do anything. I stare at my carcass on the screen and will it to sit. Somehow, it does. The ref lifts his arm to slap the mat. Killian grabs his wrist, but he's not looking down at the paunchy human in the striped shirt. He's gazing past the ropes into the crowd, toward his people, a strange expression on his face. He closes his eyes as if he's straining to listen to a very quiet voice.

And then, with a long sigh, his shoulders fall, he drops the ref's arm, and he offers me a hand up.

"All right, then, young blood," he says. "Let's finish this thing."

I take the hand. By silent accord, we back away from each other to either side of the ring. I stagger. He struts.

This is it. This is when I find my opening. I search for my wolf in the swirling darkness in my chest, and he's there, on his feet, ready. He understands what he needs to do.

The impossible.

The buzzer sounds.

I take a breath, picture Wrenlee in my mind, and I run.

I leap.

I snatch a miracle out of thin air. In the blink of an eye, I become the wolf.

Killian doesn't flinch. He doesn't duck, he doesn't block, he doesn't move at all except for the slightest curve of his lip.

My wolf slams into his chest, full force, knocking every bit of wind from him. Killian topples flat onto his back like a felled tree, his lungs wheezing.

A female screams.

The ref moves quicker than I've seen him yet, crashing to his knees and slapping the mat. "One! Two! Three! Knockout!"

The crowd goes wild, the ring's padded poles vibrating from the volume of their unbridled howls.

Killian pushes himself to his elbows, grinning ruefully.

"Mate!" The female in the red cloak limps toward the ring.

Males race to help her, but Killian's wolf snarls, and they back off, leaving her to hoist herself onto the platform and through the ropes until she's plopped on her bottom at Killian's side. He makes no move to get up, resting like he's sunning himself beside the river.

He grins even more dopily, and she prods at his chest as her lips move a mile a minute. I can't hear her above the roars, but she's clearly giving him a piece of her mind.

As she worries at the bruise spreading across his pecs, her braid falls over her shoulder. He grabs the tip and brushes it

against his smiling lips. She stops her fussing, sits back, and bursts into tears.

Overhead, the jumbotron replays the last seconds of the fight, and the crowd quiets somewhat to watch. I can finally hear the scene unfolding feet from me.

“No, mate. No tears,” he rumbles. He hops up, lifts her to her feet, and tucks her into his side. “All is well.”

“You’re hurt!”

“Is that not what you asked for?” He smiles down at her indulgently.

What does that mean?

I don’t have time to puzzle it out. My wolf is eyeing Eldrick, gauging the distance, and Wrenlee is also crying, sunken into her chair.

I thank the wolf as I wrest our skin back and stand alone in the center of the ring. The announcer crows, and the crowd roars. My wobbling right leg holds my whole weight, and my heart is cracking.

My eyes are fused with Wrenlee’s, so I don’t see Alpha Fireside approach. He only catches my attention when his beta holds the ropes apart so he can climb into the ring.

The crowd hushes.

Killian shifts his mate so that she’s behind him. “Alpha.” He drops a curt nod, greeting Fireside without an ounce of deference.

“Alpha,” Fireside replies, flashing his oily, toothy smile. “A historical day, is it not?” He straightens his brocade jacket, although it is not the least bit out of place.

His guards follow at his heel as always, splayed in a semicircle at his back. He won’t tolerate males taller than him in his guard, so they’re all an inch shorter and as wide as barn doors. They glare menacingly at the naked Quarry Pack male standing with his head high, his fists on his hips.

Killian shoots them a dismissive sneer. “First for everything,” he answers easily.

Fireside turns to me. “And where have you been hiding all these years? On the river wall, I’m told?”

I incline my chin enough to not give offense. My head is swimming, blackness edging my vision. I need to stay upright long enough to see this through. It’s almost done. She’s almost safe.

“Well, Son, let it not be said that North Border does not award accomplishment, even when it arises from the most unlikely of places. You’ve brought honor to your pack this day. Tell me, what boon would you have of your alpha? The keys to the city? A grand home overlooking the river? Ask and it shall be yours.”

The corners of his lips curl high up his cheekbones, his plucked, swooping eyebrows lifting to his artificially darkened hairline. This close, he has a jester’s face, but from the rows beyond the lights, his expression must be fond. Paternal. Congratulatory.

Maybe this is why he never deigns to walk among us. We’d see the drops of black dye collecting at his temples.

This is a bad male. He stinks of other people’s shame.

I don’t need him to be good, though. I need him to keep his word this one time. I bend my neck in earnest. “My deepest thanks, Alpha. I only ask for one thing—that my mate and I be granted leave to travel to Quarry Pack.”

He is silent. I can see the wheels crank behind his eyes. “You have a mind to see the world, pup?”

I keep my aching back straight. “Yes, Alpha. That is the way of it.”

He takes my measure, his gaze raking down my broken body. He knows I’m lying. I would not have thought a lie would trip off my tongue so easily, but it does.

For a moment, the pack holds their breath, and the humans’ whispers hush. They all know I’m lying, and that

somehow, this is a challenge. No one challenges Alpha Fireside. No one gets close enough to have the chance.

But then Fireside flashes his widest smile. “I am truly sorry, young Ditch, but your pack cannot spare a talent such as yours at this time, at the very beginning of what promises to be an extraordinary career. Why, think of all you must teach your fellow Claws.” He casts Eldrick a veiled look. “But I suppose if your mate would like to visit our sister pack without your company, she may.”

He turns the veiled look on me. There is no choice. There never has been.

“She will go,” I say.

“Clay, no!” Her voice breaks, but I don’t look her way. I can’t. “Clay!”

I catch Killian’s eye.

He nods. “Ivo. Tye.” He jerks his chin toward Wrenlee.

There are footsteps. A scuffle. “Clay, no! We go together! Clay!”

I stare into the crowd, the gawking, gaping masses, while her voice rips my heart to pieces.

“Look at me, Clay Pulley! Don’t you dare turn your back on me again!” she screams from farther away.

I still don’t move. My wolf rages, the bond tears at my soul, and I stand alone in the middle of a thousand shouting souls while my mate’s voice fades and disappears into nothing.

And I thank Fate.

I bless her with everything that is left of me, because my mate will be safe.

And then blackness rushes in, and I crumble to the ground.

WRENLEE

I STUMBLE ON NUMB LEGS AS THE QUARRY PACK MALES RUSH me through the crowd, down an empty corridor, and out an emergency door toward a white work van.

Clay sent me away.

He *gave* me away.

After the first round ended and the buzzer sounded, Eldrick roared with fury and punched the air. Then he turned to me and sneered, “You are going to pay for that. You’re going to beg me to put you down before we’re done with you.”

I was terrified. If I’d had a chance in that moment, I’d have run. But now I drag my feet and turn every few steps so that the males have to yank me forward.

I can’t leave my mate.

He fought for me. He got up over and over again like a zombie, his body beaten and broken almost beyond recognition, rising to his feet through pure will. He flip-shifted for me. Again. He bargained to keep me safe.

