

PACK OF DAWN AND DESTINY BOOK TWO



UNITED

MAGIFORD SUPERNATURAL CITY

K. M. SHEA

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Chapter 1

Pip

When I'd been informed that the Pack was going to help me try to connect with my magic, I had a lot of guesses what that would be like. I figured there would be random ambushes in the middle of the night, daytime chases where they ran me until I couldn't breathe, maybe they'd nip me a few times to see if they could inspire enough terror to ignite my powers.

But the route they'd chosen to take was...not like any of that.

"Are you *sure* you can't feel your magic? Or is it just that you don't like it, so you don't want to feel it?" Aeric asked. He peered back over his shoulder at me, his red hair sticking out in the green foliage of the forest we were hiking through.

"I didn't even know I *had* this kind of magic until the fight with the Fletchings and their allies," I said. "I couldn't have been suppressing it, because I didn't even know it existed."

"You said you weren't even aware you were the source of the potent magic during the fight, right?" Wyatt asked. Darkhaired, but shorter and more muscled than Aeric, Wyatt held back a branch for me so I could pass by without getting a face full of leaves.

“Thanks, and yeah. I thought it was Pack magic Greyson was somehow sharing with me. In hindsight, that shouldn’t be possible, since I’m a hunter.”

Yeah, I was a hunter who lived with wolves—the Northern Lakes Pack. I’d been adopted by a werewolf couple after my parents were killed in an accident on a wolf hunt.

While I was a certified hunter, there was apparently some family knowledge I’d missed out on since my parents died before they could teach me much. For instance, there was some pretty rare magic that ran through my dad’s family. Supposedly I’d inherited it, and then used it during a fight against a bunch of renegade hunters who had tried to attack the Pack.

Unfortunately, I still hadn’t figured out how I was supposed to use that magic.

“Did you feel anything when you used it?” Wyatt asked.

“Kind of? I felt awesome—like I could do anything. And I could feel that my hunter magic was around. But suddenly that feeling was just there. I didn’t do, or think, or say anything to kickstart it,” I said.

“That seems odd.” Wyatt adjusted his glasses, pinching at their thin frames. “Though maybe it’s not too surprising? You didn’t smell any different after using it—and there wasn’t any particular scent in the air. Just the smell of you. And your deodorant.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said. “I love getting reminders that I smell.”

“You’re welcome.” Aeric only half paid attention as he peered down at his phone while he tapped away on it, texting his girlfriend—and my townie friend and Timber Ridge Welcome Center coworker—Shania.

I scrambled up a steep hill that was only about ten feet tall, then skidded down the other side as Aeric and Wyatt effortlessly led the way. “Do you guys really think talking about my feelings as we hike through Pack land will help me uncover my magic, or did you just come up with this to get

Hector off your back since you haven't taken a crack at me yet?" I asked.

"Hey, this is a way more valid method than attempting to beat it from you," Wyatt said. "Based on the one time your magic *did* kickstart, it seems to be intrinsically connected to your emotions."

"Dude." Aeric looked up from his phone. "That was so professionally stated!"

Wyatt puffed out his already broad chest a little more. "Thank you. I did research beforehand!"

"Anyway." Aeric stuffed his phone in the deep pocket of his jeans. "Yeah, Hector told us it was our turn to see if we could notice anything about your magic, and he gave us the 'this is a Pack-effort' talk. But we're pretty vested in helping you with your magic anyway."

I had just enough time to get a fuzzy warm feeling in the pit of my stomach before Wyatt added, "Yeah, because we were about *twice* as strong when we were hyped up on that amplification magic of yours! Talk about feeling awesome!"

"Yeah, and if you can figure out your Wolf's Kiss powers, we'll be able to be amped up like that whenever we want!" Aeric laughed.

"Hey, we agreed to call it my trainer powers." I hiked up the trail we were following, vengefully kicking up some fallen leaves. It was late August—just before the start of school for kiddos—and some of the forests were already considering the matter of autumn. "And could you at least pretend you're doing this for my sake?"

"We are," Wyatt assured me. "But we figured you'd want to know that we want you to get your powers, too, since you were pretty upset when you first found out about them."

I had...conflicted feelings about my hidden hunter magic.

To start with, Wolf's Kiss was an extremely rare form of magic, which basically let a hunter who lived among wolves—a rarity, even back in history when supernaturals mixed more than they do in modern times—amplify a Pack's powers.

They could drastically improve the survival rate and successful change rate that a Pack could change humans into wolves and could inspire greater strength and abilities in wolves that belonged to the Pack. Unfortunately, a Wolf's Kiss was apparently such a powerful presence, it could affect the Pack hierarchy.

That was why Hudson, the previous Alpha whom I had thought of as a kind of favorite uncle and whose daughter had been my best friend, had to leave and take his family. My magic and I had unknowingly been threatening his hold on the Pack.

A stronger Alpha had been called in as a result—Greyson.

“I decided I'd rather call you a Wolf's Kiss,” Aeric announced. “Because saying you're a trainer—or a tamer for that matter—makes us sound like we're wild dogs you're domesticating.”

“I've seen you eat,” I said. “You could use some domestication.”

“She's not wrong,” Wyatt chimed in.

“Shania hasn't complained.” Aeric pulled his phone out and tapped away on it in response to a text Shania must have sent him. I didn't know if he was getting help from his nose or his superior wolf hearing, but he easily avoided trees and obstacles as he kept on marching through the woods.

“Ouch,” I said. “Did you see that, Wyatt? Now he's rubbing his dating status in our faces.”

“It's cruel of him,” Wyatt said. “But—I have hope!”

“Oh?” Aeric—as invested as always in his best friend's romantic entanglements—immediately put his phone away and whirled around. “Who are you stalking now?”

“Aeric, please.” I jumped a fallen tree, almost landing on a huge mushroom on the other side of it. “He prefers the term ‘closely monitor’.”

“Her name is Ashley,” Wyatt said. “She's a townie.”

“A human, then? Not a bad choice! Not that I’m biased or anything.” Aeric winked and nudged Wyatt. “What about you, Pip? Any choice males you’ve got your eye on?”

“How about Radcliff?” Wyatt suggested. “You’re a hunter, and he’s a hunter. Plus, he’s pretty good looking, and knows his way around a gun—I got to see him and Scarlett practice the other day, and he’s got excellent aim.”

“An important thing to consider in romantic partners,” Aeric said. “For Pip, anyway, because that means he won’t be spooked by her ability to kill things, and he shouldn’t get that dog vibe from her the rest of us do.”

“Thank you so much for the support,” I wryly said. “I always appreciate when you two are willing to chat about my possible romances since I’m a hunter.”

“It’s our duty to be encouraging,” Wyatt said. “Or you’ll lose hope since you have even fewer options than me, and enough failed feelings to get you the label of forever alone. And you aren’t off limits to wolves because you’re a hunter, you’re off limits because you feel like an adorable wolf puppy.”

“Yeah, Scarlett Fletching is a hunter, and she is gorgeous,” Wyatt reported. “But you’re just...”

The two stopped and stared at me. I started to bristle, ready for their—

“A Pomeranian!” they cooed together and hugged me, smashing me between their uncomfortably muscled chests.

“Cut that out.” I squirmed out of their hug, but I was pretty used to being manhandled. Wolves were super touchy-feely, and as one of my hunter powers, I had a defensive magic that made me ooze pheromones similar to a puppy.

The positive side meant it was really hard for a wolf to get mad at me and stay mad. The downside was I had the romantic appeal of an eight-week-old puppy. (They’d decided I was a Pomeranian because I was so much smaller than all the hulking wolves, and because my hair had gone white early in

my twenties, a trait I had inherited from my dad, along with his family's weird magic.)

"You know, you either won the lottery with your magic, or you're cursed." Aeric pointed to a narrow deer path for us to take.

"I'd say cursed, considering her bleak possibilities of love," Wyatt confidently said.

I shivered. "Take that back. That sounds too much like a prediction to be a joke."

"Sure," Wyatt easily agreed. "If you try to connect to your magic."

"Boo," I said. "You're no fun."

"Neither is your love life," Aeric said.

"Okay, I'm ready to get off the love train."

"So do you think it was that you were fighting someone outside the Pack that triggered your powers?" Wyatt asked.

"Nah, she nearly took down that Low Marsh wolf before Greyson arrived when this whole mess started," Aeric pointed out. "Maybe it was because she was fighting hunters?"

"And what, had an allergic reaction to them?" I asked.

Aeric and Wyatt stopped abruptly, and I nearly slammed into Aeric's back.

They were frozen, every muscle in their bodies tensed as they listened.

I copied them and tried to stretch my hunter senses—which would let me feel any werewolf in the immediate area. However, I felt nothing.

"It's Young Jack," Wyatt said after a few moments.

Aeric tilted his head from side to side as he picked up what my human ears couldn't. "Sounds like he drove the golfcart into the ditch again."

"Let's go find him, so you two can help him," I said.

“This way.” Wyatt took us off the deer path and through the knee-high underbrush of the woods.

We popped out on one of the many narrow gravel roads that ran through the Pack lands—they led to all the various cottages/houses, the Pack lodge, some of the nearby lakes, and Timber Ridge—the small, human tourist town the werewolves owned about half the business in.

Young Jack was just a little way up the road, anxiously rubbing the back of his head as he studied his golfcart, which was stuck with its front end dipped down in the small ditch that ran parallel to the road.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Jack—are you okay?”

Young Jack swung around and waved to us. “I’m fine. But my parents are going to bite me for crashing the golfcart again.”

Human, and a senior in high school, Young Jack was the child of a wolf couple who belonged to the Northern Lakes Pack. He’d decided he was going to stay human rather than be bitten and attempt the change—the process of being turned into a werewolf—but the Pack was still family to him, so he was living among us until he finished high school and figured out what he wanted to do for college/work.

He was a little hot headed, but fast to smile with a mischievous grin that he’d sported since I first met him when he was a little kid.

Wyatt shook his head as we joined Young Jack’s inspection of the crashed vehicle. “Going too fast down the road, were we? You know, this is why your parents won’t get you a car and you’re stuck using a golfcart.”

“Come on, give him a break.” Aeric rested a foot on the golfcart’s back bumper. “He has a need for speed—and it’s not like you can actually *go* very fast in a golfcart,” Aeric—a notable car race/auto enthusiast—said.

“He had it going fast enough to crash it,” I logically pointed out.

“Could you guys help me?” Young Jack begged. “I don’t want my parents to find out.”

“Too late for that, probably,” I estimated.

“Don’t worry,” Aeric assured him. “We’ll get you out. Wyatt?”

Aeric and Wyatt—displaying the supernatural strength of werewolves, stood at either end of the golfcart and just... picked it up. With *one* hand each.

They stabilized the golfcart with their free hands, but their face muscles didn’t even twitch with effort as they popped the golfcart out of the ditch and set it down on the gravel road.

“Thanks—I mean it.” Young Jack hopped in the golfcart with an easy grin.

“No problem,” Aeric said. “Where are you heading?”

“Lake Lycaon,” Young Jack said, naming one of the small private lakes the Pack owned. “I figure I can get one last day of swimming in. It’s going to be too cold pretty soon as the nights cool off.”

Aeric and Wyatt fidgeted—the whole Pack could swim, but given their fighting instincts, water made them a tad uncomfortable as they couldn’t really fight or defend themselves in it.

I, on the other hand, adored water—and climbing—for the very reason that they didn’t like it.

“Have fun,” I said. “Anyone meeting you there?”

“Yeah, Amelia and a few others are supposed to come out in an hour, but I wanted to get there first.” Young Jack swiveled in his seat. “Hey, if my parents happen to see you...”

“I won’t tell them,” Aeric promised.

“Great. Thanks again!” Young Jack winked at us, then started the golfcart and pattered off.

Wyatt watched as Aeric waved to the teenager. “You do know that we won’t have to tell his parents anything, since the wreckage will be obvious?” He glanced at the very clear skid

marks that dug through the gravel, and the smashed sapling Young Jack had run down in the process.

“Of course, it’s why I said *I* wouldn’t say anything.” Aeric wriggled his eyebrows, until his phone beeped and he dug it out again.

“How is Shania?” I asked.

“Good!” Aeric’s smile grew as he read the text message. “Her asthma was kicking up for a while, but she’s doing better today.”

I perked up when I felt two bright spots enter my hunter senses. “We’ve got visitors coming.”

“That would be the parental units.” Wyatt rolled his shoulders back and turned in a circle, looking for his packmates.

I saw them first when they stepped out of the shadows—it was Jack’s parents, Klancy and Roanne.

“Roanne, Klancy. Hey!” I waved to them as they tilted their heads, studying the signs of the wreck.

Roanne was picture perfect, with coppery blond hair that settled on her shoulders in lovely waves and a slim build that belied her sheer strength. She was just a touch taller than Klancy, who was wiry but looked like a lumberjack from a romance book with his craggy good looks and well-trimmed beard.

“He crashed the golfcart again, didn’t he?” Roanne joined us with a few large steps, shaking her head as she studied the skid marks. “We’re going to have to make him retake his driver’s test before we let him leave for college.”

“He’s more cautious with a car.” Klancy—although wider than his wife—moved like shadows. “But the problem could right itself if we let him drive around Timber Ridge.”

“You mean because Mayor Pearl would fix the police on him and give him a ticket for every minor infraction?” Roanne asked. “I suppose that could work.” She turned to Aeric,

Wyatt, and me, her intense blue eyes studying us. “Thank you for helping him.”

“Sure thing,” Aeric said. “We love to help the kiddos!”

Roanne nodded, then zeroed in on me. “Phillipa Sabre.”

I straightened, not really sure why she’d said my name. “Yes?”

“I heard you awakened new hunter powers.” Roanne moved in too close for my personal comfort zone and sniffed the air. “But you don’t smell any different.”

“Should I?” I asked.

Klancy tilted his head as he studied me. “I would have assumed so, but perhaps not. It is still hunter magic, so it stands to reason that you would smell the same. I was told the powers give you a special draw to the Pack...” He studied me with an expression that said he was dissatisfied I didn’t seem any different.

“I’m not sure anymore,” I said. “I haven’t been able to connect with whatever I used when the Fletchings attacked. Maybe it was a one-time thing?”

“Unlikely,” Klancy said. “Magic is not a lightning strike. You just need time.”

“I don’t see what everyone was so concerned about. You’re still you. It’s not like you really influence us.” Roanne nodded, then abruptly swept me up in a hug. “Though it is just as soothing to hug you as it’s always been.”

She patted my upper back, and I just stood there and accepted it.

“We call it our Pomeranian Puppy Power-ups.” Wyatt smugly adjusted his glasses. “Because she’s cute and fluffy like a Pomeranian puppy.”

“Even Shania has tried hugging her, and agrees that it just makes you feel better,” Aeric said.

“She said that because you two peer-pressured her into it,” I objected. I barely noticed when Roanne passed me off to

Klancy, who gave me a couple of back and head pats.

“It’s refreshing,” Klancy said.

I grunted. “Glad I could be of service.”

If Klancy was in his wolf form, his ears would have been twitching as he studied me. “You smell the same and feel the same,” he said.

“Exactly,” Roanne said.

“You said that earlier,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but I wanted to say it again, because maybe you feel the same because nothing has changed, and you’ve always had this magic. You just never used it before,” Klancy finished.

Roanne frowned a little—bothered by the idea. “I don’t know...the list of what Alpha Greyson said she was capable of...it’s a little troubling—to know that she could affect us the same way an Alpha could.”

“If you think about it as an impersonal idea, yeah,” Aeric said. “Except this isn’t some random hunter we dragged home. It’s Pip.”

“She’s not going to try to tear us away from Alpha Greyson. She’s our hunter,” Wyatt said.

I squinted at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Wyatt shrugged, but Roanne and Klancy must have understood him. They nodded, and Roanne settled down, her shoulders relaxing.

“Very well put,” Roanne agreed. “I guess our suspicions are unnecessary. She is ours, after all.”

The couple started to head back into the woods.

“Take care,” Aeric called after them.

They acknowledged the comment with a wave, then disappeared into the forest.

I waited until they disappeared from my hunter senses. “Genetics are a mystery,” I said. “I just can’t fathom how

someone as serious as Klancy and Roanne could produce Young Jack.”

“It’s the Pack influence,” Wyatt said. “Takes a village to raise a kid, and all of that.”

Werewolves weren’t often born. It happened very, very rarely—Aeric and another female werewolf named Remy were the only two in our generation to have been born as werewolves.

Instead, werewolves typically gave birth to regular humans who could—if they wanted to—attempt the change to become werewolves.

Children of werewolves had a much higher success rate than a random human off the street—or so I’d been told.

For the past decade the Northern Lakes Pack had a near perfect survival rate of the change—meaning they survived whether they became a werewolf or not—and most of the time the change was successful regardless of who the applicant’s parents were.

I’d recently been told that was my doing—apparently it was a side effect of my powers as a Wolf’s Kiss. The other Packs in the Midwest had such poor luck with successful changes that the general werewolf population was rapidly decreasing.

“It’s probably a good thing Alpha Greyson told us all to keep our mouths shut about your magic,” Wyatt abruptly said.

Aeric looked up from his phone. “Why?”

Wyatt settled his hands on his hips as he stared down the long stretch of road. “Because if other Packs knew Pip could make it easier to change werewolves...there’d be a dogfight over her.”

“That’s true. I thought it was just a precaution since that flash drive Amos Fletching made went unrecorded for a few hours,” Aeric said.

The flash drive had been found among Amos’s things... several hours after he was initially searched and his belongings

had been recorded.

It was probably a clerical error, or the wolves that had gone through his things had just missed it. Mistakes happened, and the mix up hadn't even been noticed until a few days after the flash drive had been found again.

But the incident had bothered Greyson. I didn't feel too great about it, either, because most of the information on that flash drive was about me and my Wolf's Kiss magic. But it was a small problem in comparison to my inexperience with my new magic.

I grimaced. "I'd think there would be more people who would just want me out of the picture if they thought I could control werewolves."

Wyatt shook his head. "You underestimate how highly we wolves think of our own wills. Roanne was practically a textbook example. She was concerned you'd influence the Pack, and then admitted a breath later that you're soothing to be around and didn't see a problem with that."

"Pack size matters. A lot." Aeric's usually cheery tone hardened into something deeper as he put his phone away. "Enough that a desperate Alpha—or power hungry one—would risk it if it meant increasing the Pack size and strength."

I shifted uncomfortably and listened to the chirp of birds and the familiar grinding noise of squirrels eating in the trees that stretched over our heads and seemed at odds with the cold idea. *That's a scary thought.*

"But the Pack is loyal, so it's not going to be a problem," Aeric said, his bright tone back. "Instead, we should think about your powers. You know, I pictured you as a volcano ready to blow its top. But maybe Klancy is on to something, and maybe you're more like a marsh that's just constantly oozing and smelling."

"Can't you use nicer metaphors?" I asked. "Preferably something that doesn't use the word 'ooze'?"

"How about smoke?" Aeric said. "Your powers just drift everywhere all the time and stink the place up?"

“Do you seriously believe that is a more complimentary metaphor than a marsh when you just basically said I stink?”

“How about algae and the way it can take over a lake?”
Wyatt suggested.

“You two are the worst.”

“Oh! I know: invasive species—a cute kind that people underestimate!”

“Though not cute enough to date.”

“That’s it, I’m out of here.”

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Chapter 2

Greyson

I tilted my head at an angle so I could better scent the wind, trying to sift through the smells of the trees, any nearby animals, and the smells my own packmates left.

I was tracking two outsider wolves who had entered not just Pack territory, but the literal land owned by the Northern Lakes Pack.

They had probably come to challenge me—I got challengers every so often since a Pack as big and powerful as the Northern Lakes Pack was too tempting to pass for idiots who were also too stupid to wonder how the Pack had remained this way.

But as I sniffed, I caught a few familiar scents that also didn't belong in these lands—Low Marsh wolves.

“Hector,” I called to my beta.

Hector—his near black hair combed back in a way more suited for a board room than the outdoors—didn't even grunt as he finished rolling the downed tree we'd found that blocked one of the Pack's gravel roads out of the way. “Yes, Alpha Greyson?”

“We've got visitors from Low Marsh.”

Hector flared his nostrils as he took in the smell. “I see. We do indeed. Shall I make a call?”

“No.” I settled my weight onto the balls of my feet as I stared in the direction their scent was coming from. “I only smell a few of them. You and I can handle that many if they’re looking for trouble.”

Hector’s brows flattened. “I’d hope so,” he said in a rare show of irritation. “They are the sloppiest Pack in Wisconsin.”

“Alpha Greyson!” Vant, the new Alpha of the Low Marsh Pack since the previous one had gone feral, emerged from the trees. “Ahh, and Beta Hector.”

Hector casually strolled closer to me. “Alpha Vant,” he said. “What an...*unexpected* guest.”

Vant smiled as two other Low Marsh wolves crept out of the forest after him. “Yes, I apologize for showing up unannounced. Might I have a moment of your time?” He was wearing blue jeans and a polo shirt, but the clothes—like his toothy smile—looked too polished and practiced to be genuine.

“What do you want, Vant?” I asked.

“I would like to take the time to formally introduce myself as the new Low Marsh Alpha,” Vant began. “I’m aware the past few months reflected poorly on my Pack’s conduct. And that says nothing about Dolph—our previous Alpha—and his many shortcomings that drove our Pack to our poor actions.”

He yammered on, but I tuned out.

This was nothing more than a subtle test of my Pack’s power.

Vant was new to his position, and wanted to see how we’d tolerate him.

Not very well if he keeps on talking like a windbag.

I settled in, prepared to be bored to tears for the next ten minutes—or until I lost my patience—when I felt a foreign tugging in my chest: my mate bond.

Yeah, it was more than a little ironic that I—unemotional and disinterested in relationships since I believed they only caused work—had a mate. And it was a terrible twist of fate that my mate just happened to be Pip Sabre.

Hunters were a bit taboo in terms of romance for us wolves—it was uncomfortable to be in a relationship with a supernatural who had all the abilities needed to kill you—but it was still occasionally seen.

A hunter in a mate bond, however, had never been heard of. I'd never thought it was possible.

Hunters had a sort of magical defense that protected them from typical wolf mental tactics—like an Alpha's powers, so they couldn't be forced to do anything they didn't want to.

That mental barrier also meant something like a mate bond could never be cemented—their defenses were always up. They could never have that soul deep connection because a hunter *couldn't* lower their magic—it was literally a part of their being.

I was pretty sure that was why the bond hadn't stuck earlier. Based on the timing, it must have originally started when I first met Pip along with the rest of the Pack when I arrived in Timber Ridge as their new Alpha. However, it didn't actually manifest until Pip was half dying and in enough danger that the bond could finally make it through to me.

I was also fairly certain that inability to connect was why Pip was waltzing around, completely oblivious to the bond, while I felt a black hole where my mate should have settled in my heart.

She had no idea, and I meant to keep it that way.

I shifted my stance, but Vant yammered on with his toothy smile, leaving me free to explore the sensation of my mate bond.

It wasn't a frantic pull—like I'd felt when Pip had almost died at the hands of Amos Fletching, which was what had actually activated the bond. She probably was just annoyed, but it was hard to tell.

Through the bond, she was a hazy, distant sensation, one that was overpowered by the gaping hole in my mind—or maybe it was my soul—where she should have been.

Put in what some would call the most romantic terms, but what seemed like idealist drivel to me, a mate bond was touching minds together, bonding them so you felt each other—could sense each other.

Hence, the black hole of my bond.

If Pip had been a wolf...so much would have been different.

The bond probably would have snapped into place when I first met her. It had appeared, then, but I hadn't ever been able to track that my mate was Pip, because of her hunter defenses.

I intended to never tell her, because as little as she liked me, she'd take it hard knowing that I was in any kind of pain because of her. She was too honorable like that, and I wasn't going to add to the pain that had already recently been heaped on her.

No one could accuse me of being soft. And while I'd like to blame my conduct on the bond, the fact was that even before it had solidified on my end, Pip had always been a special presence to me.

Yes, she was the reason why I was dragged out to the middle of nowhere in the northern Midwest—because they needed an Alpha strong enough to contend with her powers as a Wolf's Kiss.

But she was also the only being I'd met that I could let down my usual tight-fisted control of my powers around, because she could handle them and didn't collapse under the pressure.

Even back home in Colorado, among my own family, I hadn't been able to do that.

And there was something exhilarating about just *being*—not having to worry about my control and whether I accidentally choked someone with the sheer potency of my powers.

It was addictive.

It was the main reason why I'd accepted the bond.

I'd never had any patience for the idea of a mate bond—the last thing I needed was to drag some mate along with me when I already had to have near perfect control of my powers. I had fully intended to reject it.

Except...it was *Pip*.

And if anyone finds out that she's my mate, it's going to be pure chaos.

“—accept our apologies, Alpha Greyson?” Vant gave me a polite and polished expression that said he was finally done talking and was waiting for a reply.

I shifted, ignoring the cold pain that stabbed through my heart—I'd think about it later, when my responsibilities weren't important.

“Just do your job, Vant,” I flatly said. “Keep your Pack in line and under control, and they'd better not set foot in Timber Ridge for at least a year.”

“I shall do my best,” Vant said. “But you know how it is. Wolves are curious, and accidents happen.”

“No, they won't.” I let a bit of my powers loose, creating a pressure in the air that made the Low Marsh wolves drop to one knee—except for Vant; he just sweated, but I could see his knees were shaking. “There will be no accidents or mishaps. And if there are? Next time I won't notify the Curia Cloisters. I'll take care of it myself.”

Vant bowed his head, unable to speak.

I took a step closer to him, and he dropped to his knees like a chopped tree.

I was satisfied I'd made my point, but I pressed a little harder with my powers—just because.

It wasn't until Hector stirred next to me, his hands going to his professor-y bowtie, that I wound my spirit back in.

“Congratulations on becoming Alpha,” I said. “Now leave.”

Vant picked himself off the ground and speed walked off so fast he didn't even take the time to flick dried leaves off the knees of his pants.

The two wolves he'd brought ran after him, their fear a sharp, sour scent in the air.

I rubbed my jaw as I watched them disappear through the trees. “The investigation into the Low Marsh Pack never revealed who supplied them with wolfsbane,” I said.