He is *good*. Somehow, brought up in this awful, pitiless pack, he is brave and noble. I knew it the first time he caught my eye.

We get to the van and someone inside slides the side door open. Like a bad pup, I’m hoisted into the back and hustled toward the windowless rear doors. There are no seats, and the worn carpeted floor smells like sweat and gasoline.

“Where’s the boss?” the male in the driver’s seat asks.

“Invited to eat with Fireside,” the one called Tye answers. “We’ll hang back and bring him and Una home in the truck.”

“What do we do with her?” The driver squints back at me.

“Alpha says she comes with us. Drop her at the unmated female cabin,” Tye answers. “Kennedy, you get her settled. Keep her inside until we get there and figure out what to do with her.” Tye directs the order at the small male crouched beside me.

While the others settle themselves, I try to get a better look under his hooded sweatshirt. I was wrong. She isn’t a male. Her hair is short, but she has breasts, and I can tell now that she smells female, although it’s not easy to tease out her scent from the stench of armpits, lidocaine, and dried blood filling the van.

Without further discussion, Tye slides the door shut with an empathic thunk and calls into the open passenger side window, “Drive. Don’t stop until you’re out of North Border. This place creeps me the fuck out.”

The driver immediately obeys, throwing the vehicle into reverse and pulling out of the lot onto the road that leads to the west gate. We’re leaving. Now. No. I can’t go.

I can’t leave my mother and my sisters.

I can’t leave Clay. He’s my mate. We’re in this together.

“Stop,” I say, but my voice is soft, and the males are talking all at once, recounting the fight, joking and hollering.

This isn’t fair.

I don’t want to live without my mate. He’s mine. I picked him.

I don’t care what Fate says; she was late. *I* was the one who picked him. After I saw him that first day at the wall, *I* traded with the other females so I could be the one to bring him fresh mortar. I held the bucket handle so he couldn’t help but touch my hand when he took it. I brushed my hair a

hundred times every night until it shone and practiced smiling in Mother's hand mirror.

And once I caught his eye, I bent to retie my boot as many times as necessary so that we'd meet at the shed at the same time when the end-of-work bell rang.

I willed him to kiss me. I don't know how, but I made him do it because he was mine in a way Fate had nothing to do with.

"Please, stop," I call louder, but still, no one seems to hear, except the female beside me. She glances over, an eyebrow arched.

Before I was even born, my entire life had already been picked for me. Ditches live in the back lanes by the low wall, cheek by jowl. We work with our hands. That is our place, what we're *made for*. And female Ditches have their place, too, in the kitchens and the laundry and the root cellars and the cupboards. In the back, hidden, out from underfoot.

We wear these shifts, this cut, this color, this length. We sit in these seats, do these jobs, speak this way and only to other females and males related by blood or mate bond.

If you had to think about the rules we're expected to follow, you'd never be able to remember them all, but we're trained. It's automatic. Cross your legs at the ankle. Close your knees. Are you displaying your wares for sale? Do you want them to call you a slut?

Don't curse; don't be loud, not even when you laugh. They'll think the worst of you. You're a Ditch. You can't afford for them to think worse of you than they already do.

Don't be alone with a male. Don't let him touch you. Be virtuous and patient. Wait for the choice to be made for you.

I didn't.

I chose the blue sky and sunshine working on the wall over the hot and noisy kitchens, and *I* picked Clay Pulley. Fate fell in line.

And I don't choose this. It's not my choice to give him up, and they can make us powerless and small and scared, but as long as I have breath in my body, I can be brave. I can choose different. My wolf howls in accord.

Shift. Run.

I twist and fumble at the doors behind me. There has to be a handle. Where is it?

The female by my side notices and grabs my forearm.

My wolf snarls.

Her wolf rumbles in reply, deep and menacing.

Mine snaps her jaw shut.

"Hey," she says. "What are you doing?"

"I want out."

"We're moving." Her voice is so calm it sparks my temper.

"You can't take me away from here. I don't want to go. Make them stop and let me out."

A male has noticed us now. "You heard our beta," he says to me. "No stopping until we're out of North Border."

All the males are noticing now, quieting, twisting where they sit to watch me, bulking their shoulders, preparing to *make me* stay put if I try to leave.

My blood rushes faster in my veins, and my wolf's fur spikes along her spine. I've been dragged around for days now, shoved into that terrible cell, torn from my nest, marched to the front row of the arena so our mate could be tormented by the sight of me. I've been the carrot and the stick and collateral and a threat.

But I am not a thing, and I do not belong to them. My wolf and I are our *own*, and Clay belongs to *us*. It has never been clearer to me than it is in this moment. They can do what they want to me, but they cannot tell me what I am.

"Pull over and let me out." I lurch to my feet. The males closest to me do, too. I'm hunched, but they have to crouch.

“You are not my blood. You have no right over me. Let me go.”

“Tye says you go to the old maid cabin, so that’s where you go.” A ruddy-complected male draws himself up as much as he can in the crowded quarters and sticks a finger in my face. “Now sit down, be quiet, and try not to make a nuisance of yourself.”

I glare at him.

“Oh, just shut your mouth, Jaime,” the female says. “And quit acting like you somehow rank. You’re C-roster at best, and everyone knows it.”

“So you rank, then?” Jaime turns on the female. “We’re not going by who you can beat in the ring anymore but by whose cock you suck? Is that it?” The male’s face twists into a nasty, blotchy, freckled sneer. “Or do I have that backward? Do I need to bend my neck to you because our beta gets on his knees for you and—” He makes a dirty gesture, jerking his fist and poking his cheek with his tongue.

A male gasps. Another’s jaw drops. A few turn away so they’re facing forward, as if they suddenly decided they want no part in this argument.

I don’t understand the insult, but Kennedy’s face has gone as red as Jaime’s.

“Stop the van,” she calls to the driver.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Jaime snarls over his shoulder.

The driver coughs and adjusts the rearview. “I’m sorry, Kennedy. I can’t. You heard your—Tye.”

Jaime smirks, puffs his chest, and knocks his head against the roof of the van.

Kennedy scowls at him, her face flushing deeper and the monster in her chest grumbling louder and louder.

“Best take your seats, females.” Jaime lowers himself to a squat. “Wouldn’t want you to get yourselves hurt.”

Kennedy remains on her feet next to me. She waits a little longer until the males' attention has drifted away, and she murmurs under her breath. "If I give you an opening, can you take it?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes."

"You better shift. You're going to have to jump."

I don't know if my itty-bitty wolf could do any better than me in jumping from a moving van, but I guess it's easier to stick a landing with four feet instead of two. "Okay."

"You'll have to be quick."

"What are you going to do?" She's a little bigger than me, but she's smaller than all the males, and she's outnumbered to boot.

"I'm gonna make that fucker bend his neck to me, and then I'm never going to let him forget it for the rest of his sad, sorry life. You sure about this?" She glances at me.

I take a deep breath. "Yes. Do it."

I close my eyes and call up my wolf, but she's already at the boundary between us, eager and ready. I let go, and at the same moment, she effortlessly leaps into being. My bones crack, and my muscles tear, but the agony is over in a split second.

It's dark.

I can't see.

We're under the cloak. I claw at the fabric, ripping a hole to wriggle out, ready to fight for my freedom, but I emerge into chaos. No one spares me a glance. They're all panicking, hollering, crowded into the corners of the van as they try to fend off the enormous pitch-black wolf darting and slavering at them.

"Fucking hell, not in the van!" the driver shouts, veering as a male slams into his shoulder while trying to escape the black wolf's snapping jaws. She's magnificent.

No. Not *she*. *He*.

Kennedy's wolf is a male, and not an ordinary one. If I had to say, I'd bet he's part dire wolf, and he's elegant and stunning, like a beast from a fairy tale.

With a snap of his jaw, he takes a chunk out of the one called Jaime's leg and then leaps against the door, sliding it open with a paw. He glances over his shoulder at me with laughing yellow eyes.

I don't waste a second. I dart through the males' legs and leap from the speeding van into the night, praying I clear the wheels and Fate lets me know how to save my mate.

I roll, snout over tail. I don't mean to, but somehow the velocity and force as I hit the ground smooshes me into a ball, and I somersault onto the shoulder of the road. Instants later, the van screeches to a halt, so I have no time to catch my breath or shift back. I race into the woods, weaving through brambles and around trunks, heading east.

We haven't been traveling long, but I'm still farther from home than I've ever been before. Every now and then I catch a stale whiff of a Hunter, so I'm still in North Border territory. I keep the stink of rubber and gasoline to my left, but I venture as far from the road as I can without losing it.

My legs are so short that I might be quicker in my human form, but I'd be more visible, too. Even though I can't hear the van, I know the Quarry Pack males must be searching for me. If our alpha gave an order, any male in our pack would die before failing to see it through. They'd know the price for failure would be worse than death.

What am I going to do? How can I convince Alpha Fireside to let my mate go? His word is final. No one questions him. No one even gets close enough to him to try.

If I go back, am I just handing myself over to them so Eldrick and the rest can hold me over Clay's head? He was pummeled to a pulp tonight. If they have me, they can make him take that kind of beating over and over again. I can't let them do that.

My stubby legs slow to a trot. He cared for me enough to let me go. Am I so weak that I can't do the same for him?

I have no power. No people on my side. Nothing.

The clouds break overhead, opening on the gibbous moon like curtains on a stage. The woods are suddenly bathed in an eerie pale light. Luminous. White. Like the blossoms of the ashbalm in my little garden plot.

My wolf tears off before the thought finishes itself, howling her heart out.

No. Not nothing. I have a *very, very valuable plant* that is *nearly impossible to cultivate*, but I did grow it, with help from Clay and his stolen topsoil. The witch wants it badly, so it has to be worth one male Ditch's freedom, even if he can flip-shift. It's not like Clay can teach the other Claws to flip-shift. Everyone knows it's a gift from Fate, even if they wonder why Fate would only see fit to gift it to the near-ferals of Last Pack and Killian Kelly.

The witch will be angry.

My blood runs cold, but I don't slow down. Clay fought for me. I'll fight for him.

I have direction now. Hope. My wolf fights for breath, her muscles burning, but she pushes her skinny little legs as hard as she can all the way back to the town wall. She has to slow down once she nips through the rusted back gate in order to not draw attention. The lanes teem with drunk males celebrating Clay's win. I weave between their legs, dashing down alleyways, avoiding the raucous crowds spilling from the pubs.

Once I make my way out of Ditchside, I stick to the back streets and cut through the manicured parks of the upper ranks. They don't party in the streets, but through their lit front windows, I see them gathered in their parlors drinking and dancing. There's a carnival air in town tonight. Laughter spills from the doors.

My heart pounds in my thin chest as if it's going to burst. This has to work. I have to *make* it work.

I skirt the alpha's quarters and head for the workman's shed at the river wall. On the way, I divert through a back alley, and as stealthily as I can with as heavily as I'm breathing, I snag a shift from a clothesline with my teeth.

At the shed, I waste no time shifting into my human form. My wolf gives our skin up happily and collapses inside me into a panting puddle. I drag the shift on over my head. I'm swimming in it. I knot the skirt so it won't slow me down and help myself to a wheelbarrow. My feet are carrying me forward now, my brain a move behind.

I run down the trail to the field where the alpha's bonfire is held, ignoring the stitch in my side and the fear coursing stronger and stronger in my veins the closer I get to my goal. Clay wouldn't stop to catch his breath. He wouldn't let fear slow his steps.

I try to be as brave and undaunted, but my body isn't as tough as my mind. I'm staggering by the time I reach my garden. The ashbalm glows in the moonlight, furled in tight buds against the cool night air. Its mysterious scent fills the air, a hint of indistinct fruit, a hint of unidentifiable spice.

I drop to my knees and plunge my fingers into the loose dirt. Despite the layers Clay added, it's still dry and clumpy. It is a miracle the plants have taken root, and now I'm tearing them up with clumsy hands, plopping as many as I can into the wheelbarrow. I can't bring them all; I just need enough to prove I have them.

I wipe my hands on the shift, seize the rough wooden handles of the wheelbarrow, and jog my flowers away from the lush green clearing, up the rutted trail to town. At the rusted gate, I tilt the barrow to ease it through, praying the flowers don't slide out, and then I wind my way again through the crowded lanes of Ditchside, rushing past slurring males who call to me and try to step in my path. Even the mated females aren't out this late.

I can't be sneaky this time, so I try to be as fast as I can without hitting a rut that'll topple my cargo over onto the cobblestones.

The Quarry Pack male said his alpha was dining with Alpha Fireside, so that means they'll be at the Great Hall. It's on the far side of town, past the stairs to the river. I double back, speeding through the shuttered market square and down the wide avenue that ends at the huge stone gates to the alpha's quarter.

I'm not foolish enough to enter at the main arch where the guards are posted. I swing around to the entrance used by the servants. I've helped my sisters before when they've served at the elaborate soirees Fireside occasionally throws for his counterparts from Moon Lake and Salt Mountain.

Quarry Pack has never merited a soiree, even though their males join us for full-moon runs on occasion. I'm not sure why not. Maybe Fireside doesn't think their territory is large enough to warrant the effort. I suppose he's decided rubbing Killian Kelly's loss in his face is worth making an exception this once.

Is Clay here in the hall?

As I bolt through the back corridors, I feel for the bond. It's there, strong and deafening. Clay's pain pierces my ears and stops me in my tracks. I have to shut it down. I can't falter now.

Ditches and Cooks cast me harried looks as I rush past with my uprooted flowers, but there are too many folks rushing in all directions with all manner of trays and tureens and carts precariously stacked with dishes for anyone to think I'm out of place.

I cut through the kitchen to the staging room, and without hesitating, I spin and push through the swinging doors, pulling my wheelbarrow behind me.