“No,” Hector said. “Supposedly Vant never knew of it—but I find that unlikely.”

“Yeah. I want the Pack on the alert for it.”

“Wolfsbane?”

“Yes. It seems too tidy that the supplier just up and left after Dolph was caught. I'm not convinced they aren't still hanging around.” I turned to face my beta. “Which makes me wonder...How long do you think we have before the Low Marsh Pack becomes a problem?”

Hector strolled closer, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking very at home in the woods despite his suitcoat and ironed trousers. “I'd say it depends on if they find out.”

The wolf paw that was branded onto my bicep—the mark of my bond—prickled. “Find out about what?”

Hector lifted his chin and listened to the wind—likely making sure the Low Marsh Pack was really gone. “About our hunter.”

“Yeah.” My teeth ached as I itched to take on my wolf form at the thought. “That would be bad.”

I turned around and trotted through the forest, honing in on the scents of the two intruders.

Hector kept up, tugging casually on the cuffs of his suitcoat. “Do you want me to take any precautions?”

I followed the scents to a meadow that encircled a small pond and stream that fed into one of our bigger lakes. “There aren’t many we could take besides wiping the Low Marsh Pack out,” I said. “Give it some time. We need to gauge how power hungry Vant will become.”

“As you say, Alpha Greyson. But I must ask, do you think Amos’s USB flash drive going temporarily missing is related to the wolfsbane supplier?”

When he searched the lodge, Amos Fletching had copied encrypted files—most of them reports on Pip and her powers—onto a flash drive. The flash drive had been recovered from among the hunter’s belongings...several hours after the hunter was searched.

Either the flash drive had been missed in the initial recording, or someone had taken it—most likely copied the files—and then returned it.

Initially, it was assumed to be a clerical error, and we hadn’t pursued it. However, given that the wolfsbane supplier still hadn’t been uncovered...

“It’s a possibility,” I said. “But hopefully it’s just our paranoia.”

“Hopefully, indeed,” Hector echoed.

I shifted my eyes to the woods across the meadow, and two male werewolves emerged from the shadows. “Give me a minute, and we can continue our conversation.”

The interlopers were young—and each had just enough Alpha in them to make them stupid. Similar in build and blocky looks, I was guessing they were related.

“Alpha Greyson,” the taller one shouted. “I challenge you for your position of Alpha over the Northern Lakes Pack.”

“As do I,” the second echoed. “If I win—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it before. Come on.” I gestured for the taller one to come at me.

The dynamic duo of stupidity exchanged glances, then ran at me together.

Challenges were supposed to be one-on-one, but I didn't care. The sooner I got this over with the sooner I was no longer wasting my time, so I didn't complain as they attempted to rush me together.

They snarled as they separated, attempting to come at me from opposite sides.

The taller one was a little faster. I side stepped him when he tried to lunge at me, grabbed him by the throat, then threw him into his brother.

They collapsed on the ground in a tangle, snapping at one another as I crouched next to them.

"Challenge over," I announced. "Go home when you can see straight and can breathe again."

"When we what?" Shorty asked.

I slammed their heads together with enough force to make them see stars—they were werewolves; they'd heal up on their own, and in general we were built to withstand pain with the stubbornness of a cockroach, so I was assured they weren't going to croak from a little thing like a concussion.

Blinded, addled, and in a lot of pain, the terrible twins flopped to the ground like fish when I released them.

They tried to stir, kicking out at me, so I grabbed them by their throats and squeezed hard enough to bruise them and disrupt their breathing.

This time when I let them go they fell, coughing and hacking, and tried to roll away from me.

There. That should keep them from coming back again.

I stood up and glanced at Hector. "Call it in, would you? I don't want them staying here, sulking over their loss."

"I'll tell Ember. She'll see that they're removed," Hector scratched at his precisely trimmed goatee. "What next?"

My bond mark burned under the sleeve of my long sleeved shirt.

I wanted to go see Pip. I didn't love her—not even some stupid soul-deep connection could make me that weak. But I was intensely aware of her, and—unfortunately—aware of just how much I missed her when I wasn't with her.

I stared up at the blue sky as I considered all the work I could be doing. “I think,” I decided, “I'll go see our hunter.”

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Chapter 3

Pip

After a day of work, I came home to my cottage and had to work more—on the landscaping.

There were a few bushes Mama Dulce had planted—some roses and a giant lilac bush that apparently aspired to become a tree—that I needed to cut back before winter hit.

Fall was just starting—you could feel it in the cooler nights that made the mornings extra chilly—but if I didn't want to be overwhelmed by yardwork later, I needed to get on it now.

“Yardwork,” I grumbled as I stood on my tiptoes and held my trimming shears high above my head. “The hidden busywork of homeownership. Ouch!” I managed to cut the thick branch over my head, but my feet cramped up so I didn't dodge in time when it fell, and I got whacked in the face.

“Ugh, hopefully it's just leaves that fell down my shirt this time, and not ants.” I threw the branch onto my growing pile of trimmed branches, then flapped my shirt, dislodging a few leaves stuck in the folds of the fabric.

I started to turn back to the bush, when I heard a howl.

When I registered the tone and timber, I swung around, staring into the woods.

Howls were a common thing on Pack land. They were a constant background noise—like singing birds or...I don't know, what do normal people hear? Lawnmowers? Yeah, they were like lawnmowers.

But this howl was troubling, first of all because the tone was short, high pitched, and *scared*.

There was no reason for a Northern Lakes wolf to be scared.

Which brought up my second point: I didn't recognize the howl.

Each werewolf had a unique, individualistic voice that made it easy to tell them apart if you listened closely enough.

I had never heard this wolf before.

Is it an intruder? But no wolf trying to sneak onto Pack lands would be stupid enough to announce their presence like that.

Another howl drifted across the forest—this time it was significantly closer, and even more panicked and frightened than the first one.

It's not defensive enough to be a wolf the Pack is running off Pack lands. Werewolf visitors are allowed at Timber Ridge, so I suppose one could have wandered in there, but...why are they so afraid?

The frightened wolf was close enough to register in my hunter senses as a spot of light.

Something thrashed in the woods, snapping branches and slamming through bushes based on the racket it was raising.

I changed my hold on my pruning shears in my caution.

The noise couldn't be from the werewolf—they were never that *loud*, they were like shadows. To my shock, I was wrong. A wolf burst out of the forest with an eruption of noise.

It was mostly brown and grey with a black saddle and mask, and cute little tufts of red hair on its ears. But it looked like it had half drowned in a lake—it was sopping wet up to its

neck—and its tail was curled entirely under its hindquarters while its ears were flattened to its skull in fright.

It saw me, then scrambled across my lawn, whimpering and whining.

I took a step back, but the wolf slammed into me, pressing against my legs as it kept whimpering.

I felt my hunter powers bubble up in my chest, and somehow, I *knew*.

“*Jack?*” My voice cracked with shock. “*Young Jack?*”

Jack pushed his face into my side, his entire body quivering.

Several more wolf howls hung heavily in the air, and I felt them lighten up in my hunter senses.

“But...you’re human,” I said stupidly.

Werewolf Jack whined as he mashed his head against my hip.

He’s not human anymore...

I knelt down—which made Jack a little taller than me. “It’s going to be okay,” I told him as I peered into his hazel eyes. “I promise.”

Jack side stepped so as much of him was pressed against me as possible, and I hugged him as if I could hold him together, even as concern made my throat tighten.

If he’s already a werewolf it means he’s survived the change. But he didn’t want to be a werewolf. For years he’s been planning on staying a human.

My hunter senses were prickling from the incoming wolves, so I wasn’t surprised when I saw a few of them emerge from the forest.

Ember—a beautiful tawny color with cream colored cheeks and chin—Rio—mostly a golden shade of gray with black brushed over his back and tail—and Aspen—a beautiful sandy color with streaks of gray and black—all watched me

with curiosity, sniffing the air as they tried to figure out who was huddled into me.

“It’s Jack.” I had to fight to speak around the knot forming in my throat. “Greyson—somebody call Greyson.”

I couldn’t say why I wanted the over-powered Alpha present, but when he stepped out of the woods—as a human—I released the shaky exhale I’d been holding in.

Greyson’s intense golden eyes flickered from my face to Jack. “Young Jack?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Do you know what happened?” Greyson crouched next to us and placed a hand on Jack’s shoulders.

Jack flinched, then pulled away long enough from me to look at Greyson. He whined, and leaned his head against Greyson’s arm, maneuvering so he practically set his rear on top of me, partially pinning me so I couldn’t go anywhere and had to keep hugging him.

“No, I have no idea,” I said. “I talked to him this morning—he was going to go swimming at a lake. But that was hours ago—I’ve worked an entire shift since then. I heard him howl a few minutes ago, but I didn’t realize it was him until he popped out on my lawn and rushed me.”

“Come on, Jack. Let’s go to the lodge.” Greyson’s voice wasn’t soft, exactly, but it had a calming quality to it.

When he stood up and took a step back, Jack followed him, then nervously looked back at me.

“Don’t worry,” Greyson said. “She’s coming too.” He held out his hand to me.

I took it, and tried to keep my expression placid when he kept holding my hand—presumably because he wanted to make sure I didn’t make a break for it.

Which is rude. I wouldn’t leave Jack like this when he came to me. Although I don’t know why he came to me...

But Greyson's hand was so big—and even though his hold was loose, I could feel his werewolf strength in just his *fingers*.

It was weirding me out, to be honest.

With all the Pomeranian Power-ups, I'd been smacked into many a werewolf chest. But holding Greyson's hand was just...tingly.

“Should I get my scooter?” I asked.

“No.” Greyson glanced down at Jack, who was very careful to stand between us, just under our entwined hands, as he peered fearfully at Ember, Rio, and Aspen. “We should walk.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “Come on, Jack. Let's go to the lodge. Greyson will get this sorted out.”

Jack uncurled his tail just enough to make one little twitch that was probably supposed to be a wag, but his posture was hunched as he walked between us.

I tried to keep a smile on and my steps light, because now that Jack was a wolf, he'd be able to smell any chemical changes that things like anger stirred in my body.

Jack didn't want to be a werewolf. Which means someone changed him against his will. I'm going to find who did it, and then I'm going to stab them with my silver-edged daggers.

Typically, when a person is changed, it's a process that takes several hours. A person has to get bitten—but not just a little nip; we're talking multiple savage bites, as it requires enough wolf spit to carry a compound that's only secreted when they're fighting.

(So, no, you're not going to get changed if a werewolf licks you or nips you.)

Supposedly the change hadn't always been like that—a bloody fight for survival. But even werewolves didn't have

any concrete proof of this—just wistful legends Mama Dulce used to tell me. And being bitten was only the first step in the change.

After that, the human tries to survive as their body does its best to fight off the invasion. Usually they'll get a fever, the shakes, sometimes they'll be nauseated. This could go on for hours or mere minutes.

During that time, according to the statistics the Curia Cloisters releases, frequently they die. In fact, they die more often than they survive, and just because you live through it doesn't guarantee you'll be a werewolf. Sometimes a human's immune system is strong enough that they'll resist it entirely, and stay human. That's why kids can't be changed; on the rare chance that they survive, their immune systems will always beat the invasion off, so only adults attempt the change.

If the compound successfully invades, you'll take on your wolf form—another painful process that can take anywhere from a few minutes up to an hour for your first change—and then typically you're stuck like that for a few hours up to a day as your body tries to adjust to the hell you just put it through.

That was why I was still at the lodge when it was midnight.

Wolves were going in and out of the place—trying to figure out what had happened, even that late at night.

I sat with Jack in a room that was reserved for Greyson's use, petting the top of his head as he pushed his face into the couch cushion and whined.

Greyson technically didn't live in the lodge, but he had a room in case he needed to grab a moment of sleep in situations like these.

It wasn't a bedroom by human standards—to begin with, there was no bed.

But there was a huge couch, a fireplace, and a soft, cushiony rug—and that was all a werewolf needed to count as a den. (Seriously, it's unfair how easy it is for a wolf to sleep.)

Most importantly, the room was *quiet*, and with the window cracked to let in some of the cool night air, it was comfortable.

“Can you try sleeping, Jack?” I asked softly. “You might feel better.”

Jack peeled his head off the couch and looked to the door. Seconds later, it creaked open, and Greyson stepped inside.

“Jack.” He briefly crouched when Jack padded up to him, ruffling the thick fur on Jack’s shoulders. “Are you hungry yet?”

Jack flattened his ears again and tippy-tapped his way back to my side, his claws clicking on the wooden floor until he hit the carpet.

“I think that’s a no.” Ember stood in the open door behind Greyson, her forehead creased with motherly worry for Jack.

Ember was tall and beautiful, with brown skin that shimmered with gold. Her favorite hairstyle was to keep her dark hair in little braids, but at the moment it was unbraided in beautiful springy curls, one of which she pushed away from her cheek as she studied Jack.

I slid off the couch and stretched my arms over my head. “Hi, Ember.”

“Hello, Pip. Thanks for staying with him.” Ember smiled. “Klancy and Roanne have both expressed their deepest thankfulness that you’re willing to remain with him, given his...state.”

Jack had been clingy since we arrived at the lodge. If he couldn’t be with Greyson, he had to be with me.

It hadn’t gone well when I’d tried leaving several hours ago with one of the search crews investigating the lake where Jack had spent his afternoon. So here I stayed.

“I’m glad I can help.” I patted Jack when he sat down on his haunches just in front of me. “Any news?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” Greyson said. “There’s evidence of a struggle by Lake Lycaon, and a lot of blood that we have

identified as Jack's." Greyson glanced down at Jack. "It appears he was ambushed."

Jack tried to snap off a nod, but as new as he was to his wolf body, he nearly fell over in the process.

"We found the spot where he struggled to shift." Greyson hesitated, and the soothing quality was back in his voice. "He must have been stuck between forms for a while—at least half an hour—based on the scratch marks and additional blood we found."

I winced—the first shift is always horrific. It can be better if your Pack is there to help ease you along, but to be attacked in the middle of the woods, and then left alone to sort it out?

Poor Jack...

"Did you know the wolf who bit you, Jack?" Ember asked.

Jack shook his head.

I chewed on my lower lip. "Didn't know, or didn't see?" I asked.

Ember cocked her head. "How could he not see who attacked him?"

"You said it looked like an ambush," I said. "Whoever did this obviously had a motive. It couldn't have been just a random chance. If it was planned, then they probably tried to hide themselves so Jack wouldn't be able to identify them if he survived."

"That's a reasonable conclusion." Greyson glanced down at Jack. "Did you see them, Jack?"

The wolf shook his head again.

"That makes things slightly more difficult," Ember said.

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I'd say it would have to be a wolf outside the Pack, right?"

"There is no one in the Pack who would change a person against their will," Ember said. "Of that, I am well assured."

“How, then, did an intruder sneak onto Pack land and not get caught?” I asked.

“Lake Lycaon is fairly secluded,” Ember said. “I imagine that’s why none of us heard it, and with the way the wind was blowing today, it was downwind of the compound, so we wouldn’t have smelled it, either.”

“There were two challengers in our territory earlier today,” Greyson said. “I don’t think either of them would have done it—they were stupid, but not *that* stupid. Still, Hector is tracking them down to make sure.”

“Hector mentioned the Low Marsh Pack visited briefly,” Ember said.

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Chapter 4

Pip

My spine shivered, and I must have made a face because Greyson narrowed his eyes as he studied me.

“You don’t like them?” he asked.

“I didn’t like them before the whole wolfsbane-ordeal,” I said. “So I certainly don’t like them any more now.”

“They have a new Alpha,” Ember said.

“Yeah, who reeks of false sincerity like a con artist,” I said.

Greyson stared at me a few seconds longer than necessary—wolves stare a lot, and for a lot of nuanced reasons that I didn’t fully grasp—but the reason for the stare must have pleased him because he nodded, and set a hand on my shoulder.

“We already have a team of wolves following their scent trail to make sure they didn’t stray, but it does seem too much to be a coincidence,” Greyson said.

Ember nodded. “I’ll check in with the teams?”

Greyson blinked, and Ember slipped out, her shoes tapping on the wooden floor as she left us alone in silence.

“Aeric and Wyatt are with Hector, tracking down the challengers.” Greyson seated himself on the couch. He was tall

enough that even on the huge couch he couldn't fully sprawl out.

I sat down on the opposite end and patted the spot between us.

Jack walked up to the couch and set his head on the cushion. He sniffed Greyson, then me, then turned in a circle and curled up, his tail covering his nose.

The gentle tap of footsteps announced the arrival of more people. But instead of pacing back and forth in the main room—where Klancy and Roanne were—they veered in our direction.

Scarlett poked her head inside the room. “Ah—Pip! She's in here!” She hopped into the room, Radcliff following sedately behind her.

“We're reporting into you, Hunter Sabre,” Radcliff started. “To see if our skills can be of use.”

At my blank expression, Scarlett added, “You're the senior hunter here, and this is your territory, so any use of our skills needs to be checked with you.”

“That's not necessary,” I said. “You're adults. As long as you don't hurt anyone, you can use your powers at will.”

Radcliff stubbornly shook his head. “We have to refuse your generous offer, Hunter Sabre. The Fletchings' reputation has hit rock bottom. We must do everything we can to restore our honor and work ethic among the supernatural community.”

“So, how can we help?” Scarlett asked.

“Greyson would be the one to ask.” I glanced at Greyson, who seemed content to lounge on the couch.

“They're hunters,” he said languidly. “That means they're yours.”

I scowled at him. “Don't even start.”

“But if it *was* up to me, I'd request that Scarlett and Radcliff check out the site where Jack was bitten. They might

be able to pick up on a clue or trail we missed with their hunter abilities,” Greyson said.

Scarlett and Radcliff nodded, then looked back to me.

“Do we have permission, Hunter Sabre?” Scarlett asked.

“Yeah, but only if you guys start calling me Pip,” I said.

Scarlett pursed her lips. “We do call you Pip,” she said.

“You just called me Hunter Sabre!”

“Because this is a formal occasion,” Radcliff said. “So we need to acknowledge your title as a hunter.”

“Whatever, just call me Pip all the time,” I said.

Greyson rubbed his five o’clock shadow. “If you ask Klancy to take you to the site, he’ll drive you two out in a golfcart. There are still wolves out there, securing the area, so you don’t have to worry about protection from whoever did this,” he said.

“Yessir.” The siblings slightly bowed their heads to Greyson, then saluted me.

“Radcliff, Scarlett.” I chewed my lip and glanced down at Jack. “Thank you for helping. I really appreciate it.”

Radcliff grinned broadly. “Of course!”

“We won’t disappoint you.” Scarlett clicked the heels of her boots together before she darted out of the room, Radcliff on her heels.

“Klancy?” Scarlett thumped across the room, the rest of her words falling out of my hearing as they moved farther away from Greyson’s room.

I could still hear the murmurs of conversation and saw the occasional werewolf pass by the open door, but for the most part things quieted down.

I glanced down at Jack. He’d kept his head down, but his eyes were wide open.

“How does it feel to have your own ‘minions’, as you like to call the Pack?” Greyson asked.

“They are *not* my minions,” I said. “I’m not a leader. I don’t want to lead.”

Greyson shrugged. “Everyone leads in some capacity.”

“Not me,” I said. “I’ll show them how to live among wolves, but that’s it.”

“Showing them something like that is the definition of leading,” Greyson said.

“No, I’m teaching! I won’t be giving out assignments to them, or telling them what to do—like a leader. Or an Alpha.”

The glitter in Greyson’s eyes said he didn’t believe me, but he yawned widely and pushed away, somehow managing to look cocky and cool in the dim light of the room.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, until Jack’s hazel eyes drifted shut, and his breathing changed.

Testing to see how lightly he was sleeping, I eased my feet across the empty cushion, stopping just short of the space Greyson occupied.

Jack didn’t stir.

“How do you think he’s doing?” I whispered. “I know you can’t hear specific words from him, but you can get a good sense of how he’s feeling, right?”

Greyson tilted his head. “Sort of. I can sense his wellbeing—general health and the like. But emotions are trickier. I can say he’s doing better than I would have expected, given that the change alone is traumatic, and adding in the factor that he didn’t *want* to be a wolf.”

“It’s terrible. Whoever did this to him is a twisted, sick psycho.” I’d started to puff up like an angry cat, but when I studied the backs of Jack’s ears I relaxed a little. “But I’m glad he’s doing better than what you would have expected.”

“Yes. That would be your doing.”

“*Mine?*” My foot slipped on the leather cushion so it brushed the outside of Greyson’s thigh.

He cast a crafty glance at Jack, then grabbed my foot by my heel before I could yank it back into the safety of my personal space. “He finds comfort in the presence of a Wolf’s Kiss. That’s probably why he sought you out.” He tugged my ankle for emphasis.

“I thought the Pack agreed to call it my trainer—or tamer—magic,” I complained.

“The Pack might have,” Greyson said. “But I didn’t.”

I tried to kick him with my free foot, but he caught that one and—now possessing a pair of Pip feet—stuck them in his lap and draped his arms over them so I couldn’t pull myself free.

“It is important, Pip, that he looked for you.” Greyson’s voice was so firm he distracted me from my foot-freeing mission so I actually looked at him. “Jack covered a lot of ground between Lake Lycaon and your cottage, and he could have stopped at any number of places. But he kept going until he found you.”

“I don’t think I’m particularly special to him,” I said carefully.

“No. It’s just your dog-like vibe.”

“Hey now!”

“It’s your magic,” Greyson said. “I know you don’t think you’re using it, but you have to be. He wouldn’t have felt driven to look for you if you weren’t.”

He has a point. But how am I using my powers? I was just doing yardwork, and earlier I was at work. I didn’t even use my hunter magic to practice my shooting. So how am I supposed to wield my magic if I can’t even tell when I am already using it?

Jack whined in his sleep—a high pitched sound that broke my heart from the deep longing in it.

I leaned over the side of the couch and placed my hand on his back. It didn’t occur to me until after I’d done it that I’d probably just wake him up—and he needed sleep—but he

didn't. He quieted, and his tail twitched a little as his breathing evened out again.

"Oh, Jack. I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"We'll find who did it," Greyson said.

"Yeah."

Greyson tugged on my ankles, pulling them farther across his lap so I scooted down and had my back fully on the couch cushion. "Try to sleep," he said. "If you're okay with staying here? For Jack, that is."

I glanced at Jack. "For tonight."

"Thank you. On his behalf," Greyson said.

I yawned. "Of course. I might not be a packmate, but I still care for everyone."

Greyson was quiet as I snuggled down into the leather cushion, resting my head on the nicely pillowed arm rest. "Goodnight."

He didn't respond, but I felt him rub at the delicate skin of my ankles with his thumb.

When I peered at him he was staring at Jack, and didn't seem to be aware of the touch.

He's bothered, I realized. Because he thinks he failed Jack.

Previously, I hadn't liked Greyson very much. I'd been convinced that Hudson, the previous Alpha, had been forced to leave because Pre-Dominant Harka wanted Greyson to have the best Pack in the Midwest to prepare him to take over her position after her.

In a terrible twist of irony, he'd actually come here because of me. And when I found out, he hadn't been angry or uncaring. Instead, he'd stayed with me while I cried.

It had changed my opinion of him. Sort of. I still thought he was too full of himself. But at least I could see he had valiance deep, deep, *deep* inside of him.

That's why I felt the burning desire to say something—to try to assure him in some way.

“You're a good Alpha, Greyson,” I said.

Greyson flicked his gold eyes in my direction. “Such rare praise. Maybe I should take a picture to remember the moment.”

I bit back the usual sharp retort I'd normally fire off at him. And as I drifted off to sleep, a tiny part of me hoped I was indeed “oozing magic” as Aeric claimed, and that maybe I could help Jack *and* Greyson. Just a little bit.

Four days passed, and Jack still hadn't turned into a human.

Greyson said it was probably the trauma of the ordeal, but I could tell by Klancy's tight face and Roanne's worried expression that they just barely believed their Alpha.

Hector, Aeric, and Wyatt caught up with the very confused, slightly addled challengers who were still on the mend from twin concussions.

In the end Greyson went full Alpha on them and scared them so bad they blurted out their entire day's activities—which they had collaborating witnesses for.

The Low Marsh Pack became the prime suspects, then, but we had no proof they'd been over in that part of the Pack's territory.

The Pack still did a sweep of the immediate territory, going through any uninhabited cottages, and even the old Pack lodge that was so decrepit it was shocking it was still standing. There was no sign of any unknown wolves or intrusion in general.

Despite all the investigations, and having excessively talented and powerful wolves sniffing out any other possibilities, the only scents the Pack was able to sniff out around the lake were ones of packmates who had stopped by the lake earlier in the day.

Pre-Dominant Harka—the werewolf leader of the Midwest—was informed of the situation.

Frustratingly, even though he was stuck as a wolf, Jack had to go to Magiford to register as a newly changed werewolf.

Of course, Greyson had to go with him, and once Jack flashed his hazel eyes and wagged his tail at me—he was finally getting better at controlling his own body—guess who else got dragged along for the ride?

“You know, I’m really starting to enjoy the portal rides! Thank you, Twilight.” I patted the shoulder of the unicorn/night mare that had been kind enough to transport my carcass from Timber Ridge to the Night Court, and from the Night Court to the Curia Cloisters in Magiford.

(Talk about it paying to have friends in high places! Queen Leila of the Night Court herself had given us permission to use the night mares whenever we needed to visit Magiford, cutting out the multi-hour drive.)

“I’m glad you enjoy it.” Chase stroked the glossy neck of the night mare he rode. “I hope your endeavors here are fruitful.” He nodded his head at the Curia Cloisters.

“Yes! I hope so, as well!” Lady Chrysanthe—a beautiful fae noble of the Night Court with olive colored skin, gorgeous blond hair, and a smile that made models look shabby—beamed at us as she had her arms around Chase’s waist. While she was happy enough to see us, I was pretty sure the grin was because she’d had to ride double with Chase so Greyson and I could double up on Twilight.

Greyson half leaned on me, hiding just how sick the portal trip had made him feel, as I peered around the Curia Cloister parking lot the portal had dumped us in. “Thank you for so swiftly bringing us here,” he said, his voice pleasantly rough.

“Of course,” Chrysanthe said. “And please do visit the Night Court whenever you get the chance—like this afternoon! Or tomorrow—whenever you have the desire to see us!”