The volume increases a hundredfold. The ceilings of the Great Hall are high and peaked, with wooden beams crossing the expanse that do nothing to muffle the clatter of china and silver and lively arguments and braying laughter of the guests. Festivities at the Great Hall are an occasion for the highest ranks to show off.

On full moons, the alpha's circle has their rickshaws do an entire circuit of town so everyone can see them in their finery before delivering them to dinner a dozen yards from their homes overlooking the river. I used to crowd onto the bank by Cooks Lane with my younger sisters to watch them pass, but I stopped a few years ago. At some point, the enchantment wore off, and after they rolled past, I was left restless with a bitter taste in my mouth.

I know what that feeling is now. It was presentiment. A part of me knew, even then, that it was fine enough if I was with the others, in my place, out of their way, but if for some reason I became separated from the rest? If I'd found myself in their way? They would crush me without a second thought.

Fear twists my innards into knots, and I have to grip tighter so the wooden handles don't slip through my sweaty palms. If this doesn't work, they will make a lesson out of me, and Clay will die before he lets them.

This has to work.

I force myself to slow down and catch my breath so I can speak when I reach the dais at the front of the huge room. The aisles between the long tables are busy with servers whisking away plates and refilling drinks, so I catch some eyes, but most guests are too busy talking and tearing into the rare steaks, pork chops, and fresh fish.

My heart thuds like a hammer. Am I even loud enough to make myself heard above the clatter? Am I brave enough?

I've never had to be brave before.

Except, no.

That's not true.

I've never walked into a place knowing I need to be brave before, but dear Fate, I've been shoved into bravery a hundred times. Clay denying me. Falling into the river. Those days in the basement cell. Living with my father, every moment booby-trapped, every casual word capable of transforming an ordinary day into a nightmare.

I've been brave. I can do it again.

Still, my steps slow to a crawl as I approach the long table on the dais in front of the grand fireplace that stretches almost the entire width of the hall. The table is long enough to seat twenty guests, and aside from the Quarry Pack alpha and his mate, every seat is taken by a high-ranking packmate in their finest clothes. The males sport brocade jackets in scarlet, jade, and cobalt blue, adorned with epaulets and gold buttons and silk handkerchiefs peeking from breast pockets. Their hair is pomaded so thickly that it shines in the light from the crystal chandelier.

The females wear modest gowns a shade paler than their mates' coats—dull apple, faded sage, light indigo. They wouldn't threaten to upstage the males at all if they weren't draped in jewels, but the males need some way to display their wealth. The females drip in pearls and sapphires, emeralds and rubies. It has always boggled my mind that a short walk from my shared bedroom with its thin pallet, there are females who sleep with diamonds in their ears.

Killian Kelly and his mate sit in the place of honor next to Alpha Fireside, looking as out of place as two people can. From what I can see, Killian is wearing a tight gray T-shirt. His mate is a bit more formally dressed in a pink cardigan.

And there is Clay, on the alpha's other side. My heart stutters.

He's glaring into space, his face bruised purple and black, a cut on his cheek stitched with black thread. Shifters heal quickly, but even so, it's amazing to see him sitting so straight and tense. They've given him a brown velvet jacket that's only a bit tight across the shoulders. He looks magnificent.

I want to run to him, let him scoop me in his arms and tuck me safely away. He would. He'll try to as soon as he realizes I'm here. I can't give him the chance.

I have one shot. I have to make them hear me.

I stiffen my spine and push my wheelbarrow out from between the crowded tables and across the open expanse in front of the alpha's chair.

Clay snarls and jumps to his feet. Immediately, the males positioned behind him grab his arms and pin them behind his back while the rest of the alpha's guard flood from their various stations to the center of the floor, surrounding me.

I can smell Eldrick, and my stomach curdles. He's close. His dank breath is hot on the back of my neck.

I can't let it distract me. I have to speak. "Alpha Fireside, please, if you will—" My voice comes out meek and thready. I don't know how to do this. He's not even looking at me.

He's looking at the ashbalm, his eyes lighting.

He recognizes it.

I clear my throat. "You see that I have ashbalm here. Four, five flowers. But I have more. Many more. And I will give them all to you for my mate. Clay Pulley. He's mine. I would like him back. Please." My words aren't steady, but they're loud enough. He heard. His gleaming eyes narrow.

"Wrenlee, leave," Clay orders. "Right now. Go."

"Oh no." Alpha Fireside's lips curl into a forbidding smile. "Your mate has put a proposition to me. She has sought a hearing from her alpha. It would be against the very foundation upon which this pack was built to dismiss her without fair consideration."

He spares a glance for Killian, I suppose to make sure he's following. He is. Everyone in the hall is listening. You could hear a pin drop.

I don't know what to say next, but Alpha Fireside doesn't give me a chance. He rises to his feet, lifting his arms like he does when he addresses the pack at the bonfire. "This pack was built on the idea that all are welcome. Do we not accept the bitten and transformed? The travelers from distant lands whose packs are unknown to us? The refugees entrusted to us by our neighbors?" He casts Killian a magnanimous look. Killian's face darkens.

Everyone is rapt, even though this is just another version of the speech we hear at every full-moon run, every bonfire, every solstice.

“At North Border, we may not have the riches of Moon Lake or the physical prowess of Quarry Pack, but we are still strong because of the unity of our pack—different souls of vastly different skills and interests and backgrounds, working in concerted effort for the benefit of all. From the craftspeople of the Ditch to the great minds of the Turrets, all have an essential role in our prosperity, and any can rise on the merits of his hard work and talent.”

None of it is true, and no one believes it, but the words still have a reassuring familiarity. They somehow ring true even though everyone knows that the young males whose fathers fixed the wall will themselves grow old and die fixing the wall. My mother worked the kitchens until she had enough pups to stay home, and now my sisters work in the kitchens.

Who is the story even for? Not the servers standing in the aisle, eyes glazed, shifting from one leg to another to rest their aching feet. Not the alpha’s circle. They’ve always had a seat at the head table, like their fathers and grandfathers before them.

Or maybe it *is* for us. It’s keeping us quiet. It’s keeping *me* quiet.

“Pardon, Alpha, but I am asking for my mate. We will not trouble you. We’ll leave and never bother you again.”

Alpha Fireside blinks in surprise. He’d paused for effect. He hadn’t expected me to speak.

He’s not fazed for long. “Ah, yes, your mate. This exceptional young male beside me.” He smiles fondly down at Clay. The guards have forced him back into his seat, their hands clapped onto his shoulders to hold him there. “A shining example of the promise of North Border. In any other pack, his future would be determined by his rank, but not here. Here, excellence is rewarded. Let this male from Ditchside be an inspiration to you all. Any pack member with the boldness and courage to exceed all expectation can find himself at his alpha’s side.”

It’s like I’ve accidentally walked onto a stage, interrupting the scene, and the actor continues delivering his lines, even

though the audience isn't paying attention at all anymore. Whoever he's speaking to, it's not me, and it's not the crowd behind me.

Nothing he says is real. Our places are determined before our birth, and boldness and courage will get you nothing but a backhand to the mouth. It's like dangling a treat in front of a pup. If the pup leaps for it, he'll get a whack on the nose, because this is a test. We show our obedience by not grasping for the things above us, out of reach.

It's so clear to me now.

"Give me my mate," I say. I cannot make my voice loud or strong, but I don't have to. The silence in the hall is absolute.

"You would be so selfish as to take him away from his people, now, when he is receiving the accolades he so well deserves? You would deprive your packmates of a hero? A model of tenacity and valor? Who are *you* to ask for such a sacrifice from us? What have you done for North Border? What honor have you brought to us, female? What gives you the right to stand there and demand anything at all?" he booms, finishing with his whole chest.

"Fate gives me the right," I say without hesitation. Everything is clear to me now. My little flowers, wilting in the wheelbarrow, aren't nearly enough to let me get away with challenging the alpha in front of the pack. I am not going to walk away from this. I'm dead, but I am not going down without saying what and who I am.

I may be small and powerless and scared out of my mind, but I have a voice, and they are going to hear it. "I am Clay Pulley's mate, and Fate has given him to me. Now *give him back.*"

I take a half step forward.

Someone—Eldrick—snatches my upper arm.

The table explodes. It upends, flipping in the air. Food flies—bits of fish, grains of rice, drops of creamy soup. China and glass spill to the floor and shatter, with silverware clattering after.

Behind me, the hall gasps.

Eldrick's fingers dig into my flesh.

The high-ranking males lumber to their feet, cursing, swiping gobs of mashed potato from their jewel-toned jackets. They're worried about the wrong thing.

Clay leaps. His skin turns to fur, his hips become haunches, his bones rearrange in one fluid motion. His wolf slips from the guards' fingers.

He's coming to me in a single bound. I sink to my knees. Eldrick lets me go, raising his fists to defend himself while he begins to shift.

It's too late.

Clay's wolf sails over my head and clamps his jaws around Eldrick's skull. He doesn't stop, letting his forward momentum rip Eldrick's head from his neck in a crunch of vertebrae and a mangled gurgle.

Clay's wolf turns back toward me, swinging Eldrick's head, partially morphed into a wolf with fur sprouting in patches on the face frozen in terror. Blood sprays in an arc, splattering the white flowers in the wheelbarrow.

The guards surrounding me retreat, scurrying between tables. Females scream. Dishes clatter to the floor. On the dais, males shift, but then their wolves hang back, clustering together, waiting for the alpha to give the command. Killian Kelly has shoved his mate behind him, and he's gauging the scene.

Fireside's males will come after Clay when enough of them have fully shifted. It's a matter of seconds now.

Clay's wolf tosses his head, sending Eldrick's skull rolling into the mess of broken dishes and mashed food. Then he paces to stand in front of me, facing Alpha Fireside, waiting for the inevitable.

He will die defending me.

I need to shift. At least as my wolf, I have claws. We will go down together. I step forward to stand at his side.

Alpha Fireside is quivering, his hands fisted, his face as bright as a plum. “You’re dead, Ditch! You think your party trick will save you? You are dirt, like all of your kind, and I will grind you and your mate into dust, and toss whatever is left of you into the river to sink to the bottom with the rest of the worthless muck.”

There is a snarling pack of wolves at his side now, slavering and straining. Fireside lifts his hand and points at us, his arm shaking with rage.

I’m too scared to shift. I clutch Clay’s warm, bristly pelt and hold on tight.

“Kill them,” Fireside says.

The wolves attack. They leap, maws gaping, fangs flashing. And then, as if a powerful, silent gale gusts through the hall, they’re blown off course, skittering through the slivers of china and shards of glass like cats on a freshly waxed floor.

“Uh, uh, uh,” tuts a female from behind us. “Not the ashbalm. Especially not now that it’s finally blooming.”

My gaze darts to the flowers, and it’s a miracle. The white buds, still speckled with Eldrick’s blood, are unfurling into delicate petals as intricate as tatted lace, and they *glow*. The entire wheelbarrow is illuminated as if by moonlight. And the *scent*. It fills my nose and thrums in my veins. It smells like perfect memories and wonderous dreams.

“Well, I guess it wasn’t the soil that was the issue after all,” the witch says, gathering her skirts and rising from a bench. “I guess it just wanted a different kind of watering.”

For a moment, Fireside’s face loses its color, but then a flush creeps upward from his collar. “Witch,” he says with contempt, but also, underneath, an edge of fear.

“Alpha.” The gray witch drops the slightest curtsy, which somehow oozes even more contempt than Fireside’s voice.

“You dare plant your weeds in my territory without my permission?” Fireside doesn’t temper his indignation, but

when he looks toward his guard and sees them frozen amongst the tables, necks bent, his expression falters.

The gray witch clicks her cheek. “Now, Alpha. You and I both know these are not weeds.”

Fireside’s face is flaming red now. The shade is almost indistinguishable from his vermilion jacket. His wolf rumbles in his chest, and the shifted packmates to his left and right tilt their muzzles down.

The gray witch doesn’t blink.

“You overstep, witch,” he says. “It’s time to take your flowers and go.” His voice vibrates with alpha command. Even my wolf whines and ducks her head.

The witch’s spine seems to lengthen. She takes an unhurried gander behind herself, around the hall, and as her gaze moves over table after table, it’s like a wind riffling wheat.

Some females turn away, their faces blanching or coloring. Some males square themselves and glare at her. Most packmates, though, look down at their plates or into their laps. They look like pups trying to disappear into the floorboards when they’re called to account.

I’ve never seen the pack like this before. Usually, if we’re all together, we’re at the bonfire in the dark, and there’s hollering and dancing and joyful commotion. Rank means who eats first, who gets the choicest pieces of meat, who sits closest to the alpha, and who investigates the noises in the woods that are inevitably a mated pair who has snuck off to play in their human skins.

Here, inside the town walls, rank means who has a seat. Who serves. Who watches. Who sits high above the others, being watched. It’s different. And as the witch skewers the folks in their comfortable seats with her sharp, questioning gaze, I can feel that this is *wrong*. And more than that, it’s *precarious*.

It’s not inevitable or fated. The witch might very well crack the entire order of things with a long look—if the others

would meet her eyes. But they won't. They hang their heads so they can't see this mess in front of them.

Eventually, the witch sighs. "It isn't time yet," she says, but I'm not sure who she's speaking to. "But soon, I think . . . Very soon." She gives herself a little shake and calls, "Clay Pulley. Bring my flowers. We're going."

At some point when I was distracted by Eldrick's flying skull, Clay must've shifted back. He's standing close in front of me, blocking me from the males who have picked themselves off the floor and reorganized themselves in a line behind the swath of broken crockery and bits of food.

Clay doesn't follow the order immediately. He sizes up the males and shoots a glance at the hall behind us, gauging the distance to the exit and the number of males between us and freedom.