“Not whenever,” Chase bluntly said. “We all have responsibilities to see to. But when you have free time. That goes for you as well, Jack,” Chase called to the newly changed wolf.

Jack was slinking around, looking a little dazzled, but I think it was from the beauty of the Night Realm that we’d briefly seen, and not because he was feeling ill from the magical method of transportation.

If I had to guess, it seemed like portals affected the wolves who were stronger. Typically they had sharper senses, which would be why Greyson was not doing so great, even if he was too stubborn to admit it, while Jack and Chase were fine.

Jack nodded to Chase, but stuck close to Greyson and me. He knew Chase—Chase had grown up in the Pack. But Chase was nearly ten years older than I was, and he’d enrolled in the army for a while, so Jack didn’t know him as anything besides “an adult.”

“Come on, Jack. Let’s go in and get you registered.” Greyson draped an arm over my shoulder. He didn’t put much weight on me—I was pretty sure he was using me to stabilize himself more than for support.

“Goodbye, Lady Chrysanthe, Chase,” I called over my shoulder as Greyson tugged me down the sidewalk. “We’ll see you tonight when you come pick us up?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Lady Chrysanthe informed me.

“Since Twilight is no longer needed, would you like to dismount and ride him, Chrysanthe?” Chase asked.

“No, thank you,” Lady Chrysanthe said. “I am quite comfortable where I am.”

“Are you certain?” Chase asked.

“Absolutely.”

I chuckled as we followed the sidewalk and turned around a corner of the building. “Do you think Lady Chrysanthe will wear him down?”

“He let her ride with him, which meant he wouldn’t have been able to maneuver as well in a fight—something he usually prioritizes, no matter how unlikely the event is,” Greyson said. “Coming from Chase, the stiff-necked, everything-must-be-proper-type, I’d say that shows he’s mostly in love with her already.”

I bumped my hip into him. “He’s not that formal—and I don’t know if I’d say he’s that far along, either. But you’re right. Riding double was a big deal for him.”

Greyson smirked down at me and leaned so close some of his indecisive brown/blond hair mixed with my white locks.

“What does that mean, then, that you refuse to call me Alpha?” His voice rumbled so deep in his chest I could feel it when his shoulder brushed me.

“It means that everyone in the Pack hero worships you. You don’t need me feeding into your ego as well.” I managed to make my voice light, but my throat was a little dry.

For all of his annoying games, Greyson was gorgeous enough that it was easy to overlook. Tall and lean with eyes that were a striking golden color and an easy, confident air around him, Greyson had hit the genetic jackpot between his abilities and looks.

I found him aggravating, and even I had to admit he was devastating with that cocky smile of his.

“You are aware I can hear your heartbeat speed up when I get close, aren’t you?” Greyson asked.

“Now I know you’re making things up,” I said. “I figured out how to steady my heartbeat years ago so Aeric and Wyatt wouldn’t be able to figure out when I was lying.”

“In that case, thank you for confirming you have to steady your heartbeat around me. I knew the way you threw all those female werewolves at me was just a tactic to hide your deep feelings for me.”

“You know, I haven’t pitched Moira my idea to make bachelorette werewolf vacation packages, where eligible

females pay us for the privilege of seeing you to confirm if you're their mate or not," I said. "Maybe I should."

"I'll pass," Greyson said. "I'd rather spend more time with you." His head was still leaned against mine—which was quite the feat since we were making our way down the sidewalk. But at this proclamation, he exhaled, his grin getting alarmingly close to my ear.

"No thanks—and cut that out!" I purposely leaned my head against his, grinding our temples together so he finally pulled back—laughing, of course, because he's arrogant like that.

Jack stared up at us as he walked along.

"You know," I said. "I've never seen horror on a werewolf's wolf body before now. This is a special occasion."

"He's young enough to think flirting is gross when old people do it," Greyson said.

"I'm not old!" I squawked. "And this isn't flirting."

We headed through the front doors and almost smacked into someone coming out.

"Alpha Greyson and Hunter Sabre!" A werewolf—obvious by the muscling of his body and the intense, werewolf-green hue of his eyes—grinned at us. "How perfect—I was sent by my aunt to meet you two."

It took my brain a moment to kickstart before I recognized his dark hair and fun-loving grin. "Hello, Rafe. How is Pre-Dominant Harka doing?"

"As good as ever. She is excited to meet...Jack, is it?" Rafe smiled down at Jack.

Jack bobbed his head and wagged his tail a little.

"We're on our way to register him as a werewolf," Greyson said.

"Of course—and I shall enjoy the company of the beauty of the trio." Rafe winked at me.

“Huh?” I stared at him for several moments before I realized he was complimenting *me*. The werewolves didn’t compliment me on much besides my aim, ability to break noses, and my work ethic, so I got a pleasant warm feeling at the thought that I was considered attractive.

“That’s nice of you to say, but I’m well aware Greyson is the beauty of the Northern Lakes Pack,” I joked.

Rafe laughed. “And you’re funny, as well. No wonder the Pack treasures you so.”

Two compliments on non-combat related things in one day! Magiford is the best!

I was still basking in the warmth of compliments when Rafe turned to Greyson, who looked nauseated at Rafe’s gallantry. The jerk.

“Aunt Harka wanted me to help smooth the registration process for you, so it won’t take quite so long,” Rafe said.

“Wonderful,” Greyson said.

“If you’ll follow me this way.” Rafe stepped deeper into the Curia Cloisters.

We’d come through the front doors, so we passed by a pretty human woman working at the massive front desk. She was attempting to push her silky black hair back into a ponytail, but when she saw us, she smiled sunnily. “Good morning, and welcome to the Magiford Curia Cloisters!”

I waved to her as Rafe led us on, taking us through the maze of hallways, vestibules, and rooms, to the upstairs area sanctioned for shifter use, which included the registration office.

Since magic—and shifters, as a result—was dying out so quickly, magical society had decided a registration process was necessary. Officially, it was to make sure no one fell through the cracks. When every werewolf was precious, you didn’t want one disappearing without anyone knowing.

Unofficially, I had long suspected the registration process also made it easier to track down any supernatural who didn’t

have our society's best interests in mind. If a supernatural harmed a human, it was a heck of a lot easier to track them down if you already had a file and detailed information on them.

Distracted with that thought, I only half noticed the crowds we passed through, which consisted mostly of werewolves and shifters on this particular floor.

I thought I heard a painfully familiar peal of laughter and I paused, scanning the hallway, but I didn't see who I was looking for.

Greyson eyed me up. "Is something wrong?"

"Nah." I straightened my shoulders and looked straight ahead. "I just thought I heard someone I knew."

That laugh had sounded like Lynn's.

Lynn was my childhood best friend despite being a werewolf, and she was the daughter of Hudson. When he'd left the Pack, she'd gone with him and had never contacted me again.

I can't blame her, now that I know I'm the reason her parents were forced to leave everyone she'd ever known...

Pack loyalty was huge for a werewolf. Leaving must have destroyed Lynn—though I had seen Hudson over the summer and he'd mentioned she was happily married and pregnant. She'd probably had her baby by now...

"Here we are." Rafe pulled open the thick, wooden door to the shifter registration department. The solid door was a good choice for shifters and werewolves alike, given that a newly changed shifter or werewolf likely wouldn't have the best control over their newfound strength.

"I already spoke to Nessa—she's the werewolf over there on the left and has the paperwork all ready for you," Rafe said. He waved to the werewolf when she looked up, hearing her name with her sharpened sense of hearing.

She waved back, her eyes positively lighting up when she saw Greyson.

“She’ll take care of you,” Rafe said.

Greyson glanced at him out of the side of his eyes and stayed where he was. “You’re not coming in?”

“No, I thought I could entertain Hunter Sabre while you get the basics seen to—Jack’s picture will need to be taken for his file, you’ll have to fill out your Pack information, all the boring stuff neither of us can help with.”

“I’m just here for moral support,” I said. “I don’t do paperwork.”

“It is utterly boring,” Rafe agreed with me.

Greyson stared hard at me, almost as if he was attempting to do that wordless communication thing he could do with the Pack.

I stared back at him, unable to read anything more than slight irritation off him.

Does he want me to help with the paperwork? But I don’t know the first thing about the werewolf registration process, and legally Greyson must fill out most of it since he’s the Alpha, and we don’t know who actually changed Jack.

“Come on, Jack.” Greyson strode inside.

Jack whined, but followed after him, pausing a couple feet in to look back at me with his mournful eyes.

Maybe I should go with them, even if I just stand there like a decoration. It’ll make Jack feel better.

I took a tiny step after them.

“Here, we can sit just inside so you can keep an eye on them.” Rafe pointed to a well cushioned bench shoved up against the inner wall that looked sturdy enough to hold a gorilla.

“That would be perfect.” I waved to Jack like a mom watching her kid at a school play as I thumped down on the bench.

He wagged his tail again, then hurried after Greyson, who was talking with the werewolf. Judging by the size of her

smile and her heightened animation, she was pretty smitten already.

I don't blame you—he is something! But if you knew his personality...

I smirked at my own thoughts as Rafe sat down next to me.

“How have you been, Hunter Sabre—or can I call you Phillipa?” Rafe asked.

Was he this chatty and nice the first time I met him? I don't think so, but maybe it's because his aunt isn't here.

“Call me Pip,” I said. “And I've been great. I was enjoying the way things have quieted down. But...” I frowned as I watched Jack put his front paws on the desk and balance on his back legs so he could peer over the desk at the werewolf filing the paperwork.

Rafe—following the inherent touchy-feely-ness of all werewolves—set a hand on my knee. “I'm sorry.”

“You didn't do anything—and I'm not the one who should receive your sympathy.” I sighed.

Rafe squeezed my knee. “I'll do everything in my power to help with this situation.”

“Thanks,” I said. “The Pack will appreciate it, I'm sure.”

Rafe playfully cocked his head. “What about you? Will you appreciate it?”

I blinked at him and wondered how thankless he thought I was. “Of course.”

“Appreciative enough to allow me to treat you to lunch today?”

Chapter 5

Pip

It took a few seconds of staring before it finally dawned on me.

He's flirting. That's why he's being so chatty and charming.

I started to nod, then froze.

Wait...he's flirting. No one ever flirts with me! This is exciting—and rare!

If I'd been any less self-aware I would have clapped my hands in glee. I was *that* stoked.

No one flirted with me. Ever.

As Aeric and Wyatt loved to remind me, I didn't appeal to werewolves thanks to my stupid dog-vibe, and my supernatural-ness made me an unpopular romantic partner among humans.

I'd been a poster child for singleness my entire life.

But! Maybe! A new chapter is dawning!

Not that I was head over heels for Rafe. But I could still enjoy the moment!

“Really? Wow.” I laughed, unable to really contain myself. “That's...wow.”

I didn't even know how to respond—that was how little I'd been asked out in my life.

“All right then, play coy. It makes the chase that much more thrilling!” Rafe winked at me.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I giggled and covered my mouth with my hand, as if I could so easily hide my idiotic grin.

The whole office must have heard him ask me out. Greyson certainly did.

He shot me a look that managed to convey he was both disgusted that someone was oblivious enough to actually ask me out, and irritated with my reaction.

Boo for him. He'd never understand—he has females stalking him down to try to date him, for cryin' out loud!

“Tell me—Pip—what kind of things interest you?” Rafe asked.

“Guns.” The answer was out of my mouth before I could think about it. “Swimming and climbing,” I added. When I finally took a moment to think about it, I concluded with my real hobby. “And sitting on my front porch eating popcorn and sipping hot cocoa or alcohol.”

“An outdoorsy kind of girl, I dig it,” Rafe said. “You must enjoy living where you do, then, with all the lakes in the Northern Lakes Pack's territory. Have you seen the lakes here in Magiford?”

“Yeah. I really like all the public beaches and the boardwalk,” I said. “I think it's why your downtown is so busy, because it's picturesque and all the shops and cafés and restaurants are genius.”

“I'm very glad to hear that,” Rafe said. “Although Magiford is the result of combined efforts of humans and supernaturals alike, it makes me personally happy to hear you enjoy it. You ought to visit us more often! Perhaps then you wouldn't object to lunch?” His grin was mischievous and inviting.

More flirting—this was awesome! And he was basically asking me to come more often—wait.

Hold up. He definitely wasn't flirty before. Why is he suddenly hitting on me?

I mentally reviewed when I'd last seen him.

I think it was when Harka explained to me what I was—oh.

She'd gone into detail about all the ways I could make a Pack flourish at the time, and had explained they'd hidden the truth about my magic because they wanted to keep it quiet as long as possible as I might be endangered once the general public found out I was a Wolf's Kiss.

Even though I seriously didn't feel any magic, or have any control over it, my ability to ensure a higher likelihood of a successful werewolf change was enough to set off a feud.

And Rafe hadn't known about it before then—he was just as shocked as I was when she explained it.

Given that Harka and her husband don't have any kids, what's the likelihood Rafe hopes to take over her Pack once she retires, and is aware of just how nice it would be to have a Wolf's Kiss attached to the Pack?

The sheer glee of experiencing even something as harmless but romantic as flirting died off fast. Guess I was still the leader of the Northern Lakes "Single-Forever" Pack.

"Haa, yeah, Magiford is really fun." I kept a smile in place and my voice polite—I couldn't blame Rafe for trying, especially when the werewolf instinct to protect their Pack was legendary. There was a good chance he wasn't even mentally aware he now saw me as a hundred times more interesting due to my magic.

"But thanks for the invite," I continued, trying to steer the conversation away from more false-flirting. "And before I forget, please thank the Pre-Dominant for me—for her help with this situation."

"Oh. Of course." Rafe must have sensed the slight cooling of my emotions. He blinked in surprise, then tried grinning

again. “I’ll confess; I might have cajoled her into helping when I found out you were coming with Alpha Greyson and the new werewolf.”

“In that case—on behalf of the Pack—thank you. Jack’s parents will be grateful to learn you took a personal interest in this,” I said.

“Ah.”

Before Rafe could recover from the very obvious verbal shield I’d thrust between us, Greyson appeared at my side.

“We have the paperwork,” he said. “It’s going to take a while to fill it out, so they’re sending us to an unused conference room. You’re coming with?”

I peered up at him, feeling very suspicious as his grin was smug with a twist of slyness. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Rafe checked his watch. “Unfortunately, I must return to the Pre-Dominant in the meantime. But if you call when you finish the paperwork, I’ll come down to speed the process along.”

“Thank you,” Greyson said.

I stood up, patting my pockets to make sure I still had my wallet and phone. “Yeah, thank you, and goodbye, Rafe.” I waved to him as I followed Greyson to the door, where Jack waited for us.

Greyson’s good mood was so tangible, I could practically sense his figurative tail wagging.

“What has you so happy?” I asked.

Greyson laughed as he put his hand on the small of my back, unnecessarily guiding me through the door. “Just appreciating your sense of realism.”

I’d been peering behind us—a starry eyed secretary from the office was following us, her eyes fixed on Greyson. But at the Alpha’s statement, I turned my attention back to him and blinked. “About?”

Greyson cocked an eyebrow as we entered the hallway. “Rafe?” His smile grew as the door closed behind us and Jack padded down the hallway. “Perhaps you wouldn’t object to an offer of lunch?” he quoted.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t even *start*.” I stomped down the hallway after Jack.

“Forgive me, Lady Hunter, have I offended you?” Greyson laughed. “Perhaps we should discuss it over lunch.”

Something squeezed uncomfortably in my throat.

It was one thing for Aeris and Wyatt to give me crap about being single, but coming from Greyson, it felt...different. Less like fun ribbing and closer to mocking.

I twisted uncomfortably to look back at him. “I mean it, Greyson. Don’t.” I tried to make my voice strong, but it cracked, making me sound close to tears.

Greyson stopped his swaggering walk for a moment and stared at me.

I hurried after Jack, who was waiting for us at the end of the hallway.

I heard Greyson speed up, and was surprised when he joined me, grabbing my hand and shoving his fingers through mine.

Wha—what is he trying to accomplish?

I peered down at our hands and contemplated trying to shake mine free.

“I meant it as a compliment,” Greyson abruptly said. “Most people wouldn’t have noticed, and would have bought his sudden interest.”

I gave him the evil eye, but the look in his eyes was too serious for him to be making fun of me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, the timing was sketchy at best, and ridiculous at worst. Last time we came to Magiford he was polite and professional with zero interest in me. Now that he

knows what I am, he's suddenly charming and attentive? I may not be a werewolf, but even I can smell a lie that bad."

Greyson was quiet until we'd nearly caught up with Jack. "If it makes you feel any better, I've always paid attention to you from the start, not because of your magic, but because you make very interesting noises when surprised."

"Greyson," I groaned. "No, that does *not*, in fact, make me feel better!"

"It's better than you attempting to auction me off to the richest bidder."

"That is for the good of the Pack."

"Then what happens when I find her? As the Alpha, I'm supposed to suck it up and give my missing mate a searing kiss when she appears?" Greyson dryly asked.

"Yes!" I said. "Werewolves will come from all over to meet her. It will be great for the local economy."

When I glanced up at him, Greyson was grinning like a wolf who'd just feasted.

I sucked my head into my shoulders, my self-defense senses kicking in. "Why are you smiling?"

Greyson swung our joint hands between us. "For a reason you'd *hate*, Lady Hunter."

"Of course. Let go of my hand."

"Not a chance."

"Why?"

"Because the secretary following us finally ditched me."

"See! You're a fountain of money—we just need to exploit you!"

"Only if I get a large cut of the profits."

"Two percent."

"I'm not doing it for anything less than fifty."

"You're as shady as a fae!"

“Better get used to it, Lady Hunter!”

“Is the bracelet fitting okay, Jack? It’s not too tight, is it?” I studied Jack’s front left foot, watching for any constriction in his range of motion.

Jack paused long enough to sniff at the thin gold bracelet I’d clipped around his leg.

Every wolf in the Northern Lakes Pack wore one—not as a fashion statement, but because the bracelet would provide rudimentary clothes when the wolf shifted back into their human form.

After one too many tickets from Mayor Pearl for indecent exposure, Greyson had contacted a fae to do the work. It had been absurdly expensive, but now when the wolves transformed, the women came back wearing dresses that were as flattering as potato sacks, and the guys wore either shorts so baggy they looked like skirts, or kilts.

Greyson had actual fitted pants, but he’d paid *a lot* of money for that privilege. (Aeric and Wyatt had quoted me the price when explaining why they’d opted for a skort and kilt.)

“You’ll get used to it.” I started up the staircase again. “And you’ll be glad for it the first time you transform in downtown Timber Ridge. I swear Mayor Pearl has cameras on every corner and a police scanner in her office. Whew.”

I huffed for a breath as Jack slipped past me, climbing the stairs with a stamina I didn’t have.

“Enjoying the werewolf athleticism, right?” I called after him.

He waited for me at the floor, then started up the last flight of stairs.

“Nope, this is our stop.” I charged down the hallways, relying on dusty memories.

Thankfully, the Curia Cloisters was not big into remodeling or modern furniture trends...or really change of any kind.

Change makes supernaturals persnickety.

It wasn't that hard to follow the spacious hallways, ducking past gold veined marble pillars, statues and artwork that was likely older than the United States of America.

When we got to a bronze statue of a howling wolf whose nose had been rubbed by thousands of hands touching it over the years so it looked golden, we took a sharp turn and found the service door I'd been looking for.

When I started to turn the doorknob, Jack whined, then looked at the "employees only" sign.

"It's just a suggestion," I said. "Besides, I've been up here loads of times. Come on—we've got to hurry or we'll miss it."

The door opened up onto one of the cloister's roofs—the building had a stacked sort of quality to it—almost like a cathedral that had been severely squashed.

It was pretty windy, and as the sun was almost entirely set, I was wishing I'd brought a jacket with me.

We were on one of the lower roofs—where some of the flying supernaturals landed when visiting the cloisters.

I led Jack out onto a wooden observational deck—where the employees were supposed to wait for the flying supernaturals, I think—then turned around and pointed to the main cloister's building, which stretched up one more level behind us in a domed ceiling.

"There we go, watch the gargoyles."

Gargoyles were perched on the peaks of the tallest roofs.

There were two bird ones, three that looked like ridiculously huge and ripped goblins with the wings of a dragon, and at least six of them that appeared to be crosses of lions with bat wings, except their bodies were muscled and almost reptilian compared to their wild counterparts.

As the last ray of sunlight died, casting the building in cold twilight, magic flared around the pedestals the gargoyles were perched on, slowly crawling up the statue-like forms.

Once the magic completely encased the gargoyles, it cracked, then shattered, flaking off them like bits of snow.

One of the lion gargoyles woke first, roaring into the quiet of the night before it flexed its shoulders and flapped its wings, working the kinks out after being stone for the day.

The birds—who looked closer to griffins after they'd folded their wings around their bodies—stretched their taloned feet, then rubbed their beaks together.

The giant, winged goblins hopped down from their perch and strode across the roof of the cloisters, inspecting the area. They poked at portions of the roof, making the fae, wizard, and dragon spells that protected the place briefly shimmer into view.

Jack seemed suitably impressed with the gargoyles.

He sat down as he watched them, his eyes bright with interest.

“They’re the building’s guardians,” I said. “They’re only active at night, but they’re attuned to the cloisters’ security, so if something goes down during the day they’re supposed to wake up,” I said. “Aren’t they cool?”

Jack gave a happy “Awoo!” of approval, momentarily drawing the gargoyles’ attention to us.

One of the goblin-like gargoyles waved, while the lions yawned, revealing their enormous teeth.

A black housecat climbed up over a ridge of the roof, pausing when she saw the active gargoyles. She crouched low against the stone, then started shuffling to the edge of the roof so she could hop down to the deck where Jack and I stood.

I thought for sure she had to be a shifter, but she didn’t make any of my hunter senses sparkle as she stole her way across the roof.

One of the goblin gargoyles saw her and started in her direction.

She puffed up, her back arching, then tore across the roof, yowling as she leaped off it. She hit the wooden deck running and disappeared, skittering around a corner of the building.

The goblin gargoyle flapped his wings and hopped to a different section of the roof. He must have found her, because there was another loud yowl, before it sounded like she scrambled her way down a downspout based on the clanging noise.

“See, they were curious, but the cat wasn’t a threat, so they didn’t do anything to her,” I said. “They’re pretty chill with humans, too.”

The door creaked, and Greyson stepped out onto the observation deck. “Enjoying the illegal view?” He nodded to the gargoyles, who all slightly tipped their heads to him in return.

I rolled my eyes. “Jeez, you werewolves. Fine, I checked with the human at the welcome desk, she said it was okay. Are you happy now?”

“Deeply.” Greyson crouched next to Jack and rubbed the sides of his head, just in front of his ears, eliciting happy huffs from him.

“I thought Jack would enjoy seeing the gargoyles change after a full day.” The breeze kicked some of my white hair into my face, and I tried to brush it out of my eyes.

“They are pretty amazing.” Greyson’s gold eyes glittered in the rapidly darkening twilight. “How did you know about them?”

“My parents used to bring me out here sometimes.”

“Dulce and Santos?”

“No, my hunter parents.” I leaned against the wooden railing, a sad smile pulling at my lips. “Mom would bring me out here when she and Dad had to deliver some of their reports. We’d make a day of it and hang out at the Cloisters

while they caught up with friends and I got to explore the building.”

Jack pulled away from Greyson and nudged my side with his nose, then leaned into me.

Greyson stood up and tilted his head. “You don’t talk about your parents very often.”

“It’s painful to think about,” I said. “So I’ve avoided it—which isn’t the healthiest thing. But it only felt worse after Mama Dulce and Papa Santos died...” I trailed off as I rubbed my forehead, trying to ease the impending headache I could feel building there.

It feels like my life has been a long goodbye to everyone I love dearly. Maybe it’s just as well I’ve never had a serious relationship.

“It’s good to remember them,” Greyson said.

I froze in the middle of a rub and glanced at him, shocked by the thoughtfulness of the statement considering he was usually full of snark. “What?”

“Your parents—both sets of them,” Greyson said. “They may be gone, but if you take the time to remember, it helps to know how loved you were. You’ll still feel the loss—you always will, it’s proof of how much you cared for them—but it’s better to remember the love and mourn them than it is to avoid thinking of them so you can pretend you don’t miss them.”

“Yeah.” It was all I could say, or I’d risk bursting into tears.

Greyson seemed to sense it. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, then tugged me into his arms.

I rested my head on his warm shoulder. “It’s strange that you’re being so nice to me.”

Greyson was silent as he rested his chin on the top of my head.

The silence spoke volumes—he wasn’t going to try writing it all off as a moment of weakness, or joke about it later. He

was being sincere.

I didn't know he could be this thoughtful—to me, anyway.

He combed his fingers through some of my long white hair, and between that, the sheer warmth he radiated, and the comforting weight of his other arm slung snug around my waist, Greyson was officially one of the best hug-givers I'd met.

Most werewolves were, but this was ridiculously comforting.

I switched so I had my other cheek pressed against his chest, which gave me the perfect view of Jack, and allowed me to witness that it was actually possible for wolves to raise invisible eyebrows.

I swear, the dark mask that covered his forehead, went down his nose, and circled around his eyes was twitched up as he stared at Greyson and me.

I could feel my face start to burn.

Jack turned his head from side to side, then sneezed and made a disgusted grunting sound.

Okay, that's enough of this!

I abruptly broke out of the comforting hug. My face had to have been bright red based on how hot I felt.

“Thanks.” I cleared my throat, put my hand on my hips, then looked down at Jack.

He was still looking pretty doubtful based on the angle he held his head at.

That's right. This isn't about my traumas. This is about Jack. He was just delivered the greatest shock of his life.

I knelt next to Jack and petted the thick ruff of his fur that wrapped around his chest and neck. “You know, Jack, you've had a big loss. Everything you've planned for your life has changed. So much of what you wanted...it's different now.”

Jack hung his head.

I slid my hands under his chin and scooped his head up so I could look directly into his woeful eyes. “But you’re still Jack,” I said. “Your parents, me, the Pack, we all love you just as much as we did before. We’ll help you figure this out. And no matter how much has changed—how strong you are now, that you can grow fur and teeth, all of the new things you’re experiencing—you’re still *you*. You’re still Jack. Werewolf or human, that never changes. You can still do wonderful things.”