He seems to conclude that the witch is our best ticket out. He grabs my wrist and places me directly behind him, and he takes up the handles of the wheelbarrow.

"The flowers only, witch," Fireside's voice rings out, smug now. "The traitors stay here."

The witch, who had already turned to go, swivels, her hips first, her skirts swirling from hem to waist, and then her sharp collarbones, her bony shoulders, her long neck, and her jutting chin. Her silver braid is the last part of her to swing around, accompanied by the clinking of the bangles around her wrists.

"Traitors?" She arches a thin gray brow.

"Traitors," Fireside affirms, apparently oblivious to the new weight in the air, the sizzle raising the hairs on everyone's arms and legs. "What else would you call those who flaunt the natural order? Who rise against their alpha and seek to sow disorder and discontent? What other word for those who place their selfish interests above the unity and good of the pack?"

The witch replies softly, but I have no doubt she can be heard at the very back of the hall. "Oh, I would call such a male worse than a traitor, and I would say to him that his time is coming, for him and all his ilk."

Somehow, she draws herself even taller. It's impossible to tell; her skirts are so long, but by the way they dust the floor, I could almost swear she's floating.

“Do you know why my *weeds* took root here in *your* territory, Alpha?” The change in direction seems to throw him. He's still looking for an answer when the witch says, “I'll tell you. This young male here. Your traitor. He's very clever. He mixed the old dirt with fresh soil. So simple. Essential, though, when the old dirt has become barren.”

She spears him with her steely gaze.

His lip curls. Even though she's now on a level with him—she is definitely floating, I see space between the pointed toes of her cobbled boots and the floor—he manages to look down his nose at her.

“You would know old and barren, witch.” He waves his hand in dismissal. “Spout your vague prophecies elsewhere. I'm not a desperate slut you can fool into handing over a coin for a bottle of swamp water. Walk away now, alone, or your time will come, hag, in this very hall, this very night.” He glances over his shoulder at the roaring fire. “The flames are nice and high. What do you say?”

The North Border males seem to get a second wind, edging forward, puffing their chests, their wolves rattling their throats.

The witch smiles. “You're right about one thing. I am not desperate.” And she shifts her gaze to the left. To Una, the Quarry Pack alpha's mate.

Their eyes meet. There is an old knowing there, an exchange that I recognize. I've traded such looks with my mother and sisters a hundred times when the males are drunk or Father is on a rampage.

Una starts for us, leaving the protection of her mate's bulk. He immediately grabs her arm.

Her gaze lowers calmly to where his hand clutches her.

He lets go and sighs. “You'd have me fight the entire pack, mate?”

She smiles softly. Love and complete confidence shine in her eyes. “Only the ones who try to stop us.”

Killian exhales again, clasps his hands, and rests them on his head. “You really want to do this?”

“Am I not the most powerful wolf in the five packs? You’re always telling me so. What’s the point of being so powerful if I don’t use it for good?”

He tilts his head back and stares at the rafters. “I didn’t even get to finish my steak,” he finally mutters, and fumbles with his belt. In what appears to be one seamless movement, he kicks off his jeans, strips off his shirt, and becomes his wolf. One moment, he is a man, and the next, he is the largest beast I’ve ever seen. It’s magic. It can’t be anything else.

Una carefully picks her way through the detritus of the dinner table. Killian’s wolf stays close to her side. She leans against his flank when she gets to the edge of the dais and kind of rides him down a step.

The other males fidget and look to Fireside. Their wolves have grown silent.

When Una reaches us, she takes the witch’s hand, and they stand side by side like sisters.

Killian’s wolf turns to face the line of North Border males. Their gazes dart between him and their alpha. Fireside is frozen, purple faced.

With a snort, Killian’s wolf lifts his head and howls. The windowpanes and the dishes on the tables behind us rattle. No one moves.

The witch holds out her hand to me. I take it. It is strangely soft, like kid leather.

“You’ll get the flowers, Clay?” she asks as she walks us down the center aisle between my silent, gaping packmates, our pace slow to match Una’s.

Clay follows us with the wheelbarrow. Killian’s wolf lets out a few more plaintive howls, and when he finally accepts that no one is taking him up on his challenge, he ducks his

head, snatches up a pork chop from the floor, and snarfs it down, then brings up the rear as we leave the Great Hall.

“Your day will come, Fireside,” the witch calls over her shoulder before she steps into the night, and even though her words are nowhere near as loud as the howls of Killian’s wolf, somehow, they also make the silverware clatter against the plates.

Everything moves quickly then. A truck speeds up the cobblestone and screeches to a halt. Doors fly open. Killian’s wolf becomes man again from one blink to the next. He scoops Una into his arms and settles her in the passenger seat. After she fusses at him, he helps the witch into the second row before swinging himself in.

“You got yours?” he asks Clay, but Clay has already hoisted the wheelbarrow into the truck bed, and he’s in the process of lifting me in after it.

“Yes. Good. Go.” Clay slaps the back window, and the truck peels off just as the hall’s doors burst open and a dozen males who’ve suddenly found their courage come pouring out.

Before we whip around the lane that leads to the west bridge, I see Amir, the male who helped when I made my nest, run from the hall. He’s hanging back, motionless in the scum, an expression on his face that twists my heart. He looks like a male watching his last hope drive away.

I tilt my head to look at Clay, and immediately, I forget everything but him. He’s here. With me. We’re free.

He settles me between his knees, wraps me in his arms, and nuzzles my neck with his bristly face. Finally, after what feels like months, my muscles relax. I breathe him in along with the evening dew and the clean breeze cooling my cheeks. This is where I belong.

“I am Wrenlee’s mate,” he murmurs in my ear, nipping the tender spot where my shoulder and neck join. A shiver races up my spine.

I hum my agreement.

“Fate has given her to me,” he says, low and growly.

His canines prick my skin, and I moan.

“I have her back, and I am never letting her go.” He sinks his fangs into my flesh, and I whine, the pain swirling with the excitement in my belly, becoming something exquisite. Something beautiful.

When he’s done, he laps his mark with his rough tongue, and the pain fades to an ache. I snuggle against his hard, warm chest, and we speed away from everything we’ve ever known.

The stars are out tonight. They shine on the white flowers whose petals whip back and forth, buffeted by the wind. By all reason, they should be torn from the stem and scattered, but they are stronger than they seem. They know how to hold on.

They’ve *learned* how.

“I’m happy Fate picked you for my mate, Clay Pulley,” I say, closing my eyes and sinking back into his arms.

He draws his nose along my jaw. “I picked you first,” he says, and brushes my lips with a soft kiss. “And I’d pick you again a hundred times.”

“Because I’m yours, and you love me.” I yawn and tuck my head under his chin.

“Because you’re mine, and I love you,” he agrees.

And I know the elders would say he’s wrong, but I know he’s right. He was mine before Fate decided.

I know he was.

I felt it in my heart.

EPILOGUE

CLAY

“I CAN’T,” I TELL KILLIAN. IF I TRY TO FLIP-SHIFT AGAIN, I’M going to take a header off this downed oak and land on my ass in the dirt of the dry creek bed underneath. For the tenth time this afternoon.