I smoothed my hand over the ridge on his forehead that made him look worried. “Kind of like Greyson said, you should acknowledge the loss. You’re not human anymore, and this isn’t what you wanted. It’s okay to be sad about that. But I want you to know that you’re *loved*. And you may not feel like that’s important right now, but I promise you: love is what matters *most* in life.”

Jack whined, and something magic pulsed in his body.

He shook, and Greyson barely whisked me backward in time to avoid Jack’s enormous paws when he started flailing.

I gripped the collar of Greyson’s shirt. “Is he...?”

“Yes,” Greyson said. “He’s trying to change back into a human.”

I held my breath as Jack twitched painfully on the ground.

Shifting—for all shifters, not just werewolves—is a painful process. It involves rebuilding and rearranging your entire skeleton and muscular structure—the amount of power and magic it takes to make that happen alone is enough to make your skin burn. Add in all the physical pain of bones and muscles snapping and stretching, and you’ve got half the idea of how much it hurts.

The process can take anywhere from about forty seconds to a minute. But for newer werewolves, it always takes longer.

Jack whimpered, and about a minute later he collapsed on his knees. Sweaty, shirtless, and wearing the weird short things his bracelet created, he peered up at Greyson and me as he sucked in a shaky gasp of air. “Can we go home now?” he asked. “I want to see my parents.”

I laughed as I hugged the awkward teenager. Greyson was a moment behind me, resting an arm on my shoulders as he half hugged Jack.

“I’ll call Lord Linus,” I said. “And let Klancy and Roanne know—they’re waiting for you.”

“Tell them to get food ready,” Greyson said.

“Why?” Jack asked.

His stomach rumbled loud and long enough to make the gargoyles turn to look at us.

“Oh,” Jack said.

I laughed and pulled back from the hug, reaching into my pocket to grab my phone.

Jack listed and started to sag, until Greyson hefted him, tipping the new werewolf into his side as he shrugged one of Jack’s arms over his shoulders. “Watch it. You’re going to be lightheaded for a few hours. Your body just used a huge amount of energy.”

“Thanks, Alpha.” Jack’s eyes shut—I didn’t even know if he was aware he’d called Greyson Alpha.

But I wasn’t surprised.

As I texted Klancy, I could tell Greyson was on high alert, watching Jack for any additional signs of problems as he dug out two protein bars he’d tucked into a pocket of his pants, and passed them over to Jack to start eating.

For all of the snark Greyson hides from the Pack, he really does care about them.

The thought made me remember when Harka had spilled the news that Hudson had left because of me...Greyson had tried to stop her.

Actually, he *had* stopped her. He’d used enough of his powers to get the Midwest Pre-Dominant to go silent.

I’d just filled in the blanks and figured out what she’d been trying to say.

But why would he care that much about me?

The door to the welcome center jingled.

I leaned out of the gift shop, juggling a box of wolf action figures that snapped their teeth and howled when you pressed the tiny red button on their bellies. “Shania—perfect timing!” I set the box down in a corner. “I’m *starving*, late lunches suck, and I—woah, are you okay?”

Her face was white, and even with my hearing I could hear her uneven breathing. She dumped her stuff on the desk and dug through her purse, getting out her inhaler.

“I’m okay.” Her voice was tight and wheezy. “Just allergies.” She fitted her inhaler to her lips and squeezed it, sucking the medication into her lungs.

She coughed, but held her breath for little bit, then sagged when she exhaled. “All the molds and allergens in the air make my asthma worse.” She made a face as she put her inhaler away.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked.

Shania’s asthma wasn’t deadly, but it was bad enough that she had to be careful.

It was also one of the reasons why—even though I was pretty sure she and Aeric were going to get married at this point—she’d never try to change and become a werewolf.

Anything that compromised your health—from something like asthma all the way to more extreme medical problems like cancer—was fatal whenever anyone with such issues attempted the change.

Even in the Northern Lakes Pack. The one death I could remember was a year or so after I’d first arrived. A beautiful young lady with health complications died after attempting the change.

It was believed that because the change took you to the brink of death, any additional health problems made it too much for your body to handle.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” Shania put her inhaler back in her purse. “Now go on and get your lunch.”

I hesitated, balancing uneasily on my toes. “I don’t know...”

The door banged open, and Aeric, his red hair glowing in the afternoon light, charged inside.

“Forrest texted me and said he thought you were coughing when he saw you at the library five minutes ago. Are you okay?” He closed in on her, looking her over from head to toe. “How’s your asthma?”

Shania rolled her eyes. “One thing nobody prepared me for was that in dating a werewolf it means you sign up for a legion of nosy, furry bodyguards.”

I laughed as I grabbed my purse—reassured she’d be fine now that Aeric was here. “It comes with the territory!” I waved as I headed out the door.

The September sunshine was bright and warmed me straight through to my bones—though it wasn’t as intense as it had been over the summer.

I hummed in appreciation as I headed down the block, pondering what I was going to get for lunch at the werewolf owned coffee shop, Howl-In Café.

I was about halfway there when I spotted Mayor Pearl marching down the sidewalk, coming straight toward me.

Chapter 6

Pip

Her steps were so forceful her toothpick thin legs shook, but her curled hair—sprayed within an inch of its life and styled in something similar to a bowl cut—was motionless.

Mayor Pearl swung her umbrella—which was colored black to match the black and white pantsuit she always wore, with the pants hiked almost up to her chest—but once she saw me, the scowl etched into the jowls of her cheeks deepened.

“Phillipa Sabre.”

The way she’d said it would make you think my name was a curse word, but I wasn’t special. Mayor Pearl didn’t like *anyone*—human or wolf.

“Hello, Mayor Pearl.” I tried to smile as she stopped just in front of me. “How are you?”

Mayor Pearl gave a loud “*harumph*” that sounded like it may have started deep within her soul. “I’d be doing a great deal better if that Pack of yours didn’t break the sound restrictions at night, howling like a bunch of banshees.”

“I apologize, there was a big celebration last night,” I said. “A new werewolf was having problems shifting back.

Everyone was just so relieved he finally changed into a human that the Pack couldn't help it."

"Well, they need to," Mayor Pearl snapped. "Or the Chief of Police will have them fined for disturbing the peace! Won't you, Henry!"

I hadn't even noticed Henry—Pearl's husband and also the Chief of Police; hence, how she fined so many people all the time.

While his wife was short—barely shoulder high on me, and I was just average—Henry was tall and rail thin, but age—or Mayor Pearl—had worn on him so his shoulders were hunched up to his chin. His fluffy, gray eyebrows reminded me of inquisitive moths, but while he had *a lot* of worry lines on his forehead, he also had smile lines, unlike his wife's scowl marks.

Henry, standing in his wife's shadow, muttered to the sidewalk.

"That's right." Mayor Pearl tapped the tip of her umbrella on the sidewalk as she eyed me. "Now...shouldn't you be at the welcome center?"

Although the Timber Ridge Welcome Center was run and owned by the wolves, that didn't keep Mayor Pearl from trying to stick her oar in.

"I'm on my lunch break," I said. "Shania is on duty now."

"Is that so? Hmph." Mayor Pearl swung her umbrella up—which she claimed she used for support in lieu of a cane—and rested it on her shoulder. "Carry on, then." She hobbled down the sidewalk, Henry ghosting after her.

I stepped aside, making room for them—then hurried on to Howl-In before she changed her mind and called me back for another lecture.

I leaned into the Howl-In door, which played a soft recorded flute note, that sounded faintly like a wolf's howl.

The place capitalized on the wild, rustic, 'up north' vibe that most of Timber Ridge reflected, with wooden plank walls

that made it feel like a cabin, a canoe that hung from the rafters, and an epoxy floor that was styled to resemble stone with black wolf paw prints crisscrossing everywhere.

The furniture was made of roughly hewn wood, but covered in so many cushions it was dangerous to sit on or you'd fall asleep.

Instead of the typical jazz music most cafés played, Howl-In had an ambience soundtrack that changed based on the time of day. Since it was lunch they were playing a lake mix that had the sounds of water, loons calling to one other, hawk cries, frogs, and the occasional wolf howl.

Even though it was a café, I swear the place smelled like maple syrup and a fresh campfire, and it had the *best* paninis and breakfast food in town.

The café was staffed entirely by humans connected to the Pack. When werewolves used to work here, the health inspector nearly shut the place down several times because he kept finding wolf hair everywhere, so now all werewolves were banned from entering the place and the wolf owned candy store, Sweets Shoppe.

Scarlett and Radcliff, wearing their hunter uniforms with fake—thank you Mayor Pearl—sidearms strapped to their legs, and a few movie prop daggers strapped where their usual knives and daggers would be, waved when they saw me.

They were posing with a cluster of teenagers, who were snapping pictures with their cameras.

“We’ll be just a moment, Pip,” Radcliff called.

Although they were officially Howl-In staff, as part of the agreement to stay in Timber Ridge, Scarlett and Radcliff agreed to wear their hunter uniforms to work, instead of the brown and cream shirts and dark brown aprons the other staff members had.

I hadn’t understood why the requirement was added, but over the past few weeks it had become clear as humans flocked to Howl-In Café so they could have their picture taken with a real hunter.

Also, the already busy scheduled times the werewolf photo booth was open over at the welcome center had become downright crazy with Radcliff and Scarlett acting as living advertisements.

People apparently wanted complete sets—or something. I didn't really get the appeal, but it was great for business.

“Don't worry.” I tried to wave them off.

“No, you're our senior. We have to.” Scarlett broke off her incoming reminder of hunter rules to smile for another picture.

Every time I entered the café, Radcliff and Scarlett insisted on being the ones to serve me. This didn't really win me any points with the humans, as was evident by the glares I got as I reluctantly strolled up to the counter.

Amelia was working today. She and I were usually okay, but since the wolves' behavior toward me had changed slightly after the announcement that I was a Wolf's Kiss, she'd gotten a little...brisk.

“Hi, Amelia.” I tried smiling at her.

Amelia—a high school junior who had probably just started her after-school shift, if I had to guess, as she was still tugging her apron into place and tying the straps—just stared at me. “What do you want?” she asked.

“I'll have a hot chocolate—”

“We're out of hot chocolate mix,” Amelia said.

“Oh. Then an apple cider—”

“We're out of cider, too,” Amelia said.

“No we're not.” Radcliff narrowed his eyes as he pulled away from the overjoyed teenagers. “We have bars of chocolate that we shave for the hot chocolate visible on the counter, and there are three jugs of apple cider in the fridge. I was sent out to get more not even an hour ago.”

Amelia just stared at me, not even embarrassed at getting caught.

I like humans, I reminded myself. It's just the humans connected to the Pack. And their hurt feelings make sense, sort of. They think I'm just like them and forget that I'm a supernatural, like the werewolves.

Since they were never invited to the Pack practices, they hadn't seen me get whaled on by the wolves—a joy exclusively reserved for me since I was tougher and stronger than a regular human.

Humans were too fragile for a wolf to play with, hence the physical divide, even if the wolves loved the humans just as much—if not more—than they liked me.

But of course, the humans didn't understand that, so I got to receive their hate—and jealousy.

Scarlett and Radcliff hadn't seemed to experience it yet, but they also weren't very close to the werewolves...yet.

Scarlett slipped behind the counter. “I will make your hot chocolate for you, Pip. Are you practicing your marksmanship tonight after work?”

“Thank you, and I'm not sure yet,” I said.

“Wait, are you a hunter, too?” one of the teenagers asked.

I shook my head, but Radcliff was at my side in an instant. “She's the last of the Sabre Hunters, *and* she single handedly shut down a rebel hunter who was seeking to exterminate the local Pack of wolves.”

The teenagers' eyes brightened as they all turned to me.

“No, I didn't,” I hurriedly said. “I just stalled for time until the Alpha arrived. Amelia was there, too.”

I glanced at Amelia, hoping maybe this would thaw her a little. When the teenagers—who were approximately the same age as her—looked at her, she just shrugged.

What the heck. I can understand why the humans react this way, but if they're not going to accept it when I extend an olive branch there is no point in trying. This Wolf's Kiss thing is an all-around nuisance.

“Can we get our picture with you, too?” a teenager who had her hair shoved up in a messy bun asked.

“I don’t really look cool like Scarlett and Radcliff do.” I plucked at the sleeve of the bulky blouse I was wearing.

“Just get your daggers out.” Radcliff tapped my back, where I’d successfully hidden a small pair of daggers—not my favorite, silver edged daggers Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had bought me, but one of the starter pairs my parents had first started me on when I was a kid.

I laughed nervously. “Radcliff, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bring those up, or you’ll summon Mayor Pearl, who will try to lure me to the Town Hall so she can fine me.”

I technically wasn’t supposed to have weapons on me, but since the Fletchings’ attack and then Jack getting jumped, I’d become a tad paranoid.

“Weapons will work. It will up your intimidation factor, so even though you look like an old librarian it will still make you cool,” one of the two males in the group informed me.

“You don’t have a girlfriend, do you?” I asked.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“With those kinds of observations, I’d think it’s a given. Fine, let’s take the picture.” I let Radcliff nudge me over to the wolf statue. All the teens pressed in—the girls mostly just crowded around Radcliff, but one of them clapped her hands in glee when I did unearth one of my baby daggers.

“You’re armed, this is so cool!” she squealed. “MacKenzie can just shut her trap, now!”

“MacKenzie?” I asked as one of the teenagers shoved the phone at Amelia so she could take the photo—which I’m sure was going to further ingratiate us to her.

“Yeah, MacKenzie got her picture with the Fae Night Queen when she went to Magiford two weeks ago, and she has not *shut up* about it,” the teenager with the messy bun volunteered. “That’s why we need these photos—we drove all

the way to Timber Ridge because my mom saw that you can take pictures of werewolves here.”

“The photo booth is closed right now,” I said. “Unless you offer enough money. Then Moira—she’s the werewolf who runs the place—will probably make an exception for you.”

“Great, let’s do that next!”

I stepped out of the grocery store with two bags of food, then jumped so badly I almost dropped them when some birds nearby popped out of the lone tree positioned in the parking lot with alarmed squawks.

Hmm.

I suspiciously poked at my hunter senses, but I didn’t feel werewolves in my direct vicinity. There were some in a few of the wolf owned businesses up and down the street, but no one near me.

Yep, I’m too paranoid.

I made my way over to my scooter, then began the challenging game of “storage Tetris” I had to play whenever I bought anything and tried to take it home on my scooter. It had a basket in the front, and a tiny bit of storage under the seat, and I had to wedge all my food in those spots. (Or guess what Mayor Pearl would do if she saw me holding a plastic bag on my lap while I drove? Yep. Fines for everyone!)

I got the seat compartment filled to the brim when I felt something brush the edge of my senses.

A werewolf must be going to the library.

My senses could cover approximately a block radius around me—farther if I stretched it. But I couldn’t cover all of downtown Timber Ridge—as tiny as it was—with just my hunter senses. Hunters were supposed to work in groups and synch up their powers for that sort of thing.

I suppose with Scarlett and Radcliff around I could ask them to work on it with me. But I don't know...

It wasn't that I didn't trust the siblings—they'd guarded my back against their own family. I just...didn't do tight relationships.

And synching up magic like that? Yeah. That's going to make you *really* close with the other hunters.

I was trying to decide where to put my Oreos so they wouldn't get crushed when Teresa came booking it around the corner of the grocery store, nearly tripping when she jumped the curb.

As the oldest child of Hector and Ember, Teresa had lovely brown skin with dark hair and eyes that flashed in anger at the moment. "Pip!" she screamed. "Why don't you answer your cellphone?"

"Hm?" I put the Oreos in my basket and checked my phone—which had 5 missed calls. "Oh, sorry. I get bad reception in the store, so my phone must not have rung. What's wrong?" Feeling a sense of déjà vu—Teresa was usually the messenger sent to fetch me when there was a problem between the human pack and the wolf Pack—I laughed. "Do I have to arrange a mini golf tournament to settle some differences or something?"

"No! It's happened again!"

I stood straighter. "What's happened again?"

"A townie *changed*—he's a werewolf!" Teresa skidded to a stop in front of me, taking in great gulps of air. "He's in his wolf form over in the city park!"

"Why is it always the park? Here." I flung my bag of groceries at her. "Have some biscotti."

I threw my helmet on and turned on my scooter, which pattered to life.

"Mom is trying to calm him down, and Aeric and Wyatt shifted to try to help him, but it's not working. Mom said he's scared out of his mind. Be careful!"

I gunned my scooter as fast as it could go, shooting out of the parking lot and onto main street.

I wove around traffic—getting me honked at on more than one occasion—but I didn't slow down.

As a child of werewolves and someone who grew up in a Pack, Jack knew roughly what would happen.

But if this guy was a townie...he had to be lost and terrified. And scared werewolves were *dangerous*.

Around the time I passed the welcome center, my hunter senses roared to life.

I could feel Ember, Aeric, Wyatt, and, yes, the newly changed wolf out in the park.

I blew past City Hall—Mayor Pearl was going to fine me for sure once this was over—and drove my scooter up over the curb of the park, jarring my tailbone as I hurtled over the lawn and across the woodchip covered ground around the playground equipment.

I found the four werewolves at the edge of the park—a crowd of humans had gathered, making the situation a thousand times worse.

I didn't want to add to the noise, so I turned my scooter off and dumped it on the ground, ripping my helmet off before I stalked closer.

“Relax, it's okay,” Ember called in a voice that was both soothing, and authoritative. “We're not going to hurt you.” She stood in front of the wolf, her hands open and arms extended.

The new wolf was a dusty grey color, with a dark charcoal gray on his nose, but whiter hair on his chest and paws. He was half crouched, and his eyes—a golden brown color—were hazy with fear.

He had to be in a lot of pain from his first shift, as well as frightened, so I wasn't too surprised when he growled at Ember.

Aeric tried to lighten the moment and invitingly wagged his tail as he stood between the new wolf and the humans.

Wyatt was behind the changed wolf, pinning him so if he bolted, it would be into the woods and not into town.

The new wolf hunched closer to the ground, his ears flat against his skull as he tried to keep all three werewolves within his sight.

Someone in the crowd took a picture on their cellphone with the flash on, and he whirled around and snarled, baring his teeth at them.

“Easy,” Ember warned him. “I know you’re upset, but you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

The wolf snapped his teeth at her, and his breathing came faster.

This is bad—he’s in a panic. He’ll hurt people if he doesn’t get help soon.

I reached for my pocket, intending to call Greyson, but the movement drew the werewolf’s attention.

He turned, and was stone still as he studied me.

Ember nodded at me, and while her shoulders relaxed, the strain didn’t leave the tight way she clenched her teeth. “That’s Pip,” she said. “She—”

The wolf bolted toward me, streaking past Wyatt like lightning. Wyatt chased after him, but the wolf was closing in on me fast, and was going to reach me before he did.

For a moment, two different instincts warred within me.

Years of training, practice, and conditioning burned within my mind had me reaching behind my back, to the daggers I had strapped under my shirt.

At the same time, something deep within me insisted I needed to hold my hand out, not a weapon.

I could feel bile crawl up my throat as the wolf was almost on me—which instinct should I follow?

Thinking of how scared Jack was, and how heartbroken he’d been, I inhaled deeply.

Please, please let this be the right choice.

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Chapter 7

Pip

I held out my hand.

The wolf brushed past it and crashed into me, knocking air out of me and shoving me to the grassy ground.

But instead of feeling teeth close around my throat, the wolf frantically leaned his head into my side and whined.

When I sat up on my elbows, he circled around me, attempting to cower behind me as Wyatt slowed his approach.

“Hi.” I twisted awkwardly so I could smile at the new wolf before I carefully sat up. “That’s Ember, and she’s right. You’re going to be okay.” I situated myself so I was on my knees, and the new wolf huddled close, tucking himself under my arm and shivering uncontrollably—shock.

I shut my eyes, reining in the rage that scorched my heart at whatever monster had done this to him.

Rage later. For now, I have to help this guy.

I opened my eyes and held out my other hand to Wyatt, who was lurking a few feet away. “This is Wyatt. He’s been my friend forever, even if he cheats at bowling.”

Wyatt took the hint and wagged his tail, going down in a bowing-like motion the wolves used whenever they were

inviting each other to play.

I glanced at the new wolf. His eyes were still glazed with fear—I didn't know that he was really hearing anything I was saying—but he at least seemed to take comfort in the pleasant tone I kept my voice at.

“That's Aeric, way past him.” I said. “He's my other oldest friend. He has a thing for fast cars, so I wouldn't suggest getting in a car with him at the wheel.”

Aeric wagged his tail again and offered a happy “Awoo!”

The wolf's breathing was starting to slow—he wasn't halfway to hyperventilating anymore, but with my hand draped over his chest, I could feel the frantic beat of his heart.

A silver car pulled up to the parking lot, and Greyson got out.

“That's Greyson, your Alpha,” I said. “You don't know it yet, but he's going to be really important to you. He's an okay guy.” I hesitated when the wolf looked up at me, fear in every move he made. “No, actually, he's a great wolf. He'll take care of you. You're going to be okay. I promise.”

Greyson reached us by then and crouched next to me. “She's right, kid. We'll take care of you. And I'll find whoever did this to you, and make them pay.”

The new wolf stretched his neck out and sniffed Greyson, his black nose twitching.

“Yep, I smell like her,” Greyson said. “And she smells like me.”

“What?” I was so surprised I forgot to be quiet and squawked like an angry chicken. “You take that back—oop.” I guiltily glanced at the new wolf, but, weirdly, he seemed happier.

He lay down in front of Greyson, then tipped over onto his side and kicked his legs out so his back was flush against Greyson and me, and he could still see everyone else.

Greyson rubbed the wolf's right ear for him. “Take a break, kid,” he said. “We'll get this figured out.”

He stood up as Ember cautiously approached us, smiling at the new wolf when he didn't seem alarmed by her presence.

"Do we know who it is?" Greyson asked.

"A townie." Ember handed him a wallet. "We found him and his torn clothes at his shifting site on one of the city walking trails that go into the woods. He was at the farthest point, where the path stops just short of a river, so when he was attacked, no one heard him."

Greyson glanced at the driver's license in the wallet, then passed it down to me.

A young man who was maybe just a couple years older than me smiled in the photo, his blond hair springing up like pieces of dried straw, and the gap between his front teeth giving his smile an extra boyish charm.

I recognized him—not surprising in a town the size of Timber Ridge—but I'd seen him a lot because he was one of the police officers Mayor Pearl frequently sent to deliver tickets and fines.

His driver's license said his name was Easton Vickerson.

He was nice—fast to laugh and respectful but relaxed around the werewolves.

How relaxed is he going to be now that one of them savaged him and changed his life forever?

"Aeric and Wyatt were the ones who stumbled on him," Ember said. "He ran into town before they could properly corner him. Thankfully Teresa and I were downtown already. Teresa had seen Pip go into the grocery store, and went to get her since she didn't answer her phone." Ember pushed an eyebrow up as she peered down at me.

"Sorry," I said. "I was getting Oreos and biscotti."

"You did great, Ember. But we need to get a team together to the change site and see if we can track whoever did this," Greyson said. "Get Hector on the phone."

"Yes, Alpha Greyson." Ember moved away, her fingers already finding the speed-dial button for her husband.

“Aeric, Wyatt, I want you to stay with Pip—in case he bolts again.” Greyson looked down at me.

I’d been unconsciously petting Easton, who was breathing normally now, though his ears were frantically moving as he tried to take in all the new noises he could hear.

“I think he’ll be okay,” Greyson said. “But we can’t risk it.”

Aeric plopped down on his rear and yawned, while Wyatt went down to his belly, then turned so he was balanced on his back and smiled at Easton, looking at him upside down and appearing dog-like enough to make Easton relax a fraction more.

I chewed on my lip as I considered the situation.

I could go with Hector and the tracking team and use my magic, but when I shifted my weight to ease the growing ache in my knees, Easton twitched upright, his breathing instantly picking up.

Welp. Guess I’m not going.

There was another option. I didn’t really want to use it—I was pretty sure it would only make them *worse* about it—but we needed to find out who was doing this.

“Easton, mind your ears,” I warned him before I fitted my fingers to my mouth and shrilly whistled—twice as long sharp notes, and then twice as piercing shrieks that lasted only a second each.

Aeric whined at me, and Wyatt pawed at his ears as he balefully watched me.

“Calling backup?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah. Sorry,” I said. “Hunter whistles are always hard on wolf ears.”

“Imagine that,” Greyson drawled.

I patted Easton as I looked around, hoping.

About a minute passed before Scarlett and Radcliff came booking it down the city sidewalk, and something in me

relaxed.

I hadn't known if it would work, but I didn't have their phone numbers, so I was just hoping for the best.

"Hey." Scarlett took the lead, jogging out in front of her brother. "We heard right as we were about to get into our car."

"What's going on?" Radcliff craned his neck as he saw who was sitting in front of me. "Is that a fringe member of the Northern Lakes Pack? I don't remember seeing that color pattern among the Pack."

"Scarlett, Radcliff, this is Easton. He's a newly changed wolf." I spoke carefully, making sure I met their eyes.

The downcast look to Scarlett and the way Radcliff curled his hands into fists said they understood the message I was trying to send.

Easton was not voluntarily changed.

"Hector—and Ember?" I looked up at Greyson for confirmation.

He nodded.

"Hector and Ember are heading a group to investigate the area where he was changed. Would you go with and...look around?" I evasively asked.

"Of course," Scarlett said.

"Thanks. Sorry, I'd go myself but..."

"You seem needed here," Radcliff said. "We'll go—this is why we're hunters. We help one another out."

He and Scarlett bowed to Greyson, then marched off toward Ember, who was still on the phone with Hector.

"I hope they're able to find something," I said.

"We will." Greyson watched as Rio and Aspen emerged from the woods, wearing exercise clothes—they'd probably been nearby, training.

"You're going with them, then?" I asked.

“I will, after we’re sure Easton is stabilized.” Greyson glanced down at Easton.

When the new wolf looked up at him, Greyson smiled—not his cocky grin, but something smaller and more reassuring.

Easton sighed and rested his head on one of his paws.

“At least he’s calmed,” I said.

“Yeah. You channeled your Wolf’s Kiss powers?” Greyson asked.