I don’t mind the pain and aggravation. It’s the waste of time that’s getting to me. We’ve been out here in the woods too long. Even though the bond is humming away, I worry when I haven’t scented my mate in a while.

“*Can’t* is for bitches and pussies,” Killian replies.

“*Bitches* and *pussies* are gendered slurs. We aren’t allowed to say those anymore,” Tye hollers from his perch on a nearby grassy bank.

It feels like all the Quarry Pack males are sitting over there, watching the show. Some of them are eating sunflower seeds, spitting the shells like I’m not gutting myself up here for their amusement, and I’ve seen money exchange hands.

“Yeah, who says?” Killian shoots back.

“Your mate,” Tye answers.

Killian scowls and then grunts. “All right. *Can’t* is for puckered assholes. Everybody’s got one of those.” He smirks at Tye triumphantly. “I’ve got one as a beta. He’s sitting right there.”

The males on the bank fall out laughing. It wasn’t that funny. They’re bored, and they’re getting punch-drunk.

“Come on,” Killian says, clapping his hands as he balances barefoot on the log. “It’s easy.” He morphs into his wolf and back into human skin so smoothly that the only evidence he shifted is his swinging dick. He grins and flourishes his hands. *Ta da.*

I rub my temples. My bones ache, and I’ve got splinters in the soles of my feet.

“Just, kind of dig deep, and reach for it and then just kind of grab it, and—” Killian grunts, morphs into wolf, shifts back, and does the *ta da*. “Like that.”

These past few months, I’ve learned a hell of a lot about fighting from my new alpha, but it’s been purely from observation and imitation. He can’t explain anything worth shit.

“Now go.” He snaps and points a finger gun at me.

“I can only do it in the moment.”

“The moment is now.” He snaps and shoots again.

“My mate isn’t in danger.” I check the bond to be sure, but yeah, whatever she’s doing, she’s happy. I will never get enough of the feeling. It’s like clouds and cotton.

A shadow crosses Killian’s face, and all of a sudden, he’s not playing around anymore. “Yes, she is. All of our females are now. I don’t know what the hell the witch is holding over Moon Lake’s head, or what’s going on with Salt Mountain, but I know that the second they’re back in play, this truce is over. Fireside is biding his time until he has the backing and then he’s going to come at us with all he has. We made a fool of him in his own house.”

Not for the first time in these past months, I feel the full weight of what I’ve asked from this male, or rather what his mate bid him do for us. “I understand, Alpha.”

I prepare myself to shift again, to get it right this time, but just as quickly as Killian sobered, his mood changes, and he gets a gleam in his eye. “I can’t fucking wait. After I kill that pompous fucker and his bootlickers, I’m going to have Old

Noreen turn all their fancy jackets into throw pillows for my sofa.”

“Your mate is never going to go for that,” Tye calls.

“Una picks the sofas. I pick the pillows,” Killian says with total confidence. The males on the bank snicker. They don’t seem convinced. “Now, come on. You’ve got this. Go!”

I dig deep. I reach for it. I grab.

Then I’m teetering on a log on four furry feet, my two arms flailing over my head, desperately trying to balance. As I crash to the ground, a male on the bank says, “Is that a wolf dick or a human dick?”

“I don’t know,” another answers. “But that’s sure as shit not where it’s supposed to be.”

I black out.

When I come to, I’m flat on my back in the dirt, and Killian is offering me his hand, grinning. “Hey, that was, like, a forty-five percent flip-shift. That’s a one hundred percent improvement from last time. Let’s hit the showers.”

We traipse back to the wilderness camp that Quarry Pack has made into a home, the males ribbing each other and carrying on, their laughter startling birds into flight and sending small critters scurrying through the undergrowth. It feels good.

The days here in Quarry Pack are as hard and long as those working on the wall in North Border, but I’m not so bone weary when I hit the sheets at night. In part, it’s because of who’s waiting there for me, but it’s also this—the dumb jokes and ball busting and random wrestling matches.

It feels like a pack should feel. Kind of hectic, kind of messy, but somehow in sync. There is rank here, but it’s not an excuse to keep folks down or to hoard what you’ve got. It feels more like the positions in a human sport. Killian plays alpha. Tye plays beta. I’m some kind of secret weapon we haven’t figured out how to use quite yet. But ultimately, what we are is a team.

Until I got here, I didn't realize how *easy* it was for things to be different. Really, it's only a matter of attitude. How do you change minds, though? How do you get people to imagine something different than what they've always known? When I think about North Border, it seems even more impossible than flip-shifting.

Back at the gym, Killian invites me for a steam, but I decline, clean up quickly, and hike out toward the witch's cottage. Wrenlee's working in the greenhouse up there today. She knows I'm coming to walk her home. Quarry Pack is deadly serious about patrolling their territory, but I don't like her leaving the commons without male protection.

I'm fortunate that she doesn't mind waiting for me. The Quarry Pack females roam where they want, even as far as the nearest human town. They drive vehicles and use human phones and wear pants. They're happy, but their males don't sleep so well.

I'm grateful that Wrenlee prefers her own modest shifts I brought back when I fetched her mother and sisters. I can hardly focus when she's around now. I'd be useless if I could see the tops of her breasts or her bare thighs.

As I enter the clearing around the cottage, the anxiety that's always a low hum inside me when we're apart begins to ebb, and my stride slows. I breathe in all the growing things, the plump strawberries and blackberries and tender green beans. Over by the apiary, a female in a white suit and veil is smoking the bees.

Another female, Wrenlee's sister, Annabel, is perched on an overturned bushel basket, picking peas. Their youngest sister, Laney, sits nearby in the grass, shelling the peas and popping at least every other one in her mouth.

"Hello, sisters," I call. They both wave. They're still shy of me and the other males, but they don't smell of fear anymore, and that's a blessing.

I thank Fate every day that I was able to bring them away without bloodshed. I'd prepared for a fight, and I went back alone. I didn't feel like I had the right to ask Killian or the

others for help, and in the end, they might've made it harder by drawing attention. I waltzed into the rusted-open gate in the low wall right after sunset, and no one challenged me.

When I got to Wrenlee's house, I knocked out her oily cousin, more for my own satisfaction than because he posed an obstacle, but her father and brothers didn't try to stop me, so I let them be. The hardest part was driving the van I borrowed back to Quarry Pack. The female, Kennedy, coached me on how to shift gears, but it's harder than it looks.

Killian beat my ass in the ring for going alone, but he didn't say a word about sending them back. He was going to beat my ass in the ring anyway because it was a day that ended in the letter y, so I figured I got off easy.

Afterward, he wanted to talk about how I did it. Apparently, there are some Quarry Pack females who were entrusted to North Border for care years ago, and now that there is conflict looming, Killian is considering how best to retrieve them. That is a problem for a future day, though. Today is good. I can see my mate through the greenhouse glass.

She's bent over a rack of herbs, snipping at them with a pair of shears. The witch says Wrenlee has a real green thumb. She also says to call her Abertha, and Wrenlee does, but it feels too familiar to me. I saw that female float in the air. I'm not going to call her by her given name.

As I get to the door, I give the bond a tug. Wrenlee straightens right up and turns. Her braid swings, and her eyes light up.

A big dumb smile breaks across my face. I can't help it. She has a twig stuck in her hair, mud on the hem of her shift, and dirt under her fingernails. She's the prettiest thing in the world, and she steals my breath. I can't wait until she's carrying my pup. It didn't take this past heat, but we'll have plenty more chances at the rate we're going.

"Have you been waiting long?" I ask her, lingering in the doorway just to admire her.

She sets the shears on the rack and wipes her grubby hands on her smock. When she glances up at me from behind her thick lashes, I know it's supposed to seem demure, but she can't hide the shine. Besides, her excitement surges through the bond and stirs mine. She missed me.

My smile grows wider, and I stroll over.

"I'm sorry if I made you wait," I say, pitching my voice low and growly. She goes wild when I speak that way in bed, and when we're out in public, it makes her squirm. I'm not sure which I like better.

"I wasn't just hanging around for you." She lifts her nose in the air. "I have plenty to keep me busy."

"I see that." I pluck the twig from her braid and hold it up for her to see.

The apples of her cheeks pinken.

"Should I go, then, and come back later?" I turn, pretending to go, but the truth is that nothing could tear me away now that her brown eyes have gone dark and deep.

She snatches my wrist. "You'd leave me?"

I cannot tease her a second longer. I drag her into my arms and take her mouth until she's panting. "Never," I tell her in between kisses. "You're mine, and I intend to keep you."

"Keep me?" Her voice is dreamy, and her nipples are pebbling, visible through the cotton of her shift. I wonder if she'll let me take her on the ground in the mossy knoll on the way back home.

I murmur a *yes* and whisper against her neck, close to her ear so she can hear. "Keep you happy, keep you safe, keep you right beside me until we're old and cranky and you swat me with the broom, so I'll give you a moment of peace."

"I never would," she says, winding her arms around my neck. "I'd sit on your lap in the rocking chair, and we'd doze together by the fire."

"Go with me now?" I ask.

“To sit on your lap in the rocking chair?” She flashes me the sauciest grin, and I swing her into my arms. She shrieks as I carry her off, her sweet voice ringing through the woods, her body warm against my chest.

I do not know what the future holds, but today, I have everything. The sun is high, the sky is blue, and Wrenlee Pulley is mine.

We rush all the way back to our cabin in the commons, hand in hand. Our place is small, and we share a wall with another mated pair, but it’s cozy, close to where her family stays, and we have all we need. There’s heat, running water, a big bed, and a trunk for Wrenlee to store the linens and trinkets I buy her from the alpha female’s shop in Chapel Bell. Killian allows us to keep most of the purses we win on the circuit, and even without flip-shifting, I’m holding my own.

As soon as we dash through the front door, I lift and spin Wrenlee, pinning her to the wall and kissing her breathless. She laughs in my mouth, but unlike usual, her fingers don’t fly to my buttons. She pushes at my shoulders, ducking away.

My heart drops, and she giggles. “Don’t worry. I have a present for you. I just want to give it to you first.”

I don’t want to, but I let her slip away. She dances to the kitchenette and draws a covered plate from the cupboard. Cinnamon and sugar hit my nose, and my stomach rumbles. Her smile reaches her ears.

“Cinnamon cake?” I guess.

She plucks the crisp white towel from the dish with a flourish. I moan. It has the crumbly topping. I step forward, and she clicks her cheek, her brown eyes sparkling with mischief. “No. Sit there.” She nods toward the rocking chair on the braided rug in front of the fireplace.

I’ll do whatever she wants if she never stops looking at me like this.

I sink into the low seat, and despite my weight, it doesn’t creak. It’s solid and made big to fit a male or a female with a few clinging pups. I traded some masonry work for it early on,

and even though the project took twice as long as I was told, I still think I got the better end of the deal. It's a good chair.

Slow and coy, Wrenlee approaches me, bearing the cake as if it's priceless. It sure feels like it to me.

"When did you have time to bake?" I ask.

"I didn't." Her eyes twinkle. "You know I hate working in the kitchen. I traded for it."

"What did you trade?" I don't like the idea of her giving up her things.

"A bushel of meadowsweet."

"I guess that's all right."

"You approve?" She's laughing at me, but I don't care, because she's lifting her shift so she can sit atop me, sliding a knee on either side of my hips. Her white woolen stockings come up just past her knees. Those stockings haunt me. I've taken more than a few unblocked blows to the face because I drifted off, picturing them.

I rest my hands on the warm bare skin above the wool, with the plate between us. Cinnamon, brown sugar, sunshine, and traces of the greenhouse fill my lungs. My mate smells like every good thing.

She breaks off a piece of cake and holds it up. "Try it," she says quietly.

I let her slip it between my lips, and the sweetness explodes on my tongue. I groan.

"Good?" she asks.

"So good." I tear off another bite and offer it to her.

She smiles, but shakes her head. "I got it for you. It's a present."

"It's no good unless we share it." That's true of everything, and the bond sings to me that she feels exactly the same.

She parts her lips. I can't help but kiss them before I slip the cake in. Her tongue swipes my fingers before I can pull

them away, licking off the crumbs that stick. My wolf growls in my throat. Hers rumbles in reply.

Suddenly, the cake is forgotten. She fumbles with my belt, one-handed. I take the plate, set it on the floor, and then gather her closer, sucking in a breath as her small hand wraps around my cock.

“Baby, slow down,” I beg her as she rises higher on her knees. “I need to get you ready.”

“I’m ready now,” she whines, hooking her panties aside and notching me in place. She’s not lying. She’s wet and hot, and I’m not about to argue. Before I can thrust up, though, she sinks down, grunting as she takes me to the hilt.

Her eyes are closed, her head tossed back, her braid swinging across my knees. She’s lovely and sure and lost in the moment.

She grinds her hips, chasing her pleasure, and I rock us with my feet, back and forth, trying desperately to hold off while I commit every detail to memory. Her panting, her flushed skin, the soft flutter of her channel as she screams against my neck and collapses against my chest, grinning.

I still don’t come. I don’t want this to ever end. It’s a miracle that we’re here, safe, together, and happy. Whatever the future holds, I don’t want to ever forget how this feels.

I’m not invincible, though, and when her pussy gives one last little spasm, it sends me over the edge. I come with a shout, muffled by her sweet kiss.

“That was amazing,” she says as she leans over the side of the rocking chair, my softening cock still inside her, and plucks up the remaining cake. She takes a huge bite, but she saves the last tiny piece for me.

“I love you,” she says as she pops it into my mouth.

I can’t answer her right away because I’m chewing, but she knows what I’ll say when I swallow.

I love you back.

Wherever we are. Whatever happens.

Now and forever.

Always.



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