I hunched my shoulders. “Maybe? I don’t know, it was more like an instinct smacked me. I didn’t actually *use* magic.”

Greyson rubbed his jaw. “Even though there was so much danger present?”

“Yeah.”

“There goes the theory that your powers surfaced fighting Amos because others were in danger.”

“Yeah.” I patted Easton on the back. “Maybe I don’t have the full power set, and this is as good as it gets.”

“You have a newly changed wolf who didn’t know the first thing about being changed lying at your feet,” Greyson dryly said. “You’ve got the full power set. You just need more practice.”

“If you say so.” I smiled for Easton’s sake—I had no right to have a pity party for myself when he’d just been turned into a werewolf against his will.

There’s just one problem with Greyson’s point. How can I practice when I don’t even know how to spark it?

“Okay, so you feel all of your wolf instincts, right?” Jack crouched in front of Easton and held his finger up. “Just turn in the *opposite* direction and think of your human instincts—

you know, to check your phone, or make your bed and stuff. Move toward those instincts.”

Easton tipped his head from side to side as he listened to the teenager’s attempt at coaching as the sun finally crept over the trees.

As it had happened with Jack, Easton spent the rest of the day glued to my side. Jack joined us sometime around midnight, stating he understood more than anyone else in the Pack, which was how I found myself camped out in the lodge with one wolf and a teenager unable to go to school because he broke chairs if he sat down wrong as my perpetual companions.

Unfortunately, I was finding I did not do well on zero hours of sleep after a full day of work and a stressful night.

My mood was pretty fragile, but I had to hold it together because Easton wasn’t keen on going anywhere without me, and Jack had decided that we were going to pal it out together until Easton was able to turn back into a human.

As a result, we were out on the lodge’s front deck. Supposedly to watch the sunrise, but really it was so I could drink my mimosa without any judgy eyes from the few Pack members milling around.

Easton was sprawled on the deck, wide awake despite being up all night, and Jack sat next to him, dispensing encouragement, and some heartfelt advice.

I was sitting in a chair, sucking down my mimosa like tomorrow wasn’t coming. I mean, what the heck—it wasn’t like I was going into work with two recently changed wolves in tow.

Alcohol. I need so much more alcohol to deal with all of this.

I had no idea how Jack was managing to be as chipper as he was, and Easton seemed pretty chill. I was pretty sure that I, however, was starting to get stomach ulcers.

I’m not even the one facing the loss here. Why does all this feel so horrible?

“Do you know how to change, Pip?” Jack asked.

When I looked up both Jack and Easton were peering at me with hopeful expressions—ears perked on the wolf and eyes bright on the human.

Ah. That’s why. They trust me, when I really wish they wouldn’t. At least not this deeply. It really makes me want to find the monster that did this to them and end them.

I stirred my beverage with the spoon I’d brought outside, and tried to muffle all the bright spots the werewolves were on my hunter senses. “I’m sorry, but I don’t. Did your parents have any tips, Jack?”

“Yeah, they talked about unspooling magic and other fairy crap, but that seemed useless,” Jack said.

“Did it?” I sucked down more of my drink and sank lower in my chair. “I’ll have to go feed Prince and Princess soon,” I muttered, speaking my stream-of-consciousness thoughts.

“We can go now.” Jack hopped to his feet and brushed off his athletic shorts. “I don’t mind a walk.”

Easton rocked to his paws and wagged his tail, then awkwardly nodded his head—he was doing a lot better at controlling his body and adjusting to it, but he was still figuring some of the movements out.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean right now.” I peered into my now empty glass. “I just have to remember to do it.”

“You seem tired,” Jack said. “Why don’t we go sit in Alpha Greyson’s room?”

“Can’t.” I rubbed my eyes, which felt dry and gritty. “I’m trying to stay awake so we can get the report on what everyone found at the site where Easton was changed. He deserves to know.”

Easton and Jack exchanged looks—Easton seemed to be synching up with Jack faster than the rest of the Pack.

I wasn’t sure if that was because Jack had been hanging around with us the whole night, or if it was because they’d been changed by the same wolf.

“Just sleep,” Jack said. “Easton doesn’t mind, and Alpha Greyson won’t care if you collapse on his couch.”

“Consider it your exclusive property,” Greyson said.

I jumped in my chair, almost flinging my empty glass into the air, except Greyson caught my hand and held it just in time.

I slapped my free hand over my pounding heart. “Woah.” I exhaled deeply. “When did you get back?”

“Just a few minutes ago—I came in through the back door.” Greyson shook my hand—and my empty glass. “Alcohol dulling your senses?”

“I’ve been pushing them down.” I pulled my hand from his so I could set my glass down on an end table and rubbed my throbbing forehead. “All the coming and going the whole night was a bit too much to take.”

Greyson watched me, his yellow eyes gleaming. “I should have come back sooner.” He sat down in the chair next to mine, then set his hand on my upper back and rubbed between my shoulder blades, easing the muscles there.

I had to try really hard not to lean into his massage. “It’s fine. So, tell us—did you figure out who did it?”

When Greyson shook his head, I wasn’t too surprised—he wouldn’t have been out all night if they’d discovered anything.

“Whoever changed Easton attacked him in water. We tracked his scent to the river that acts as the natural border to cut off the land we let the city use for walking and jogging trails. Radcliff and Scarlett were able to pinpoint that his wolf nature—the shift—began in the riverbed. The river is about two feet deep right now. It seems like he went through most of the transformation in the river, then climbed onto shore right before the final change took place, and shifted him into a wolf,” Greyson said.

Jack whistled. “You’re lucky you’re alive, Easton,” he said. “When I changed, the pain was so bad I was flat on the ground the whole time. You must have been incredibly strong not to drown in all of this.”

“So if he was in the river, that means there’s no blood trail, and the attacker had it all planned,” I said. “But we established earlier tonight that Easton never saw who changed him. He heard a wolf, but didn’t get enough of a look to know anything besides that it had brown and gray, and maybe a few other colors in its coat.”

Unfortunately, this description only eliminated the mostly or all white wolves—like Greyson—and the mostly or all dark brown/black wolves—like Wyatt.

I’d spent the night painstakingly asking Easton yes or no questions to piece together the tiny description. (Jack had lounged next to Easton in his wolf form, the lucky kid.)

“If the water was two feet deep, and with human senses, it would have been relatively easy to hide in the brush along the bank, then jump Easton if he went into the river on his own.” Greyson flicked his eyes to Easton. “Do you normally go into a river during your afternoon run?”

Easton snapped off that somewhat-awkward nod again.

“Then it would have been extra easy to attack him from behind, tackle him, and half drown him while simultaneously savaging him,” I said.

Easton whined and snapped off another nod.

I closed my eyes and once again forced myself to hold back the simmering anger.

How could a werewolf be so cruel and calculated about this? They’re deliberately changing wolves in this territory. But why? What’s the point? They survive, but are left with a whole lot of heartache. Besides that, there is no side effect.

I gripped the armrests of my chair. “What do we do, Greyson?”

Greyson removed his hand from my back. “We’ll have a Pack meeting to discuss it.” He turned to Jack, who bowed his head.

“Come on, Easton. That’s our cue to leave. We can go out on the lawn and stay within Pip’s sight.”

Easton nodded—the movement a little smoother this time—and leaped down the stairs after Jack.

Greyson watched them cross the frost covered lawn, and I finally noticed the dark circles under his eyes and the tension in the set of his jaw.

Werewolves didn't have to sleep as frequently as some supernaturals—their stamina let them push past their limits—but I was betting that in the past few weeks Greyson had pulled off more than a few all nighters.

Being a leader really stinks. I don't get why anyone would want to be an Alpha.

When he kept on staring at the duo, I pushed past the haze caused by my lack of sleep—and possibly my beverage of choice—and spoke. “Something wrong?”

Greyson laughed lowly. “Besides the fact that we've got some kind of predator wolf turning people into wolves?”

“When you put it that way.” I twisted in my chair to peer through a front window of the lodge. “Maybe I ought to go get both of us another stiff drink.”

“Stay.” Greyson set his hand on top of my wrist, pinning my arm to the chair.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I should try to tackle this with a clear head, anyway.”

Greyson relaxed his grasp, though he kept his hand where it was. “Admirable of you.”

“Not really,” I said. “If I had a choice I'd be with Scarlett and Radcliff so I could feel like I was helping more, but it seems like I've been selected as the official watcher of the unwillingly turned.” I closed my eyes. “I'm not upset because they want to stay near me—I know it's an honor to be considered safe for them. It's just that I'm *furious* because Jack didn't want to be a werewolf, and Easton had a life and was happy as a human.”

My eyes still shut, I tipped my head back so it rested on the uncomfortable, plastic back of the lawn chair. “They're

being so strong about all of this, and I just want to find whoever did this to them and make them feel the pain they've put these guys through."

Greyson's fingers slid down my wrist and to my hand, settling his palm against mine. "I know."

Ahh yes, the touchy wolf returns. But this feels genuine compared to when he's being snarky and irritating.

I let out a rattling sigh. "Okay. Hit me with it. Why did you send them away?"

"It has occurred to me that someone might have figured out what you are," Greyson said.

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Chapter 8

Pip

I popped my eyes open. “How?”

“One of your powers is to greatly increase the chances a change will successfully take,” Greyson said. “The Pack’s survivability rate has always been talked about, but since Amos Fletching flapped his useless yap and accused us of illegal activity to achieve it, there’s been a lot more scrutiny. Someone may have put together the pieces, and is testing it out.”

“By randomly forcing the change on people?”

“Not at all.” Greyson eased his fingers farther through mine so he could tap the top of my hand with his pointer finger. “By attempting to change people who normally wouldn’t survive.”

The hand holding thing was a little distracting. I got hugged a lot, but hand holding? Not so much. Especially by no one as heart-burn-inducing handsome as Greyson.

I suspected he was doing it because it’d been a rough night and even he needed a bit of affection, but he was too aware of his position as Alpha to go for something like a hug.

He certainly wasn’t reacting as if it was something special or potentially embarrassing, so there was no way I was going

to give him the satisfaction of knowing I was holding his hand and it was affecting me.

I kept my voice steady, my breathing normal, and prayed that my palms wouldn't give me away and turn sweaty. "Jack is perfectly healthy, and Easton physically trained to be a police officer," I said. "They're prime targets to survive a change."

"Nope," Greyson drawled. "A huge part of the change is the mental battle. Jack's unwillingness to be a wolf and yet knowing what was happening when he got bitten would be a big hindrance in surviving. You can't fool your survival instinct. He was set against being a wolf. Normally he would have died as a result."

"And Easton?"

"You said it yourself, Easton was content as a human. He never looked into becoming a werewolf—and when he was bitten, he had no idea what was happening. Historically, there was still a fairly good chance he'd survive the attack and be changed as a result. But in the past sixty or seventy years, the survivability rate of cases like that have plummeted. He normally wouldn't have survived."

I watched Jack and Easton mess around at the edge of the forest. Jack was probably explaining some of Easton's new senses, based on the way Easton would look up at him, then try to sniff things.

"That's why you think they've figured out what I am?" I asked. "Because they're picking out people who shouldn't survive, and they obviously are?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. It seems like a reach," I said. "This magic ran in my dad's family, and even I didn't know. I doubt it would be common knowledge among the werewolf community—or even the shifter community—if I didn't know about it."

"It used to be more widely known, but you've got a point." Greyson stretched his legs out in front of him.

“I think what’s a greater possibility is that someone is doing this to discredit you,” I said.

Greyson flicked his golden eyes in my direction. “Show that the almighty Alpha Greyson isn’t as amazing as everyone says he is by turning innocents into wolves in his territory?”

I shrugged. “It fits. And it’s been my experience that almost everything comes back to you. You might have moved here because of me, but the werewolf community is way more concerned about what your plans are for the future, and how much power you’ll hold.”

Greyson made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded like a strangled growl. “I wish Harka would announce her successor.”

“So it’s known that it’s you?”

He shot me a look that would have had a wolf cowering, but his Alpha powers were wasted on me. “*No*,” he said witheringly. “Because I’m *not* going to be her successor. It’s bad enough keeping our Pack in line. I’m not going to be the babysitter for all the wolves in the Midwest. The sooner everyone realizes that, the faster they’ll leave me alone.”

Huh. Yeah, now that I think of it Greyson doesn’t seem altruistic enough to want to lead the entire Midwest. Can’t say I blame him; I’m uneasy just about having Jack and Easton watch me so intensely. But with as much power as Greyson has, I’m not sure he will get a choice unless someone else pops up. Rafe, maybe?

I wasn’t going to drop my suspicions on Greyson—not now, anyway. It seemed more appropriate to try to lighten the moment.

“Hey, that’s not true.” I wriggled my eyebrows at him when he looked at me. “Everyone is also breathlessly waiting to see who your mate is.”

Greyson blankly stared at me in a way that made me suspect he’d completely forgotten about his possible mate.

Maybe it’s better for her if they never meet and cement the bond. Based on the way he sees his bond as an inconvenience,

something tells me he wouldn't be overjoyed to have her be a part of his life.

There was a certain aspect of mate bonds that were beyond your control—I mean, you didn't get to choose *who* was your mate. To someone like Greyson, that would drive him crazy.

In the deepest pits of my heart, I was actually a little jealous. The idea that there was someone out there who could know me so deeply...it was a little terrifying and a whole lot of alluring to someone like me, who straddled a bunch of different worlds and thus had no one who really got everything.

Not that it mattered. As a hunter, I'd never be part of a bond. Our natural defenses made it impossible for one to ever form.

"You might be right," Greyson said, knocking me from my thoughts.

"About your mate?"

"No." Greyson gave me a withering look. "That someone is biting humans and changing them into werewolves to undermine my power."

"Oh. Yeah, you betcha," I drawled.

"*However.*" Greyson thumped our joint hands on the armrest. "I don't think that's the only possibility. The choices of who they're biting is too deliberate."

Worried, I glanced at Jack and Easton, who were still exploring the edge of the woods with their new senses. "What do you mean?"

"Jack was deliberately picked," Greyson said. "There are other members of the human pack who would have been much easier to corner than him. And it might seem like Easton was a choice of opportunity, except he's a police officer."

I chewed my lip. "Mayor Pearl is gonna be furious."

"She is," Greyson said. "She has been blowing up my voicemail, even after I lost a phone last night."

If it were any less serious of a situation, I would have laughed.

To the werewolf world, Greyson might appear perfect and wonderful with his unfairly good looks, his extensive powers, and his Pack. But all of his powers meant his senses were stronger than the average wolf's, so things like cellphone ringtones were extra piercing and occasionally caught him off guard so he destroyed them before thinking.

He typically went through a phone every two weeks or so, and was the reason why the Pack had purchased the city's sole cellphone store in an effort to get cheaper phones.

"Her anger is valid." I wanted to smile, but when I tried I could feel my mouth was screwed up as I tried not to cry for Jack and Easton. "I so badly want to hurt whoever is doing this," I said, my voice wet even if I'd been able to hold back actual tears. "How could someone do this to them?"

Greyson stood and pulled me to my unsteady feet with a tug of his hand.

I was starting to feel the effects of chugging three mimosas on an empty stomach, and I staggered, until Greyson pulled me straight into his chest.

He wrapped his arms around me in a hug that was the perfect combination of tightness and tenderness.

Oh fine. I'll admit. I'll be a little bit jealous of whatever wolf ends up with him. He's thoughtful—when he wants to be.

I thumped my head against his chest. "What do we do against an enemy we can't smell or track?" I whispered.

Greyson's growl made his entire chest vibrate, and I could feel his powers churn under his skin, barely leashed. "We destroy them."

Once Greyson headed out, I zombie walked my way to the couch in his spare room and slept there the whole morning as

Jack and Easton snoozed on the floor as wolves.

After I woke up we headed out to check on Prince and Princess—the overweight, sour-tempered cats Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had loved way more than the brats deserved.

The Bedevilments—that’s what I called the cats—were upset enough with me that Prince had puked in my favorite slippers, but I had to speed run through feeding them and cleaning their litter box so we could get back in time for the Pack meeting.

Pack meetings were held in the lodge whenever possible, or outside when too many wolves were present.

I’d attended a couple of them—not because I was special to the wolves, but because I was a supernatural, so their discussion affected me as well.

Typically I was the only non-wolf present—which could get pretty intimidating, so I was downright chuffed when Radcliff and Scarlett plopped down in the seats next to me.

“Hunter Sabre,” Radcliff said.

“If you guys don’t kick the hunter title, I’m going to start calling you two Hunter Fletching,” I complained.

“You said on informal occasions we should call you Pip. This is a formal occasion where we need to mark your seniority,” Scarlett said.

“Yeah, forget what I said. There is no seniority at all here in Timber Ridge,” I said. “The only hunter-ish things I do are practice with the Pack—something I would *gladly* welcome you two into if Greyson cleared it, because then it would give the wolves new toys to play with and maybe they’d stop chewing on me,” I complained.

Jack, sitting on my other side, carefully playing with his cellphone as he adjusted to his new strength—he’d already broken one—grunted. “I don’t want to train.”

Radcliff leaned past me so he could see Jack. “Why not?”

“I don’t want to be better at being a wolf than I have to,” Jack grimly said.

Scarlett planted an elbow on her brother's back and propped herself up so she could peer over him. "I can understand the impulse," she said. "But the better wolf you are, the more normal you'll feel. When you can control your strength you won't have to worry so much about accidentally destroying your phone, and if you know how to control your wolf instincts you won't have to fight them if you're faced with a hostile human or opponent."

Jack shrugged and looked down at his phone again.

Easton—still stuck in his wolf form—was lying down in front of us. His ears swiveled as he listened to the hunters, and he flipped sides so he could peer up at Scarlett and Radcliff.

"Officer Easton." Radcliff bowed his head to him.

Easton straightened up, and I could see him brighten a little—the acknowledgment had been a reminder that he was still himself, was still an officer.

"Pomeranian Puppy Power-up!" Aeric plopped down in the seat behind me, then leaned forward and gave me a back hug, jostling me in my seat.

"Hey, Aeric. How's Shania?" I gurgled in his stranglehold grasp.

"Doing better," Aeric said. "She's still been using her inhaler more than I like, though." He released me and made room for Wyatt.

"Power-up!" Wyatt put me in the same half-strangled back hug.

Easton stood up and watched us, his black nose twitching.

"It's okay, Aeric and Wyatt are your packmates," I said. "Your very exuberant, touchy-feely packmates."

"All wolves are," Jack informed me. "But I think I'm starting to get why. You can sense a lot about a person by touching them."

"Right on, Young Jack!" Wyatt backslapped Jack before he plopped down in the seat next to Aeric.

Aeric propped his feet up on the lower bar of my chair. “You all ready for this?”

“Yes. I believe everyone in this group has a better idea of what we’re discussing than most others in the Pack.” Scarlett motioned to our little gathering.

“Can’t be helped,” Wyatt said. “Alpha Greyson has called in a bunch of our fringe members so everyone can hear exactly what happened.”

I shifted in my chair and muted my hunter senses a little more. Standing in a room full of wolves, it could get pretty overwhelming. “I see Jack...but I don’t see any of the other humans connected to the Pack.”

“Greyson is letting wolf parents tell their human kids,” Aeric said. “Same to any wolves married to humans—though he asked Original Jack to be here to represent humans.”

“He’s being pretty closed about what humans find out, though.” Wyatt pushed his thin framed glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. “River was upset he banned her from explaining all of it to her boyfriend—I think it’s because he’s afraid word will get out about you being a Wolf’s Kiss.”

Greyson stood up, and Wyatt—and everyone else in the room—instantly went silent.

Greyson swept his gold eyes across the wolves. They all sat up straighter, and the room somehow felt *sharper*.

When he nodded, Hector stood up and joined him at the front of the room.

“There have been two attacks,” Hector started.

He went into detail about the attack on Jack, but was more bare bones with the information on Easton. We didn’t have the full picture of Easton’s attack since he still couldn’t speak.

Wolves could communicate well between each other in wolf form. But it was more general feelings, and a kind of synchronized understanding but not actual words and sentences, like “we should run to Howl-In Café and beg

someone to come give us pumpkin lattes to drink this afternoon at 2 p.m.”

Jack shut down during the talk. He immersed himself in his cellphone and didn't look up when they talked about him.

I draped an arm over his shoulders in support—the event alone was traumatic; I was surprised he could sit through the meeting and hear about it again.

Greyson had given both him and Easton the chance to sit it out, but they'd insisted on attending.

“We're going to be making changes in hopes of capturing whoever is doing this,” Hector said.

He glanced around the room, able to hold the wolves quite well, despite being a beta and not the Alpha—which wasn't too surprising, as he was quite powerful on his own.

That was why it was a little shocking when Rio stood up.

Rio was Hector's little brother and shared his dark hair and russet complexion, though Rio was quite a bit younger, and was the Pack's hot-head.

Hector arched an eyebrow at his little brother. “Yes, Rio?”

“Why do we have to change?” Rio demanded. “If Hunter Phillipa learned to control her powers, she could fix this.”

“*What?*” I gaped at Rio, so shocked at his lack of thinking I didn't even know what to say. “I'm a hunter, not a wolf. I have no control over the creep doing this!”

Rio sneered at me. “If you used your Wolf's Kiss magic, you could control him!”

“I can't *control* werewolves,” I said.

“Sure you can. That's why Greyson is here, isn't it? To make sure you don't mind control all of us to do whatever you want?”

I flinched, guilt filling my throat like sludge.

“Rio.”

All Greyson said was his name, but Rio sat down so hard in his seat, it must have hurt his spine.

“Anyone who attempts to blame someone within the Pack for what’s happening has a failure of thinking. One I will *gladly* help adjust.” Greyson prowled out past Hector, his eyes glowing. “We have no one to blame for this issue except the predator preying upon humans. Pip is a Wolf’s Kiss. That makes her a powerful ally, but she is not to be held responsible for Pack issues. If you have a problem with her, *attack me.*”

Rio sank lower in his seat, and all the wolves in the room looked away from Greyson as too much of his Alpha abilities leaked through.

I was pretty sure I was the only one watching him—gaping at him, really.

The way he phrased that, he essentially said anyone with problems with me has a personal problem with him, then, too.

I was pretty sure he meant it more out of a place of irritation. Although he had a lot of patience for his Pack, having been subjected to his Alpha powers as often as I was, I knew he didn’t have much tolerance for stupidity.

And what Rio had said was very, very stupid.

There are a million reasons for me to feel guilty. But some psychopath preying upon Timber Ridge is not one of them.

Aeric and Wyatt, also looking at the floor, leaned forward so they could pat me on the shoulders. It was meant to be comforting, but they always overestimated how strong hunters were, so it felt like I was getting my back pounded on by an angry chiropractor.

With Rio chastised, Greyson sauntered back to his original spot beyond Hector.

Hector cleared his throat. “Well. Yes. Ahem.” He glanced at the tablet he held supported in one arm. “To combat and find whoever is committing these terrible deeds, Alpha Greyson has elected to call in all fringe members of the Pack—with a few exceptions.”

Fringe members of the Pack lived farther away from the main complex of the path. They all still lived on Pack territory—the Northern Lakes Pack had a lot of land in the area, which included land they owned and land that just fell within their jurisdiction.

With the territory as a boundary, the fringe members were within an hour or two drive, with the exception of a few wolves who were more Alpha-like and had been shipped out—like Chase.

Almost all of the fringe members lived farther north, where they had less to do with humans and could live more of a rustic lifestyle while watching the northern borders.

They typically passed through the lodge area and stayed with the Pack a few months out of the year—answering the inescapable call of Greyson’s Alpha powers—so it wouldn’t be at all upsetting or unexpected for them to be called in closer temporarily.

“The fringe members will help us fill in gaps, so we can have two or more wolves in Timber Ridge at all times,” Hector continued. “Additionally, it will be required that all human members of the Pack travel in groups, or with at least one werewolf escort. The exception is the hunters.”

Radcliff folded his arms across his chest and nodded while Scarlett casually adjusted her cuff, revealing a hidden dagger scabbard on the underside of her arm.

Hunters couldn’t be turned into werewolves—the bite wouldn’t take for us. We wouldn’t even be affected—it came with our genetics and ability to resist an Alpha’s call.

But also, as hunters we all carried weapons, and had our early warning system of our hunter senses.

We might not be able to beat the rogue wolf if it tried one of us, but we’d sure as heck be able to maim it and see who it was.

“Given that the hunters all work downtown already, they will serve as additional aid should the need arise,” Hector said. “Any wolf placed on Timber Ridge duty will be given a copy

of their schedule. For now we have selected specific wolves to watch the town. Once the fringe members arrive, we'll work out a more extensive rotational duty. Any questions?"

Klancy—Jack's dad—stood. "Are we doing anything else to investigate the identity of the rogue wolf?"

Hector glanced back at Greyson.

All Greyson did was blink, but I swear I could feel the brush of his Alpha powers—not invasive or stifling like they had been before, when Rio angered him, but something that was a cross between raw strength and reassurance.

"Pre-Dominant Harka has been notified," Greyson said. "But, given the results of the last time an outside group held an investigation in our territory, she has given her permission for us to carry out the investigation on our own and offered whatever resources we might need. Scarlett and Radcliff Fletching have agreed to help us track."

"But not Pip?" Rio asked.

Wow, he's just not going to give up. Seriously. We don't usually get along, but he tends to be snarky, not stupidly hateful. What is up with him?

Klancy spun around and snarled at him, but it was Greyson who spoke.

"Rio, if you continue to act as stupid as you are today, I may have to personally attempt to lodge a few intelligent thoughts lodged back into your brain." He spoke with a kind of derision he hadn't frequently revealed to the Pack, and now I *really* felt his Alpha powers uncurl—and most of it was focused on a very regretful Rio.

Greyson gestured to me. "*Obviously* not Pip. Besides myself, she's the only one the newly turned wolves feel most comfortable around. Given what they've gone through, I'd like to provide for them in any way we can. Which—based on the way Jack's jaw is about to crack—will include sending your ungrateful tail north to get your thoughtless—and useless—chatter far away from them."

Forrest—a newer wolf—leaped to his feet. “Yeah, go Alpha Greyson!” He clapped, and a few other wolves—Jack included—added to the applause. They calmed down only when Ember—who had been standing at the wall of the room—somehow appeared behind Forrest, set her hands on his shoulders, and firmly pushed him back into his seat.

Hector casually slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “Does anyone else have any concerns?”

Aspen slowly stood. Though her hands shook a little, she kept her gaze level. “I think it’s shameful that we haven’t found even a tail hair of the monster that did this,” she said. “And I’m not satisfied with just being on the offense.”

“Understandable,” Hector said.

Aspen licked her lips. “Which is why, if the Pack doesn’t get this figured out in the next month, I’m submitting a request to move to Aunt Harka’s Pack.”

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Chapter 9

Pip

Rio twitched in his chair and looked up at his girlfriend with open surprise and hurt.

Whispers broke out among the Pack as they peered at the beautiful werewolf.

Ahh that's right. Aspen is Pre-Dominant Harka's niece. I think Rafe is even her brother.

I couldn't remember for sure—I didn't really pay attention to family lines, to the horror of most hunters and wolves.

“Naturally, any such request would be respected.” Hector glanced at Greyson.

“If we have not found new information on the rogue wolf—or stopped them from biting additional humans—it will be my failing as Alpha and I will leave the Pack,” Greyson drawled.

“What?” I leaned forward in my chair, certain I must have misheard him.

Several wolves leaped to their feet, and the room crackled with heightened emotions and yells.

Aspen just nodded and sat down, anxiously rubbing the tops of her thighs as chaos erupted around her.

I tried to peer around and get a gauge for how everyone felt about Greyson's threat, but my eyes kept going back to him against my will.

His expression was stoic and his stance casual, but there was no way he'd made the offer on an impulse.

I noticed it when we were out on the deck. He's more than angry about this—he's furious. I think with himself most. But he can't leave Northern Lakes! No one else could manage these insufferable wolves!

A little voice in the back of my head pointed out that no one would probably be able to manage me, either, and I'd miss Greyson for a lot more than his sheer power.

Nope. No—I just respect him. He's too infuriating for anything beyond that. Though as soon as Easton turns human and is comfortable, you can bet I'm going to be banging down his door so we can have a "talk" about this!

The meeting went on a little longer, so it was sunset by the time I was able to leave for my cabin.

I half thought Easton and Jack were going to demand to come with me, but the pair had opted to stay in the lodge for the night with Aeric and Wyatt.

I yawned, then snorted and shook my head when a falling leaf batted me in the face.

Nights were getting longer as the sun started setting a lot earlier in the day. The leaves were starting to change colors, and the forest was a vibrant mix of red, yellow, and orange that was fun to walk through on the way home.

I'd just reached my cottage when I felt a werewolf pop up in my hunter senses.

Suspicious, I turned around, reaching for the sidearm I carried when I saw Aspen step onto the pathway behind me.

“Pip? Could I talk to you for a moment?” Aspen’s silky black hair swayed as she trotted after me, and her smile was white and friendly.

“Sure.” I glanced at my door, wondering if I should invite her inside.

An angry yowl pierced through the doorframe.

Nope. Prince and Princess sound angry, which means they might claw her ankles, and I don’t need to bait any werewolves tonight.

“I just wanted to apologize for the way Rio is behaving,” Aspen said. “He doesn’t *really* blame you.”

“Really? Could have fooled me.”

Aspen cringed. “He’s just...upset. And suspicious. Werewolves don’t adapt wonderfully to change, and I think the announcement that you’re a Wolf’s Kiss really threw him.”

Rio hadn’t liked me much before, but I wasn’t going to point that out to his girlfriend—it was surprising she was taking the initiative to apologize for him, given how loyal werewolves tended to be.

“Yeah, I guess.” There wasn’t anything else pleasant I could say, so I just smiled.

“And...I wanted to ask...are you angry with me?” Aspen asked.

I tried to think for a few moments, but my tired brain was mostly just confused. “Why would I be angry with you?”

“Because I said I’d leave the Pack.” Aspen fidgeted.

Huh? Does she actually care what I think? Is that what this is all about?

“Between Rio’s conduct, and I guess a failure of my strength...I don’t want to upset you.” Aspen smiled sadly at me.

Ughhh, this is about being a Wolf’s Kiss, isn’t it? Stupid, annoying, insincere magic, making wolves who previously were a distant sort of polite now act overly worried!

“No, I get it,” I said tiredly.

“You do?” Aspen asked.

“Yeah.”

“Oh good!” Aspen relaxed, setting her hands on her hips as her smile brightened. “It’s just between whoever is doing this, and knowing that the person who supplied the wolfsbane—which could make us feral—was never caught, and I’m too scared. I just want to feel safe. I mean, it’s bad on me that I don’t have the strength to stay, but I am also worried about what this situation will do to poor Greyson. He’s already so overworked trying to keep our enormous Pack going, and his missing mate is much harder on him than most people realize.”

I eyed my door as Prince let out another warbling yodel and wondered how I could get Aspen to leave because I just wanted to fall into bed. “Is it?” I asked with zero interest.

“Yeah.” Aspen’s voice got quiet. “My parents were mates.”

I shifted my gaze back to her.

She said were. Did her parents die?

I didn’t remember what circumstances she’d joined the Pack in, besides the fact that Harka had personally requested it. It was right before Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had died, so those months were a heart-breaking blur.

“Santos and Dulce were mates, weren’t they?” Aspen asked.

“No,” I said. “Though they loved each other dearly. I always knew when one of them died, the other would be shortly after.”

Leaving me behind. Again.

I mercilessly murdered the selfish thought in my mind.

Santos and Dulce had provided me—a fledgling hunter—with all the love and warmth I would have missed out on if I’d been raised by a hunter family that took me in out of duty.

They loved me. That was enough—even if it hurt to think I hadn't mattered quite enough to keep them living.

“Oh.” Aspen blinked—I'd genuinely surprised her. “I'm sorry, when they died—I just assumed—”

I waved her off. “It's not surprising. They practically were.”

Two snarls pierced the frame of the door, and I glanced worriedly in through one of the front windows.

“Are they planning to murder me now?” I muttered.

“I'll go.” Aspen laughed. “It sounds like your cats want you. I just wanted to make sure you knew Rio doesn't *really* mean it, and...that you didn't think badly of me.”

“Thanks for dropping in,” I said. It was better to just be generally polite than to say what I was really thinking: *Your boyfriend is a jerk and I can't believe he and Hector are related!*

I forced a smile to my cheeks and waved as she jogged across my driveway and joined the little path it merged onto.

I opened the front door of my darkened cottage, and as I fumbled for the lights, claws tore through my jeans and sank into my ankles.

“Ow! Princess, Prince!” I finally found the light switch and flicked it, then grabbed the spray bottle I kept on a cabinet right by the entrance for this reason.

I sprayed Princess, who puffed up so much her tail was cylindrical before she ran off, kicking up a rug as she sped into the kitchen.

Prince, however, wasn't swayed, and instead yanked his claws out of my jeans and tried to latch on to my inner thigh instead, like the angry mesh of fuzz, fat, and fury that he was.

I unscrewed the sprayer to the bottle of water, and dumped it over him—getting my leg soaked in the process.

Prince hissed, but he let me go so he could sit down and drip all over the wood floor.

“Both of you out. I just need five minutes to get your food ready. You can enjoy the sunset.” I swung the door open, and Princess bolted, nearly smacking into me as she ran past.

Prince just glared up at me, so I helped him out by putting my foot behind him and scooping him out the door, closing it before he could streak back inside.

I grumbled under my breath as I straightened the rug Princess had upset, wiped up the water I’d dumped on Prince, then padded through the cottage to turn on a few more lights.

The main floor contained a bedroom—which I didn’t use because it was Mama Dulce and Papa Santos’s—and the only bathroom that was decorated in old-lady pink, which I was sure had been the height of decor when Mama and Papa had the cottage constructed years ago.

The compact kitchen was clean, cheerful, and worn with use, and it opened into the tiny spot where my three-seater dining table was, which edged into the little space that served as a sitting room with a sofa so soft you could get lost in its cushions, and my modest sized TV.

My small loft bedroom was the only thing upstairs, so I didn’t bother checking on it before I got started on the cats’ dinners and found their porcelain food dishes.

It had to be porcelain because Prince was allergic to plastic. I hadn’t known that was a thing until I blew an entire work check on vet bills in my panic when he’d gotten puss filled bumps on his chin, only to find out it was feline acne caused by an allergic reaction to his plastic food dish.

Cats. I’m telling you.

I’d just finished measuring out their food when I felt a werewolf flash across my hunter senses.

There’s no way anyone from the Northern Lakes Pack would hurt Prince or Princess. Except...there’s whatever rogue werewolf is turning people...

I bolted for the front door, flinging it open. “Prin—ouch! You little terrors!”

Prince and Princess again attacked my ankles, ripping little pinpricks through my jeans. Prince tried to outright bite me through the thick fabric.

“Stop it, you Bedevilments!”

When I bent over to yank them off my legs, they retracted their claws and skittered inside, each bringing in a handful of tiny leaves on their belly fur.

“Menaces!” I shouted after them. “No bedtime treats for you tonight!”

I shook my leg out and started to close the door, when I saw the wolf standing at the edge of my driveway.

Solid white, with dramatic black skin on his nose and around his yellow eyes that made them even more stark than a regular wolf, Greyson was downright gorgeous in the blue light of twilight.

Greyson was the only solid white wolf in the Pack, but I’d recognize him anyway. He had his Alpha powers out, and they settled in my yard like a thick mist.

“Hey, Greyson. Is everything okay?” I asked.

He tilted his head as he watched me.

“Did you need something? Did Young Jack and Easton change their minds?”

He tilted his head back the other way.

I held on to the doorframe and swung from it like a confused monkey.

It doesn't seem like he's here for anything important...

I glanced back at the warm glow of my compact but cheerful kitchen. “Did you want to come inside—okay.”

Greyson sprinted across the yard and almost knocked me over as he sauntered inside.

Prince and Princess were waiting in the kitchen—they were too fat to jump when it suited them, and they wanted to

be served like royalty, so even though their dishes were just on the kitchen counter they meowed expectantly.

When they saw Greyson they twitched their whiskers, turned their butts to him, then started clawing the sides of the counter.

“Okay, okay!” I closed the door then hustled to the kitchen.

I put Prince’s diet food down in front of him, then grabbed Princess and her special allergy food and whisked her off to eat on one of the three chairs of my tiny dining table so they wouldn’t exchange food and make themselves sick.

When I’d finished guarding them as they ate, I finally remembered Greyson was around.

He’d stretched out on the couch—the only cushioned seating in my tiny cottage—and took up the whole thing. He rested his head on one of the cushions, though his eyes watched me as I moved around the cottage, cleaning up after the cats.

When I finished, I awkwardly stood in front of him, not sure what to do now. I’d been planning to turn on the TV, but I was pretty sure that would disturb Greyson. Normally I wouldn’t care about that—I might even delight in it. But ever since the night he’d spent leaning into me while I cried after finding out what I really was...I had no reason to dislike him anymore. Well, no reason besides his cocky, overly smug personality, anyway.

After everything he’s been doing for the Pack, I feel kind of bad kicking him off the couch. Especially because I’m pretty sure he’s just here so he can let loose and give his powers free rein.

As much as I understood Aspen’s fear, I still thought it was a little unfair to project all these expectations on Greyson.

We were obviously dealing with a psychopath—a *smart* psychopath. And Greyson was also trying to assimilate Young Jack and now Easton into the Pack on top of everything else.

Yep. Leadership stinks.

I picked up a craft catalog that still came to the house from the pile of mail and headed to the table for a bit of nostalgia.

I wasn't a crafter, but Mama Dulce had been into crochet, and my dad had been really good at sewing, and had made me a Hunter Bear—with a hood and little daggers made of felt for accessories—that sat on my dresser upstairs, so I occasionally liked to thumb through the magazines for memories' sake.

Greyson picked his massive head off the couch as I plopped down at my dining table.

When I flipped the catalog open, marveling at the antiquated design header on the pages that hadn't changed since Mama Dulce started getting the catalog, Greyson made a deep, raspy noise in the back of his throat.

It wasn't a growl, and it was too bossy to be a whine. But it was loud enough to make me flick my eyes to him. "What?"

Greyson stretched out one of his massive paws in front of him and smacked the cushion he'd had his head on.

"Stop that." I licked my finger and turned a page in the catalog, admiring the colorful varieties of yarn printed on the pages.

Greyson made the noise again, and when I glanced at him, he huffed.

I tossed the catalog aside and stood up, veering around Prince—who was begrudgingly cleaning himself—and stopping in front of the couch. "What is it—use your words." I laughed at my own joke while Greyson stared at me with his golden eyes that said he wasn't impressed.

When I finished I put my hands on my hips. "No, seriously. What do you want?"

Greyson scooted back a little, freeing a *tiny* sliver of couch—presumably for me to sit on.

I grabbed the remote off a crocheted doily Mama Dulce had made, and squeezed myself into the spot. "You just want to watch TV, don't you? Well I've got news for you—my house, my rules. I get to decide what we're watching."

Greyson set his enormous head on my lap—which took up the whole thing—before I found a channel I was satisfied with.

I eventually settled on the food network—I wanted something light and fluffy that I could hopefully fall asleep to after the rough past few days.

I set the remote on the end table, then rested my hands on Greyson’s neck. I dug my fingers past his coarse outer coat to his soft undercoat that warmed my cold hands.

As the show—some kind of cake decorating competition—went on, I sank into the sofa, slightly angling myself so I could see the TV but keep my neck supported by the back of the couch so I wouldn’t have a neckache the following day.

I didn’t really notice when Greyson draped more of himself onto my lap.

I just adjusted so I was petting his shoulders, and didn’t even stop to wonder why I didn’t need a blanket even though the cottage was rapidly cooling.

It wasn’t until the competition ended that I realized he’d hefted his front end onto my lap and had his head tucked against my side so he was essentially curled around me.

“Hey.” I gently stroked the back of one of his stark white ears. “Just because you’re soft and warm doesn’t mean you can take over.”

Greyson yawned and ignored me.

I tried to shift, but he was *heavy*—a blanket of solid muscle.

“You know, if you just wanted to hang out, you could have come over as a human. It would have made talking to you easier.”

Greyson abruptly lifted his head to smell my face, surprising me at the sudden movement.

“Woah—see? This is what I meant. You could still take over my couch, but then you can just *tell* me what you’re doing so I wouldn’t have to play ‘20 questions’ and...what?”

Greyson scrambled off the couch—taking just enough care to make sure he didn't step on me in the process—and booked it to Mama Dulce and Papa Santos's old bedroom.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He turned his head to look back at me, then kicked the door shut with his back foot.

“Rude!”

Princess meandered up to the couch and deigned to receive a chin tickle from me. “You'd think he would have been raised by—”

The door flung open and Greyson, wearing his magic-tailored pants, poked his head out. “You were the one who said I could change, Lady Hunter.”

“I, what?” I garbled, confused. “How did you change so fast? You were only in there for like...twenty seconds!”

Greyson grinned as he leaned against the door, hiding his left arm and shoulder from view. “Impressed?”

“Go put a shirt on,” I sourly said. “You make me cold just looking at you.”

“Do you have a clothes stash here?” Greyson glanced back at the bare room.

“Yeah—in the white dresser there's a few shirts and pants.”

Greyson shut the door.

“You're welcome!” I yowled after him, sounding almost as irritated as Prince looked.

When he emerged again, Greyson was still wearing his fitted black pants, but he'd matched them with a black sweatshirt.

“Are your virgin eyes satisfied, Lady Hunter?” Greyson asked.

I rolled my eyes. “You're in a mood tonight, aren't you?”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Greyson purred as he eased himself onto the couch, taking up just as much room as he had as a wolf.

When he moved to stick his head on my lap, I protested. “Hey, hey, hey! I’m not your headrest.”

“You didn’t mind when I was a wolf,” he smirked up at me.

“It’s different,” I said.

“How?” Greyson’s grin turned too delighted for my health. “Wolf or human, I’m still me.”

“That’s not true. You aren’t annoying as a wolf because you can’t smirk at me,” I said.

“*You* were the one who said I should change if I wanted to.” He leaned close enough to me that—to my embarrassment—I actually got goosebumps. “Unless you’ve changed your mind, because I’m that incredible.”

I opened my mouth to tell him *exactly* how incredible he was, when I noticed that the black bags he’d had under his eyes earlier in the morning had only gotten worse.

There were other subtle signs of how tired he was—his hair wasn’t purposely tousled so much as it was the result of spending an entire night in the woods, trying to track the rogue wolf. His usually straight posture was slightly slouched, and while he was verbally sparring with me, I hadn’t missed the way he kept inching closer—seeking physical comfort like a true wolf.

A month ago, I wouldn’t have cared. I would have kicked him out on the principle of the matter.

But now...knowing what he’d done because of me—and that he’d never thrown it in my face...

He was still arrogant. But he did care.

And I’m not sure he feels like he can let anyone see just how tired and worn he is...or he wouldn’t be here in my cottage.

I chewed on my lip as I considered my options, but didn't complain when Greyson took my silence as defeat and stretched out over the entire couch, his head on my legs.

"This is one for the memories—I've finally stunned you into silence. No one will believe me." He fell silent and went stiff when I shifted, but he didn't grab onto me—he wasn't going to make me stay with him.

"Relax," I said. "I'm just trying to get comfortable. Your head is *heavy*."

"You know, there may be a reason why the males of the Pack don't see you as dating material."

"Hey, you bring my dating life into this and the gloves are coming off," I warned him as I shifted so my legs took his weight evenly, then turned off the mute button so I could listen to the voiceover of the next round of the cake competition.

Greyson turned so he was stomach down on the couch but had his head turned toward me, and completely ignored the show. After a few minutes, his eyes shut, and he slung an arm over my legs for good measure.

But he warmed me like a personal space heater as we watched, and even though I'd never admit it out loud, watching TV together was...nice.

My cottage was small, but it was big with memories. And sometimes it felt unbearably empty as I puttered around it.

With Greyson here, though, it somehow felt warmer. And safer.

I lived on Pack lands, and I was trained in combat. No one was going to hurt me. But even though I was a certified hunter, when you sit in bed in the darkest hours of night...you become *very* aware of how alone and isolated you are.

I draped my arm over his back and watched the entire episode.

By the time it finished, my grogginess was so bad, I couldn't see straight anymore.

"That's it for me," I said. "I have to sleep."

“It’s barely dinnertime,” Greyson muttered into my legs.

“Don’t care,” I said. “I can’t stay awake any longer.”

Greyson boosted himself off me. “If you don’t eat and keep sucking down alcoholic drinks, you’re going to make yourself ill.”

Mildly upset when the cold of the room finally hit me without him acting as my blanket, I shivered. “Hey, that was just this morning! And I think it’s justified. I have *no* idea how you’re able to handle all of this.”

Greyson padded over to the kitchen. “Better stamina. Don’t you have *any* food?” He opened my empty fridge and peered inside.

I tipped my head back so I rested it on the back of the top edge of the sofa. “Nope. I bought groceries, but I abandoned them when Easton was changed.” I scowled at the ceiling. “Come to think of it, I don’t know what happened to my scooter. I left it at the park.”

“It’s at the lodge.” Greyson crossed the room in three steps, then leaned over the side of the sofa and just sorta... loomed over me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He tipped me so my face smacked into his muscled chest as he slipped his hand into the side pocket of my blue jeans and pulled out my phone. “Calling delivery,” he said. “What do you want?”

“We don’t get delivery on Pack lands.”

“You do when you send a werewolf to get it,” Greyson said.

“You send a wolf off like he’s some kind of bellhop?”

“I’ll send a wolf who has recently stepped out of line as punishment, yes.”

“Oohhh, sending Rio, are you? I support this decision.”

Greyson must have gotten sick of hanging over me, because he sat back down into the couch. “I’m thrilled to hear

it meets your approval. What do you want?"

"Hmm...how about pasta? That will reheat easily if it's cooled down when he gets here," I said.

"Got it. We'll order curbside from Luna Lupa," he said, naming the only Italian restaurant in Timber Ridge. "You want the carbonara?"

"Yes!" I happily wriggled on the couch and wondered if I could scoot my rapidly freezing feet over by his great warmth. "Wait, how did you know what I'd want?"

"You always order their carbonara." Greyson tapped Rio's number into my phone.

I heard it ring, but once Rio picked it up I couldn't hear anything more—Greyson must have turned the volume down as low as it would go.

"Rio," he said. "It's me. I'm at Pip's. Order and deliver two carbonara entrees and a lasagna from Luna Lupa."

He hung up without saying any more.

Somebody is used to his orders being followed. No wonder he argues with me like it's a hobby.

"Why did you order extra?" I asked.

Greyson stared at me. "They're for me. Did you seriously think I'd just sit here and watch you eat?"

"No. But I thought you might leave soon."

"Nope. You can't ditch me that easily, Lady Hunter." Greyson reclaimed his previous spot on my lap.

I laughed, and let my arms bonelessly drape over him again as I yawned.

Wolves and their need to snuggle. At least in this form he won't get dog hair all over my couch.

"I hope Rio doesn't spit in my food to spite me," I said.

"He won't," Greyson promised. "He might be an idiot, but he's just upset and wants an easy fix to the situation when there isn't one. He knows it. He and Aspen have been part of

the investigation both times. But no one can accuse Rio of being in touch with his feelings.”

“Yeah.” I reflexively grasped the soft fabric of Greyson’s borrowed sweatshirt before I made myself release it. “It’s crazy. I can’t believe there’s been anyone that’s been able to fool the whole Pack like this. Everyone is so strong and has such perfectly honed senses.”

“It is troubling,” Greyson agreed.

I smothered a yawn as my need to sleep overwhelmed me. “You said you think Easton survived the shift because of my powers, right?”

Greyson picked up one of my hands and rubbed my palm. “Yes.”

It took every brain cell on duty in my head to form a cohesive statement between the allure of sleep and Greyson massaging my palm—I hadn’t even known how tense my hands were. “I was thinking about that. That’s weird, isn’t it?” My words came out almost slurred. “The powers of a Wolf’s Kiss only affect her Pack. Harka said so. But even in the loosest of terms, I never would have considered Easton part of my Pack.” I yawned, and my eyes slid shut. “I wonder if that means the wolf biting them is actually from our Pack?”

I was very disappointed when Greyson stopped rubbing my palm. “What?”

“Hm?”

“What did you just say?”

I opened my eyes, and the intensity of Greyson’s golden gaze almost made me forget my fuzzy thought. “Couldn’t Easton surviving be a sign that the wolf is from our Pack? Because my powers would probably work if it was a packmate doing the changing—”

I blinked, and Greyson was upright, half crouched next to me.

Before I could process what was happening, Greyson slipped an arm back behind my shoulders, crushed me against

his chest in a warm hug, then I felt him kiss me on the cheek.

I dazedly thought he'd just give me a quick peck or something—you know, like in the movies when someone has a brilliant idea and everyone is thrilled about it.

I frequently have good ideas, but no one ever reacts like that. I thought maybe this was a first in my life, *until he moved his mouth* and ended up kissing the corner of my lips, too. The moment stretched on for several *long*, confusing moments—making it way more than a friendly peck—and he gently nipped me before he pulled back.

That woke me up fast.

“What was *that*?” I croaked.

Greyson was already to my front door, ignoring me. “Rio will deliver the food in half an hour,” he said. “Eat before you go to sleep.” He opened the door and slipped out, then immediately slipped back in. “A wolf will be on duty outside your house all night.”

I had my hand to my cheek and was still trying to process what had just happened. “Why?” I asked.

“Because if it's a packmate doing this, they're going to hear that you're on to them.” Greyson shut the door and was gone, leaving me more than a little confused.

I wasn't the only one.

Prince was so disturbed by Greyson's abrupt exit that he joined me on the couch, creating a massive dent in the cushion with his layer of fat.

“That was...weird, right?” I asked him. “Wolves are affectionate, and they'll lick you in wolf form, but they don't just kiss one another like that. I mean, he was lightning fast, and it wasn't really on the lips...”

I was too confused to figure out if I needed to talk myself into a fury and smack him for it, or if I needed to talk myself out of making a big deal about it because it was actually a wolf thing I just didn't know about.

“I’ll eat when the food arrives,” I decided. “Maybe I’ll even eat his—that’ll teach him. Then tomorrow I’ll corner him about it.”

Prince meowed as he turned his attention to the new show—which was another baking competition, but this one was British.

“Yep, that’s what I’ll do,” I decided. “I’ll just be straight with him. I think if I got too dramatic he’d just make fun of me.”

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Chapter 10

Greyson

A scent trail typically only lasts from five to fourteen days, depending on weather conditions and the senses of the wolves trying to track it.

It'd been well over two weeks since Jack had been changed, so I didn't have much hope of finding anything when I headed out with Hector that night.

We searched the area for a few hours, but as I'd feared, the scents—even the smell of his blood—were gone.

Around one in the morning Hector and I headed over to the city path and stream where Easton had been mauled.

We had Remy, Forrest, Wyatt, and Aeric establish a border for us, but kept them out as we combed through the area in our wolf forms, trying to uncover specific scents.

The sun lit up the pale autumn sky, revealing the cloudy, gloomy morning. It was about six thirty, but it was bright enough that I didn't need my night vision as I crouched—in my human form—and studied a giant rock perched on the side of the river.

If Easton didn't see who attacked him, the wolf must have been hiding somewhere on the side of the stream. But why, then, can't we get even a whiff of them?

The area had been somewhat compromised, considering Aeric, Wyatt, Rio, and Aspen as well as the Fletching Hunters had scrambled through it during their investigation, and a number of the Pack occasionally ran on the city trails in their human form.

But I wasn't too worried about that. There are subtle differences between a wolf's scent as a human and their wolf form. The human will have other smells attached—fabric softener and soap, sometimes lotions, or a hint of gunpowder or steel if they're carrying a weapon.

We'd already established that Forrest had used the path in his human form, but he'd been on it in the morning—before Easton was even out—and was accounted for as he'd been in practice with Remy the whole day.

But I didn't smell any other wolves besides those who had helped in the investigation.

Which means it's either one of the wolves who joined the search, or the wolf had another way.

It was possible.

They could have stood on a rock like the one I was studying—which got wet enough that the scent would have washed off much faster.

But I suspected there was something worse at play. Particularly because this rock looked like it had dried muck and algae coating it, and it smelled like a river bottom.

I narrowed my eyes and pushed the rock, easily tipping it so it flipped upside down, revealing a clean side.

“Hector.”

My beta was instantly at my side, his whiskers brushing my hand as he sniffed at the rock.

He excitedly circled it, his tail moving with interest—which dropped away.

I inhaled deeply.

Sure enough, I thought I could pick up a faint hint of wolf through the overwhelming stench of river water.

But since the wolf—it had to be the wolf who turned Easton who had done this—had flipped the rock, the scent was indistinguishable from the faintest trace of wolf musk—there was no individual scent to it.

“Wolf,” I said. “But it’s been covered too much that you can’t smell precisely who it is, right?” I asked.

Hector circled the boulder again, probably trying to see if he could smell where the wolf had pushed the rock, but he stopped long enough to nod at me.

Flipping a rock in the river was a textbook example of covering one’s scent trail. Something a common werewolf wouldn’t know, but a Northern Lakes packmate would, given all the scent trails and games they played. Heck—it was a maneuver Pip used when she was attempting to hide her trail during practice.

Which means this really is most likely a Northern Lakes member. Other Packs hunt, but they don’t do the drills we do with Pip. It could be an assassin, but wolf assassins are few and far between as they require being a loner—something that goes against our nature.

No, the most likely scenario was that we were dealing with a packmate.

“It’s a start,” I said. “Though I think it proves Pip’s theory. I don’t know that many other wolves outside our Pack would be quite so aware of the various tricks of the trade used to hide your scent.”

Hector whined his agreement.

I rolled my neck, cracking it and getting some of the stiffness out.

If we’re looking for a packmate...things could get ugly.

This was the worst kind of betrayal there was. What had happened to drive a *Northern Lakes* wolf to do this?

It was pointless to think about when we finally had a lead.

“We might be able to find a few other spots they stood on if we keep flipping rocks.” I stood up and peered up and down the riverbed. “But the water is shallow here, all the way up to where it crosses through a corner of Timber Ridge. I expect the wolf came in using the stream as a road.”

It would go against instinct—wolves didn’t really like water—but, again, any Northern Lakes wolf would be familiar with the idea due to working with Pip.

Hector waded into the water, investigating some of the rocks that were deeper in.

I took a step—intending to follow him—when the gaping hole that was my mate bond shuddered in my chest.

Pip?

I turned around, listening. A moment passed before I heard the faint crunch of gravel and skittering of paws.

“Pip’s coming.” I listened for a moment longer. “She’s got two wolves with her—Jack and Easton, I’d bet.”

Hector picked his way out of the water and joined me on the bank.

Eventually, Pip came around a bend in the trees, following the running trails. “Good morning. I’m here to report that a full night’s rest makes everything beautiful!” She was wearing oversized sunglasses, was eating a donut with one hand, and toting a bag of them with her other.

She held the bag high above her head as Jack and Easton—both in their wolf forms—came shooting down the path behind her. “But since you guys were up all night, I’ve got apple cider donuts to make up for it. Aeric took the last pumpkin donut, sorry.”

Hector trotted up to her, giving her an “Awoo!” of appreciation.

“Hello, Hector, give me a second.” Pip shoved the rest of her donut into her mouth, then dug through the paper bag.

I moved myself so I was downwind of her and could subtly enjoy her scent. It was a unique blend of sweetness—a sugary,

wild rose smell—and danger—silver with a faint trace of gunpowder from her rifle.

Hector eagerly watched the bag, his nose twitching, before he shifted his gaze to Pip's shirt.

He twisted his head to peer back at me, his tail still as he studied me.

He must have picked up on my scent rubbed all over Pip. Great. It was hard enough coming up with an excuse to change near a clothes stash so I could get a shirt over my mate brand without him noticing when I shifted this morning. If I'm not careful, he's going to figure it out.

Even though she was wearing different clothes, I'd spent enough time sprawled out on top of Pip's lap that some of my scent had rubbed off onto her. Particularly her cheek, but hopefully Hector wouldn't smell that, or he'd have a few questions for me that I wasn't ready to answer.

Hector discreetly sniffed the air around Pip—who didn't notice because she was too busy hip checking Jack.

“Don't be a pig, Jack. You and Easton already split a dozen between you. I swear, between you and my cats eating away at my paycheck, I'm going to be broke by the end of the year,” she said.

Hector must have gotten a pretty good sample of my scent. He actually turned around and stared me down.

It wasn't an angry stare, more like a “what-are-you-doing” stare.

Bet this means I'll be getting a lecture on the sanctity of mates—again—later today.

Little did Hector know, she *was* my mate. But that taboo was going to be dealt with on a different day. Preferably after I'd already swindled Pip into falling in love with me.

Pip, oblivious to the plans I had for us, held out a donut to Hector, who politely took it and carried it off while Jack watched him with pleading eyes. “Enjoy.” She wiped her

hands off on her jeans, then eyed me up. “Greyson, do you want one?”

Judging by the stranglehold she has on the bag, she remembers last night much better than I thought she would.

A kiss on the cheek she probably would have let slide—that’s the excuse I used to reason the impulse, anyway.

But that close to her, surrounded by her delightful scent and after letting my powers out for the better part of an hour, I’d been drunk on the high of the experience and hadn’t been able to hold back from pushing it farther.

Pip pulled out an apple cider donut that was still warm and covered in cinnamon sugar, her fingers murderously dug into it.

Yeah, apparently she didn’t appreciate that.

“I’m good,” I said.

“*Are you?*” Pip’s smile looked hard enough to punch through rock as she offered the donut to Hector, who had returned to ask for seconds.

This is not a conversation I want to have in front of Hector. Pip might never figure out she’s my mate, but he will. I need to distract her.

“We might have found proof that you’re right, and whoever changed both Jack and Easton is a Pack member,” I said.

I explained what we found about the rock, and our general suspicions.

Pip’s anger melted away during my explanation.

“What makes you think it’s just one wolf, and not two?” she asked when I was finished.

I nodded at Jack and Easton, who were sitting side by side. “The way they’re getting along,” I said. “Werewolves aren’t quite as connected to the one who changes them the way vampires are to the vampires who turn them, but as a wolf adjusts to their new life, there is a connection. Jack has said

before that they ‘vibe.’ I’d take that as proof that it’s the same wolf.”

“I still don’t get it. Why would *anyone* in the Northern Lakes Pack rebel like this?” Pip asked. “Forget the Pack’s power, you guys are among the most technologically advanced, and there are some serious perks, like the option to be a fringe member. This is as good as it gets for a wolf, unless they want to lounge around and...I don’t know, eat grapes on a cushion or something.”

“There’s no point in trying to understand their motive. If they’re Pack, it means they’re even more unhinged than we thought.”

I glanced at Jack and hoped Pip would get the subtle undertone.

She scowled at me, but a moment passed before her expression flashed to horror.

Yep. That means whoever chose Jack as their target knew he didn’t want to be a werewolf.

Pip wordlessly got two more donuts out and offered one each to Jack and Easton.

Easton ate his, then trotted along the riverbank, his nose to the ground.

“When you changed, Easton, did you catch the scent of whoever bit you?” I asked.

Easton growled, his hackles raising on his shoulders as his nose wrinkled with his anger.

I felt it when the last link in his change clicked into place, binding him to the Pack.

He solidified his change—that means he’s going to turn human.

“He’s about to shift,” I called.

Magic peeled away from Easton, rearranging bones, muscle, tissue, skin, and fur.

Easton bore it—he never whimpered, even as his hands and fingers grew, and the bones of his back legs cracked as they reorganized.

The change took maybe two minutes—shockingly fast for a first-time transformation—and left behind a man who appeared to be approximately my age with a narrow swimmers’ build, and a disorderly mop of blond hair on his head.

We have another wolf with Alpha tendencies on our hands—that’s the power of a Wolf’s Kiss.

Easton—having been provided with the same thin, golden bracelet as Jack—stared at the loose shorts that formed around him. “What are *these*?” he asked.

“Fine deterrents,” Pip grinned. “Hello, Easton. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Actually,” Easton said, his voice rusty from disuse. “Everyone calls me East.”

Jack emitted happy cries as he loped up to his new packmate, wildly wagging his tail as he circled around East’s legs.

Hector joined him, though he stopped to howl a few long notes, welcoming East.

Pip laughed as she gave East a loose hug, patting him on the back as if she was his granny.

I didn’t miss the way Hector peered at me, watching to see if I’d react.

The pain of my bond twinged for a moment, but I’d have to be mind-numbingly stupid to think the action was anything more than platonic. I recognized the bright eyes and eager grin East gave her.

“East, welcome,” I said.

East turned the exact same look on me, especially as I let a little more of my Alpha powers out to help him think more clearly.

He looks at her like she's an Alpha.

“Thank you—I’d love to say there’s more to tell you, but I was sitting on the Selfie Rock, and something jumped me from behind.” East pointed to the rock that we’d found his scent on. “It half drowned me in the river while biting me, and it was long gone by the time I recovered enough to drag myself off, before the pain of the change hit. I did see a bit of the wolf, though, when it first charged me. I know it had white, gray, and brown fur.”

I reached for my cellphone, hoping. “If we showed you pictures, would you be able to recognize it?”

East shook his head. “Not a chance. It happened so fast, I only saw a blur of fur. I can’t even tell you what color tail it had.”

There goes any additional lead.

But I suppose, if this is a packmate, they've had years to practice stalking Pip—and she's a supernatural and a potentially deadly target if she's got her gun.

“We’re sorry, about all of it.” Pip chewed on her lip and glanced at the river as she twisted the nearly empty donut bag in her hands. “You becoming a werewolf and...everything.”

“I was pretty upset at first,” Easton said. “But as I thought about it...I just want to help Timber Ridge. And as a police officer, I have a unique opportunity. I mean, come on. We don’t have a K9 unit—it’s too expensive for our town. Now, we won’t need to. I can be my own K9 partner.”

Jack raised his nose to the sky and emitted several howls of laughter, then scrambled off to the rocky shore. He turned in a circle twice before he finally got the hang of himself and activated a shift.

“I’m glad you can laugh about it—already,” Pip said as Jack continued to shift.

East shrugged. “I planned to stay in Timber Ridge. I grew up here; it’s in my blood. Once I learn how to be a werewolf, this won’t affect my job—as I already established, it’ll help.

Old man Henry is getting too old to be running around town like Pearl has him doing.”

“Ugh, wow, does that still hurt,” Jack groaned as he stood up and wiped his hands off on his shorts. “But, more importantly, does this mean you can keep Mayor Pearl from fining us when we set off firecrackers and stuff for the Fourth of July?”

“No,” East said. “This summer you set off fifteen of them at once. It was a noise violation.”

“Wow, you were more fun as a wolf,” Jack said.

Pip wandered closer to me as the wolves grinned at each other, bringing the aroma of sugar and apples with her paper bag of donuts. “Chase version 2.0?” she muttered.

“Wolves excel in protective and defensive jobs.” I tried getting closer to her to see if I could gauge how mad she still was, edging near enough that our shoulders brushed. “It’s our loyalty. It also makes us extra loveable. People feel safe with a good wolf.”

Pip snorted and bumped her shoulder into mine. “You are *not* safe.”

“I am to others,” I said. “Though I do have plans for you that I’m pretty sure would make you disagree.”

She snapped her head up so fast I actually heard the bones of her neck crack, and I could hear her heart stutter in her chest. “*What?*”

I’ll have to be careful. Since I can’t tell her she’s my mate without sparking that dratted feeling of responsibility within her, if I’m not careful in my approach I’ll freak her out.

I was saved from coming up with a reply that wouldn’t be too shock-inducing by East.

“Before I forget, Alpha Greyson, I can tell you the wolf jumped me from that direction.” East pointed upstream, where we’d found the rock the wolf had likely stood on.

A wolf that hides itself, can cover its tracks, and knows how the Pack will follow a scent trail. Yes, we are absolutely

dealing with a packmate.

The realization was like smelling rotting meat—it hit you in the gut and made your insides churn.

“Thank you for sharing your observations, East,” I said.

East bowed his head. “Of course.”

Pip pulled out her cellphone from her pants pocket and waggled it. “I’ll turn on the app and go find the nearest clothes stash for you two—I don’t want you catching a chill.”

“It’s physically impossible for wolves to catch a chill,” I murmured to her. “Also, why are you concerned about their health but never mine?”

“Because they haven’t half kissed me and then run from my cottage?” Pip said through gritted teeth.

Oh yeah, she was still mad.

Also, Hector must have heard that. His ears were perked so stiffly I could have balanced something on their tips.

“Do you want to repeat the experience?” I asked.

“I want to *talk* about it.” Pip meaningfully tapped me over the heart with a finger, likely attempting to remind me of my supposedly incomplete bond.

She had no way of knowing the bond rippled under her touch, the pain easing from the attention.

“But we’ll do that later.” She tapped away on her phone as I stared at her, fighting my desire to at least hug her, if not kiss her, right now. “Looks like the nearest stash is at the border by the Park. Be right back!” she said.

“I’m coming with!” Jack zipped past her, running down the gravel path ahead of her. “Running is actually fun, now, you know? I never thought that was possible!”

Pip followed after him, swinging her donut bag. “That’s because it’s not. You’re just a wolf now.”

Based on the way East eyed them, I could tell a part of him wanted to go with them, but he turned his body to me and

squared his shoulders. “What can I do to help, Alpha Greyson?”

Interesting. So Pip rates as an Alpha, but I do as well.

Normally that wasn't possible—there was one leader in a Pack, or things got murky. The exception to the rule was if two Alphas were mates. Previously I'd thought I was able to lead the Pack because my Alpha powers were strong enough.

But what if it was also that Pip and I were mates?

I felt stupid and sentimental just thinking it, but East's behavior was pretty astute considering he'd been a werewolf for two days and had no prior knowledge of how a Pack worked.

Even if the bond is incomplete—and stays incomplete—I bet it will still affect the Pack. But I have to tell Pip before I tell them, and I'm not telling her until I'm certain she won't take it badly.

With that cheerful thought propelling me, I slapped East on the back—liking him just for his most likely unknowing encouragement, then approached the riverbed. “Walk us through what you remember.”

“Yessir.”

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Chapter 11

Pip

The night East turned human, I had just enough time to carve out an hour of practice with my gun—I hadn't wanted to risk it before when Jack and East were hanging with me. But since East was starting to receive training about his new life—yes, even though he'd only been in his human form for a few hours, it was critical he start working on adjusting his strength levels *immediately*—Jack stayed with him for moral support.

The sun was setting, but since it was the start of fall and underbrush was dying out, it was still bright in the forest, all lit up in crimson colors from the sun.

I peered through the scope on my rifle, then squeezed the trigger.

My shot hit the edge of my target's bullseye.

I flipped the safety on, then dropped down a branch in the tree I was perched in, lined up another shot, flicked off the safety, and took my shot. I repeated the process, using all four bullets in my gun's internal magazine before I dropped to the ground.

My rifle was a feat of fae-engineering and used special practice ammo for my study sessions, and silver bullets for live combat. I'd been using my nonlethal practice ammo, but I

still double checked that my rifle was out of ammunition—gun safety first, as always—then checked my target.

One shot had gone laughably wide and spattered the outermost ring of the target with the silvery paint my practice rounds were made of. The rest were clustered around the bullseye, with one in the dead center. I'd done acceptably, considering I was aiming for speed and practicing movement at the same time, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to do another round.

I groaned and peered back at the enormous tree I'd been scrambling around in for my practice.

I'm so tired...I don't want to climb that tree again.

I practiced in trees a lot, because trees and open water were the two places a wolf couldn't follow me.

Climbing a tree could be a double-edged weapon if I wasn't careful. Some wolves were strong enough to ram younger trees over and break them. But that was only the strongest wolves in the Northern Lakes Pack, like Greyson and Hector, and it had to be a smaller tree—which I didn't climb anymore after learning my lesson.

Once when I'd gotten Rio really mad, I'd climbed up a young tree in a newly wooded area to escape him, and he'd flattened about twenty trees trying to catch me.

Mayor Pearl tattled to the state Department of Natural Resources, and we got a warning and a huge fine, which Greyson had docked from Rio's pay—and mine.

So now I only climbed large, old trees that could take a beating—which was a better policy for fighting, anyway.

I hefted my gun, then peered back at the target. *Ugh. I still have to clean my gun after this.*

That made the decision for me. I ripped the paper target off the tree I'd nailed it to, then retreated to my tree and grabbed my stuff that I'd left piled at the base.

I sent out a text message letting all wolves in the area know my practice was done, then dragged my sorry carcass

out of the forest.

I needed to head back to my cottage—that was where my cleaning kit was—but when I passed through the meadow that housed the lodge, I saw someone had built a campfire in the massive firepit.

I thought I smelled burned marshmallows, and food sounded pretty good, so I wandered over and plopped down in a plastic lawn chair when I saw it was Jack, East, and Wyatt.

“Aeric on date night with Shania?” I guessed.

“Yep. And Hector is leading a Pack run.” Wyatt crushed the can of soda he’d been drinking with two fingers. “I figured our newest members deserved a low-key night of entertainment since it’s a little too early for East to join the run. Want to tell them stories about all your failed romances instead?”

“Hahaha, very funny.” I carefully scooted my rifle under my chair so it would be protected but out of the way.

“Wyatt told us sugar was a good lure for you when you’ve been practicing.” Jack offered me the bag of marshmallows and one of the metal roasting sticks.

“Lure? What, you guys aren’t sick of my adorable face? Thanks.” I took the bag, then stabbed one of the extra-large marshmallows on the roasting stick.

“I never tire of your puppy pheromones.” Wyatt eyed me over the fire. “In fact, I could go for a Pomeranian Puppy Power—”

“Not until I’ve had at least four marshmallows.” I shoved my roasting stick straight into the fire, sticking my marshmallow in the hottest part of the flame.

“You’re supposed to roast those over coals for an even, golden roast,” East said.

“Don’t care.” I waited until my marshmallow was a blazing inferno, then yanked it from the flames and blew it out. “I just want sugar.”

“Heathen,” Wyatt said.

I pulled the gooey marshmallow off the stick, then stuffed it in my mouth. The taste of burned sugar and warm marshmallow made me hum. “It still tastes delicious—oh, that’s hot!” I blew out of my mouth, trying vainly to cool my tongue off as Jack chuckled.

Once I recovered I stabbed another marshmallow on the fork. “How are you holding up, East?”

“He’s doing great,” Wyatt said, his voice deep and mellow. “He already kicked a soccer ball without flattening it.”

Jack clapped for East, who shook his head.

“Figuring out my strength is tedious, but I can tell I’m getting better at it. The thing I’m having the hardest time adjusting to is all the smells and sounds.” East rubbed his nose. “I feel overwhelmed so much of the time. When we went to my apartment to get some of my stuff so I could temporarily move in with Wyatt, I could smell the banana I’d thrown out in my garbage the day I changed all the way in the hallway outside—where I could also smell that my neighbor had walked smelling of sweat several minutes before we arrived, and I could hear the wings of a fly buzzing in the stairwell.”

“You’re not used to processing all of that information.” The lenses of Wyatt’s glasses reflected the light from the fire. “It’ll get easier. Unfortunately, you can’t really practice it. You just have to learn when you need to retreat to some place quieter, or with fewer strong smells to let your brain rest.”

“Aeric and Remy are lucky,” Jack groaned. “They were born like this, and never had to adjust.”

I blew out my second flaming marshmallow, and this time waited and let it sit on the stick and cool off for a moment. “You’re both doing amazing.”

East stared in disgust at my charcoal black marshmallow, while Wyatt propped his hands behind his head. “How are you holding up?” Wyatt asked.

“Me? I’m fine. I’m not the one who’s had my life turned upside down. I haven’t even been able to help hunt down the psychopath doing this.” I stuffed the cooled marshmallow in

my mouth, just as pleased with the second molten sugary fluff as I had been with the first one.

“Yeah, because you’ve been staying with Jack and me,” East pointed out.

I swallowed, then laughed. “Yeah, I guess I’m happy my dog-like vibes can be calming.”

Jack scrunched up his forehead. “That’s not why we stick with you.”

I paused in the middle of impaling another marshmallow. “It’s not?”

“No.” East frowned at me, as if he was puzzled I would ever think that.

“Pip, when I changed, I was freaked out of my mind.” Jack leaned closer to the fire and rested his elbows on his knees. “I figured out what was happening, but I was alone, and it hurt, and I got *blasted* with all of these new sensations as I suddenly had to run on four paws...” He shook his head. “It was the most terrifying experience of my life. But when the change fully took...you blazed like a star in my mind.”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

Jack rubbed his hands together. “I mean...I could sense you even though you were halfway across Pack territory. And although I was terrified, freaked out, and hurting, I knew if I could just get to you, I’d be okay. And once I reached you, it was.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“No, and nothing was magically fixed but...” Jack groaned. “I don’t know how to describe it. Wyatt? East?”

“I get it,” East said. “I had no idea what was happening or what was going on. I think I almost died from fright when I started changing. And then suddenly there were people around me, and I didn’t know how to handle anything. But then I saw you, and it was like I could finally think again. Everything I knew had been flipped upside down, but seeing you, it settled my world back into place.”

“It’s like you’ve got the comfort of a hundred moms with the killing capacity of a wolf Pack wrapped up in one package,” Jack said. “Just being with you makes everything that’s new not feel so...raw.”

“Moms...huh?” I finally shoved my marshmallow into the fire.

“You’re comforting and assuring,” East said. The last rays of the sun had long since disappeared, but the fire made his blond hair more of a copper hue. “I don’t know...If I had to describe it, I’d say we feel about you the way dogs feel about their owners—but that’s pretty insulting to us.”

“I don’t think so.” Wyatt tossed his crushed soda can into the garbage bag by his feet. “Someone picks up after me and gives me free food on top of play sessions and all-day belly rubs? Sign me up! I would demand to be one pampered pooch.”

I laughed as I yanked my marshmallow out of the fire and blew it out.

“They’re not wrong, though.” Wyatt stared into the flames, wagging his foot at the fire. “I changed before your powers as a Wolf’s Kiss awakened—obviously. But even I can say that you’re...*more*. It’s not like previously you were lesser or anything. It’s just now there’s *more* of you—you shine bright in our senses.”

“Can you sense me, then?” I attempted to casually eat my marshmallow, as if this conversation wasn’t the most important talk I’d had in a while. “Like I can sense werewolves?”

“I can’t tell where you are,” Wyatt said. “Or even what direction you’re in. But I can tell you exist. And when I’m with you the sensation of your existence is stronger.”

“Yeah, I think I get why Wolf’s Kisses were also called tamers and trainers,” Jack said. “It really is like a dog-human relationship.”

“Except for once in her life, Pip is the human,” Wyatt said.

“Watch it,” I warned Wyatt, shaking my roasting stick at him before shoving another marshmallow on it and thrusting it into the fire. “I’m glad that my presence is...soothing?”

“Yes,” East said.

I nodded as I rotated my roasting stick, pulling it out once my entire marshmallow was black, and blew it out. “You got a really raw deal in this. I can’t imagine how hard the change must have been for you.”

“I think Jack had it harder,” East said. “You arrived just about when I was finally getting my wits together, so I wasn’t alone too long. He had to find you.”

“But I knew what was going on,” Jack said. “So I’d say you had the more traumatic experience.”

“Either way, it’s awful.” I prodded my burned marshmallow with a finger, testing it to see if it was too hot to eat. “And we’re going to get the wolf who did this to you,” I vowed.

“Yeah, when Alpha Greyson finds whoever did this, I would *not* want to be in their paws,” Jack laughed.

“Having an Alpha is a very unique experience,” East chimed in. “But there is a certain sense of...not security...but belief? Being with Pip makes you think everything will be okay. Being with Alpha Greyson makes you think that he’ll help you make things right.”

I shoved the marshmallow in my mouth, but felt required to put in my two cents about Greyson, lest he get a big head about this conversation even though he wasn’t here. “He’s got charisma for days, but wow, do you guys make him sound like a saint when he’s closer to a mouthy rogue.”

“And that makes four,” Wyatt announced.

I licked the last of my marshmallow off my fingers. “Four what?”

Wyatt stood up and threw his arms wide. “Four marshmallows. It’s time for a Pomeranian Puppy Power-up!”

“Not for you!” I threw my roasting stick at him, abandoned my rifle, and scurried across the darkened lawn.

I fled to the lodge, though I could hear Wyatt in pursuit. When I rounded a back corner of the building, I smacked into Greyson’s chest, getting a face full of hard muscles.

“Ow,” I muttered.

“A mouthy rogue?” Greyson said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I’m disappointed—I thought I at least had attained the rank of a deviant swindler.”

I scowled up at him, but Greyson stripped my hat off me and tossed it halfway across the lawn so it landed on the edge of the forest. Then set me up against the wall of the lodge and moved so he leaned into me, covering up every part of my body *just* before Wyatt made it around the corner.

Wyatt skidded to a stop. “Evening, Alpha.” He slightly bowed his head, then picked up running, pausing when he reached the far corner and he realized he couldn’t smell or hear me.

He must have caught the smell of my hat, because he went running out to it, snatched it up, then ran back around to the front of the lodge. “Very funny, Pip, come on out!” he shouted, his voice echoing and bouncing off the lodge.

“Mouthy rogue is more deplorable than a deviant swindler,” I informed Greyson’s back. “Because people tend to like them.”

Greyson turned around and planted one hand on the wall, just above my shoulder. “Ahh, that does sound about right.”

Between how close he was to me and the way he was grinning made me think of the almost-maybe-it-was-or-wasn’t-kiss, so I stuck a hand in front of his face. “Ah-ah—no!”

“Still mad about that?” Greyson asked.

“Yes,” I said before realizing that meant I still thought about it, and I was determined to whittle Greyson’s arrogance

down. “I mean no. It was like getting licked by the dog or something. Who cares. Just back up.”

“I did ask if we could attempt a do over—maybe you’d grade me better.” Greyson leaned in a little closer—so close that I could feel the heat of his skin and his bangs brushed my forehead.

“No!” I sensed the danger of the moment, so I ducked past him. “No, thank you.”

“Fine. Then you wanted to talk about it?” Greyson asked.

I did.

I really did.

But the way Greyson was smirking down at me...I could tell he wasn’t mocking me, but there was something about it that told me he found the whole thing funny for reasons I—as a not-wolf—didn’t understand.

Which means I was right and this is a wolf thing and I mentally blew it out of proportion.

The idea stung a little. I never wanted to squeal over Greyson—it’d be a loss of dignity—and this had gotten me... not close, but pointed in that direction.

I chewed on my lip as I stewed over the thought.

Greyson again moved into my personal space. “You overthink things,” he announced.

“I do not,” I snapped.

“You do. You get a little ridge on your forehead whenever you’re thinking useless thoughts.” Greyson swiped a thumb across my forehead, then casually rested his arms on my hips.

Every nerve in my body snapped to attention as he curved his hands around my back and rubbed at the column of my spine with his thumbs. It sparked an awareness in how close we were and just how all-consuming Greyson’s physical presence was.

I had to suck air in twice before I could get my mouth to work. “What are you doing, Greyson?”

Greyson tilted his head, his grin growing as he saw just how much he was affecting me. “I’m not aiming to get a Pomeranian Puppy Power-up if that’s what you’re asking.” The golden glow of his eyes seemed to intensify to a predator level as he studied me while pushing his thumbs up and down my spine.

“What are you doing?” I repeated, proud that my voice only quivered once.

Greyson again lowered his head so our foreheads brushed, and I could feel his Alpha powers drift dangerously around me, reeling me in closer. “Pip. Don’t tell me you haven’t figured it out? Then allow me to show you.”

I bailed.

I pulled the cowardly move and backed out, unable to take the heat any longer. My will worked double time to restore my inner sense of balance so I could laugh as I pulled away and Greyson’s hands dropped off my back. “Yeah, nah, that’s not necessary. Demonstrations aren’t my thing.”

I might have moved away, but Greyson’s eyes were still a painful shade of intense gold. “Is that so?”

“Yep.” I awkwardly cleared my throat, and backed toward the corner of the lodge. “I want more marshmallows. See ya.”

Greyson laughed at my terrible exit, but at this point it was more important that I got out of his proximity with a few of my braincells left.

I gritted my jaw, irritated with myself. Whatever game we were playing, I was obviously losing.

Greyson wasn’t a harmless flirt—I didn’t think he was doing this with the intention of later embarrassing me. But he was an Alpha while I was a hunter. Nothing could happen.

And he has a mate, I reminded myself. A mate. That’s the end of any thoughts about flirting with him.

It made me feel a little steadier, and I used it to put some steel back in my spine—which had gone embarrassingly floppy after Greyson’s impromptu massage.

I rounded the corner of the lodge, and spotted Wyatt waiting for me a safe distance away.

“Where were you thirty seconds ago?” I demanded.

“Purposely staying away,” Wyatt reported. “Because I’m not getting dragged into whatever this thing is going on between you and Greyson. It’s weird—like seeing Mom and Dad flirting.” Wyatt shivered in highly dramatized revulsion.

I stalked toward the fire. “Next time you ask for a Pomeranian Puppy Power-up, I’m going to stab you.”

“I thought romance was supposed to make girls giggly and nice,” Wyatt said. “You’re just grouchier. Aren’t you glad? Greyson obviously doesn’t see you as a dog—even if the rest of the Pack does.” Wyatt jogged to catch up.

“You’re not helping!”

“He’s not helping with what?” East asked as we were close enough to the fire that the light from the flames lit us up.

“Nothing,” I said firmly. “Nothing at all!”

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Chapter 12

Pip

Weeks passed with no more incidents from the rogue packmate.

It seemed like all the changes Greyson had made were making a difference—and now that we were more positive it was a packmate we were dealing with, the list of suspects had been considerably narrowed.

Still, we were careful as we returned to our daily routines.

Greyson went back to his usual level of teasing, too, which made me wonder if it had just been a lack of sleep, or if his mate bond was twisting in his chest again, reminding him of his inevitable future.

With the return of normalcy, I got to experience the “joy” of having various packmates try to help me figure out my unusual magic.

On a Wednesday evening in late October, I reported in to Hector and Ember—the next set of wolves that was supposed to help me.

“This is the place.” I peered at the cozy house—which was an adorable little cape cod that was painted forest green with white shutters and trim.

The front yard had a bin of soccer balls and volleyballs, a swing set, and a stone walkway that led up to the front door.

I adjusted my scarf and pulled my knit cap lower so it covered more of my ears. “Thanks for the escort service, guys.”

I glanced back at Jack and Easton, who were standing directly under one of the house floodlights.

It got dark early in Wisconsin during the fall and winter months, so it was already pitch black, making the floodlights a necessity.

Jack wagged his tail at me, but East was busy investigating scents.

Since East was on administrative leave until he learned how to control his strength, and Jack was similarly on leave from school for the same reason, the two had taken to following me around.

When I was working they either napped in the welcome center after a night of running in the forest as wolves, or they trained in the city park.

They were so rapidly improving their control that Moira told me she thought it had to be all their exposure to a Wolf’s Kiss, but I thought that undermined all the work the pair were putting into their control. They were *desperate* to improve, and it showed in all of their practices.

The front door opened, and Ember, wearing a t-shirt and leggings, stuck her head out, her hair—back in her favorite hairstyle of tiny, intricate braids—fanned over her shoulder. “Hello, Pip. We’ll be just a moment; Hector is on a call.”

“I’m in no rush,” I said. “He can take his time.”

Ember smiled. “Thanks.” Children laughed somewhere behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder. “I’ll be a moment. We keep it warm inside for the kids, but even we’ll need a warmer shirt for outside. Will you be warm enough? Do you need to borrow anything?”

“Please, I’m a Wisconsin girl. I’m set,” I said with the assurance of someone wearing fleece lined jeans, a ski jacket, and boots rated for negative-sixty-degree temperatures.

Once I got cold, I’d never warm up until I went inside again, so I always dressed *aggressively* warm in the cooler months.

“In that case, I’ll be just a moment.” Ember smiled at me, and the door started to swing shut, before it abruptly popped back open.

“Hi, Pip!” Teresa, Ember and Hector’s eldest child, stood in the doorway with a smile. “How are you—*wow*, it’s freezing out here!”

“It is! Here, I’ll stand closer so you don’t have to open the door so wide. But I’m doing great! How is school?”

“It’s okay, but I can’t wait for Thanksgiving break next month,” Teresa said. “Mom is going to take me and my friend Justine to Magiford for the day. And she already talked to Uncle Chase, so we get to ride the night mares in!”

“That sounds fun!” I said. “Is Chase going to hang out with you three?”

“Yes.” Teresa’s wide eyes said she knew just what a rare occasion it was. “Mom scheduled our trip on his day off. But I’m so excited—he’s going to take us to a bunch of werewolf businesses. There is a store that has health and beauty products—and apparently it has brushes for wolf fur!”

Teresa happily chattered on, excited about the prospect of seeing other werewolves.

She was the exact opposite of Young Jack—she’d wanted to be a wolf since she was five. But at age ten she was way too young to attempt the change. Sixteen was typically as early as you wanted to risk it. Any earlier and the chance of survivability dropped, and for someone as young as Teresa—with a body that was still growing and adjusting—her body just wouldn’t take the change. It would act almost like a vaccination—if she survived—and make her immune to the compound used to spark the change.

“All right. I’m set.” Ember quietly padded up behind her daughter, wearing a sweater and a pair of white athletic shoes. “Sweet Pea, could you watch your sister and brother? They’re playing video games for now, but just shout for us if there are any problems. We’ll hear you through the walls.”

“Sure thing, Mom. Bye, Pip!” Teresa gave me a grin that was a mash of Hector’s quiet smile and Ember’s playful smirks before she closed the door behind her mother.

Ember pushed the tiny, neat braids of her hair over her shoulder as she prowled through the floodlights. “We’ll practice out here in the front yard for better lighting. I know you have some night vision, but I don’t think there will be a tactical benefit to making you work in the dark when we want to focus on your magic.” She turned around to face East and Jack. “As for you two gentlemen, take yourselves off. Hector and I will take our hunter home. Consider yourselves off duty for the night.”

Jack whined, but immediately trotted off into the night—a testament of how high Ember was in the Pack that she could boss him around as easily as Greyson.

East paused just long enough to give me a nearly natural looking nod, then he trailed after Jack, lifting his nose to scent the brisk evening wind.

The door clicked open and Hector popped out. “I’m here—I apologize for the wait.” He smiled at me as he closed the door, then approached his wife.

Like Ember, he was dressed for motion, wearing a dark blue tracksuit and athletic shoes. He stopped and kissed Ember on the cheek, before the two rested their foreheads together and smiled with such beautiful contentment, it actually kind of hurt to look at them.

Just when I think I’m accepting my “forever alone” status, I see something heartwarming like this and it reminds me, no, I really do want someone.

Briefly, I remembered the not-a-kiss Greyson had given me, but he still had a *mate*. He might not have found her, but

she was out there.

“So,” Hector started. “It occurred to us that perhaps we’ve been going about this all wrong in focusing on trying to get you to feel different sensations and think about your magic, because your powers of Wolf’s Kiss have obviously been around for a while, so you’ve been using them for a while without knowing. And you probably don’t know because you aren’t aware there’s any other way.”

“Also, we have wondered if your powers were particularly...wakeful because of the incident with the Fletchings, and have decided we might need to recreate it,” Ember added.

I uneasily shifted, scraping my boots on the stones of their front walkway. “I can understand that, but I did not come prepared tonight to get the stuffing beat out of me. Can we relocate to the lodge gym?”

“We don’t intend for you to be hurt,” Ember assured me. “I was actually more referring to the presence of both werewolf and hunter magic during the fight. We’ve invited Radcliff and Scarlett to come with to discuss magic—and to perhaps try springing a trap on Hector and myself to see if that sparks anything in you. If my nose is not mistaken, they are coming down the road right now.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Radcliff called out from the darkness.

I squinted into the shadows of the forest and saw the siblings hurrying down the road, dressed similarly to me although not quite so brightly, and in matching colors.

Scarlett beamed at me as they trotted up. “Hello, Pip.”

“Hello.” I wriggled my eyebrows, communicating how pleased I was that she’d skipped the titles and just used my name.

“We have everything prepared,” Radcliff said. He held out four daggers that glowed faintly with magic. “Let us place them, then Hector and Ember should enter the area so we can close the trap!”

There was something that felt very alternate-reality-ish about watching two hunters try to space the four daggers into an even square, only to have two wolves correct them and help them accurately measure it out.

My life has gotten so bizarre.

“We think you’ll need to sit down—since there are only two of us powering this spell, it won’t be very powerful and will probably fall lower than the one from the actual battle,” Radcliff said.

“Excellent. Thank you for preparing this.” Hector plopped on the ground, then gave me a fatherly smile. “You can stop worrying, Pip. It’s only a containment spell. The one Amos used was laced with magic that would hurt us if we touched it, but Radcliff and Scarlett left that part out.”

I nervously chewed on my lip as Ember joined him on the ground. “I’m not just worried about you two getting hurt,” I said. “I’m worried that I’m the *only* one worried about the two of you getting hurt.”

“We would never hurt a wolf from the Northern Lakes Pack,” Radcliff announced, looking affronted. “Except for the rogue one,” he added.

“That’s not what I’m worried about either,” I said.

“We’ll begin setting it up,” Scarlett announced.

She and Radcliff knelt on the freezing ground and crawled from dagger to dagger as they properly looped their spells.

“Here we go,” Radcliff announced.

Golden magic shot out of the daggers, forming threads that twined into a net-like structure that encased the little square spot.

“Excellent, it worked!” Scarlett grinned as she put her hands on her hips. “Do you want me and Radcliff to pretend to threaten them a bit? Maybe throw some rocks or something?”

“That’s hardly scary,” I said.

“Obviously,” Radcliff said. “But their kid is watching and I am *not* going to become the catalyst for a childhood trauma.” He pointed to one of the front windows, where Teresa was watching with interest.

She waved when she realized we were looking at her.

“I believe this alone is satisfactory—to begin with, at least,” Hector said. “Pip, does your magic feel any different?”

I exhaled and shut my eyes as I tried to sort through my magic.

It was pretty minimal. Besides my hunter senses and my own ability to weave traps, everything else was automatic—like my puppy pheromones.

“No, I don’t feel any kind of magic besides my usual stuff.”

“Isn’t that a given?” Scarlett asked. “If it’s a hunter magic—even if it’s a special strain of hunter magic, it will feel the same.”

Ember drummed her fingers on the grassy ground. “What do you mean?”

“Our mom became the leader of the Fletchings because she inherited a rare strain of booster magic that runs in our family. She can shoot with more accuracy and at farther distances—and that goes for crossbows, arrows, paintball guns, anything that needs to be aimed,” Radcliff said.

“Our little brother ended up getting it too, but she tested us a lot when we were younger. She said it would feel just like our regular magic,” Scarlett said. “The only way to tell it was different was because it let her do things other hunters couldn’t.”

“Which is a rough indicator, since already our hunter abilities are so varied,” Scarlett said. “I’m jealous of your puppy pheromones ability—I can’t believe more hunters weren’t breaking down your door to adopt you because of it.”

“That might explain why you were so convinced it was Greyson or the Pack casting the magic,” Hector said. The gold

light of the trap gave his russet skin a golden overlay. “Because your magic didn’t feel any different, but you could feel the effects of the magic.”

“Yeah, I could feel my magic in my chest.” I stared at the golden strands of the trap, remembering the day, and the inescapable pain until the magic had released. “I remember it was desperate to be used...but it felt *different* when Aeric and the others all got big and broke through the trap. It was the same sensation but...I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Wolfsbane wasn’t involved in our uncle’s attack,” Scarlett said. “But Pip had encountered it with the Low Marsh Pack. Could it have somehow awakened her magic?”

“In a word? No.” Hector smoothed his goatee as he thought. “Wolfsbane only affects wolves and shifters, stripping us of our humanity and leaving us with our animal instincts. The elves created it because they wanted tame shifter pets. It shouldn’t affect Pip at all, given that it’s an entirely different kind of magic. Additionally, the only wolves she encountered who had taken it were from the Low Marsh Pack, not our Pack.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Radcliff said.

I gnawed on my lower lip—I was going to have to apply a ton of lip balm when I got home—and tried to remember the chaotic moments of the Fletching fight. “Did we ever confirm that a Wolf’s Kiss *doesn’t* have any healing powers?”

“You’re referring to the mysterious way you went from being a few minutes from death to suddenly being able to stand and knock out Amos?” Ember asked.

I slowly nodded.

“I researched it some more,” Hector said. “There was no indication of an ability to physically heal—although it was noted that a Wolf’s Kiss’s presence could be soothing to a wolf.”

“There’s a hunter family based in the Alps that has some healing powers in their family line,” Radcliff said. “I don’t know for certain if there are any in America, sorry.”

“No, yeah, it’s fine,” I said. “It must have been a Pack thing.”

“There is no Pack magic that can *heal* a packmate, much less someone outside the Pack,” Ember said.

“The notable exceptions to the rule are wolves with mate bonds,” Hector brightly said. “I researched it when Greyson first confirmed he had a mate. Apparently—in close quarters—they are able to heal one another, though it is said to be difficult.”

“Except I’m a hunter, which makes me biologically incapable of having a mate,” I pointed out.

“Maybe it was wild magic,” Scarlett said. “There’s gossip that Magiford has been doing better since Adept Hazel Medeis became involved with the vampire Eminence Killian Drake, and the Night Queen’s ascension to the fae throne.”

“We’re not attempting to recreate the healing magic tonight,” Ember reminded us. “We’re here to try to awaken Pip’s powers as a Wolf’s Kiss.”

“Yes, you are correct, darling,” Hector said. “Pip, based on what Radcliff and Scarlett have shared about their mother’s experience and what you said about the magic feeling different, do you think perhaps it was more that you were using it in a different *way* you hadn’t experienced and not that the magic itself was actually different?”

I flexed my fingers in my gloves. “That seems pretty likely, except I don’t remember how I used it differently. It’s like...it just did.”

“Considering the Pack was in overwhelming need, and you are a Wolf’s Kiss, I imagine that was enough of a situation to drag the magic out of you even if you didn’t truly know how to wield it,” Ember said.

Scarlett tapped her chin. “Maybe thinking about the differences in the kinds of magic will give you a hint? Trap magic, hunter senses, the flood of adrenaline we get in fights, those are all offensive types of magic.”

“You mean they help in fights,” Radcliff said.

“Yeah.”

“But what she did was *in* a fight.” Radcliff flicked his sister on the forehead. “And was used to the wolves’ advantage in battle. It’s still an offensive kind of magic.”

“Hold up.” Ember held her hand up. “The usage might not change much, but the *subject* does. Trap magic and hunter senses are tools to be used against us. It’s designed to control us. A Wolf’s Kiss’s powers are performed directly on us for our *benefit*.”

“So you mean to say that even though it’s the same magic, it’s almost as though it’s going in reverse,” Hector said.

“Exactly.”

“Okay, but how do you make magic go in reverse?” I asked. “As one of the subsets of magical humans, we filter wild magic through our blood, which puts it in a useable form. When I do hunter magic, I just grab it straight from that source and filter it through to do whatever I want.”

Hector tilted his head. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

“Here, we’ll power down the trap spell—I don’t think it’s helping,” Radcliff said. “In the meantime, why don’t you try exploring the various outlets you have for your magic?”

He and Scarlett went about depowering their spell, removing the daggers from the ground and collapsing the net-like spell.

In the meantime, I pulled wild magic through my blood and played with it, trying to feel if there was any other way I could use it.

The problem with human magic is that there aren’t clear boundaries. It just...floats around and you try to harness it however you can.

No matter how I swirled the magic, it just oozed around me, and I only personally knew how to twist magic in hunter ways I’d been taught when my parents were alive, and by the instructors the Quillon hunter family had gotten for me.

I tried shoving some of the magic back into my blood, but the only sensation I got from that was tiredness—it actually felt like I was sweating in my brain, which was several degrees of yuck I didn't want to experience again.

“Any luck?” Ember hopped to her feet and brushed her legs off while Hector stood with her.

“No.” I tugged my hat lower down my head. “Maybe I should contact the Quillons and see if they have any information on a Wolf's Kiss. I need a textbook or something.”

“They might be able to find something, but is that wise?” Scarlett asked.

“Alpha Greyson told us we couldn't tell anyone else you were a Wolf's Kiss,” Radcliff said. “We never even told our mom. Telling the Quillons might alert the community that you are one.”

“The Quillons may not be necessary,” Hector said. “I would be happy to research if there are any materials that can help you. When I find something, I will put a request in with Pre-Dominant Harka. She'll gladly purchase them and ship them here.” Hector grinned broadly.

Ember shook her head in mock disappointment. “I should have expected—you and research.” She dropped a quick kiss on her husband, then turned to me. “It might be possible, Pip, that you might have some resources already. Since the powers of a Wolf's Kiss ran in your dad's family line, they might have kept records. Don't you have a storage unit of stuff from your parents?”

I exhaled, puffing out my cheeks. “Yeah, I can look.” I winced. “I haven't looked at my parents' stuff since I was a teenager since I have the storage unit set to autopay. I should look in on it anyway.”

While I tried to look at Mama Dulce's craft magazines or read one of Papa Santos's mysteries to honor them, it was harder to do the same thing when it came to my parents.

I didn't like visiting the storage unit. It reminded me too much of what I'd missed out on when I lost my parents—even

though Mama and Papa were literally the best family I could have ever asked for after my parents' deaths.

"Maybe you need to talk to Jack and East about the magic, too," Scarlett suggested. "They were drawn to you—which must mean you're unconsciously broadcasting what you are."

"I don't know," I said. "I can't shake the feeling that everyone is overestimating what I'm capable of, or what a Wolf's Kiss is capable of. It feels like we're inventing an explanation, when we still don't know for certain that I can do everything a typical Wolf's Kiss can do."

Radcliff snorted. "You powered up wolves so they were the size of ponies. Believe me, you don't need to worry about being inferior—that was *terrifying*."

"I just don't want people to be disappointed when I can't do what they think I should be able to," I said.

"Pip, you could never disappoint us," Ember said. "And the only reason the Pack is so invested in helping you awaken your powers is because Greyson ordered it."

I plucked at the sleeves of my winter coat. "What? Why did *Greyson* order it?"

"He's concerned about what could happen once word breaks out about your abilities among supernaturals. Knowing what you're capable of could help keep you safe," Hector said.

"Yikes," I said. "That's a bit of a downer to hear, though I understand it."

Hector patted my shoulder. "You'll adjust. All of this is new to both the Pack and to you. You have time to explore your magic, so don't put more pressure on yourself."

I puffed my cheeks out, then nodded. "You're right. Thanks for your help—all of you."

"We're happy to aid a hunter!" Scarlett winked.

"I'm also more than a little curious about what all your powers will look like," Radcliff said. "I've been wondering how much of your relationship with the Pack is based on your magic, and how much is just that you're like family to them."

“I’ll escort you home, Pip.” Hector zipped up his tracksuit. “And then I will walk Hunter Scarlett and Hunter Radcliff to their apartment.”

“Oh, but there are two of us. It’s fine,” Scarlett said.

“Nonetheless, I feel the need to.” Hector gave her his nice professor-y smile, but when he glanced at me I saw the worried edge to his eyes.

He doesn’t think the rogue wolf is done. He’s just been scared off for now.

I shivered in the cold, and wondered when the Pack would ever feel safe again.



I was at work the following day, refilling our pamphlets, when I heard the roar of an engine.

“What’s that?” Shania shouted to me from inside the gift shop.

“I have no idea.” I peered out through the front window just in time to see an enormous, dark purple bus barrel through downtown, practically *glowing* with fae magic. “Looks like some kind of bus—but it’s using fae magic.”

Is this the help Harka promised to send ages ago?

“Oohh, is it worth looking at?” Shania asked.

I shrugged and strolled back to my desk. “Given that fae can be tricky at the best of times and downright manipulative on average—they can’t lie, but that doesn’t keep them from rule-lawyering everything—I’d stay out of it,” I advised.

“Good point.” Shania briefly surfaced and threw her arm over the top of one of the spinning magnet displays. “Boring, but still valid.” She winked, tossed her brown curls over her shoulder, then disappeared back into the gift shop. “Did I tell you last night that I found a car part in Aeric’s *fridge*? I swear, I’m going to find one in the coffee maker one of the times I visit.”

“I’ve always been impressed you put up with his enthusiasm for cars so well.”

“I figure it comes with the territory.” Shania walked past, carrying a box of pitch-black stuffed animal wolves.

“Of?” I asked.

Shania gestured at me with one of the wolf toys. “Dating a werewolf. You know, they’re kinda like dogs, and dogs have a thing for sticking their heads outside of car windows.”

I laughed. “*Shania!*”

“It makes sense!” Shania cackled as she loaded the toys into the right display.

Just as I got the last of the new pamphlets stocked in the right places, the front door opened so hard it nearly dislodged the bell that hung over it.

Lord Linus—a handsome fae with midnight black hair pulled back in a ponytail and blue-purple eyes with a grin faster than lightning—flung himself through the doorway.

He was holding a wooden stick that was topped with a purple pennant flag and crested with a little plastic moon. “And here we have the Timber Ridge Welcome Center,” he said. “Which has all the information you could need about the Northern Lakes Pack, and a delightful gift shop!”

“Lord Linus?” I asked. I snapped my jaw shut when fae streamed in through the open door.

Chapter 13

Pip

They were mostly nobles—human-esque in shape, although they were too elegant and had features so refined they made human celebrities look drabby—but I saw three brownies and a gnome, and a family of pixies hovered in the air, inspecting the wolf exhibits.

The women were dressed in frilly dresses of dark blue, purple, magenta, and silver colors, while the men wore navy or black sportscoats, tan trousers, and brown loafers. All of them had the warm, olive toned skin that marked them as members of the Night Court.

They were fashionable, but almost a sort of 50's British royalty fashion as a lot of the women wore embroidered taffeta hats or pillbox hats and most of the men had black top hats.

Despite their finery, they minced around the welcome center with a lot more glee than I would have thought any fae would be willing to show.

“Beautiful, simply beautiful,” a fae female declared over one of the canvas prints—this particular one was of Klancy and Roanne.

“Is this where Lady Chrysanthe bought the wolf key chain that howls?” a male fae asked Lord Linus.

“Indeed it is,” Lord Linus confirmed.

Ten fae stampeded into the gift shop portion of the center.

Shania shrieked a little in surprise. “Wow, you *are* fae.”

“Yes, hello,” a fae said. “Be a dear and tell me, do you accept fae gold?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Shania said.

“How rustic and adorable this place is,” a female fae declared. She was positioned in front of the photo booth, studying the sign.

“Um, Lord Linus?” I called. “Could I have a moment?”

“Certainly!” said the fae lord—who also happened to be the father of the Night Queen even though he looked like he was in his mid to upper thirties, *max*. “It’s good to see you again, Pip! I do hope you are doing well?”

A fae strolled past us, studying a pamphlet on what parts of the territory’s land were open to the public.

“Yeah, I’m great,” I said.

“That is always wonderful to hear! Queen Leila did wish to express her greetings and salutations to you, by the by.”

“The Pack Alpha is named Greyson, yet he appears to be all white?” the brownie said as he read the plaque of a canvas print of Greyson.

“Yes! Thank you!” I pointed to him. “I always say that, and no one else sees how weird that is, thank you!”

I paused, then remembered what I was trying to do and shook myself free. “Lord Linus, what are you *doing* here?”

“Oh, nothing!” Lord Linus winked at me. “This is just the inaugural tour of ‘Night Dreams Bus Tours’!”

“Of *what*?” I asked.

“So many fae were jelly that Chrys and I got to see Chase’s hometown, and they didn’t,” Lord Linus explained.

“Okay,” I said, even though my brain was breaking because a *fae lord* had just used the term “jelly”.

“Everyone is especially antsy because Leila refuses to make any Court outings and trips that are more expensive than free,” he continued. “So I offered to organize a tour bus for them. All for a very cheap charge, of course.” Lord Linus winked at me, and I wondered what steep price the oblivious fae had unwittingly paid in their ignorance of how human money works.

“Though,” Lord Linus continued, “I had to pay *so much* insurance for that bus—the driver didn’t want to take it through the gate to the Night Realm until I bought the premium insurance package. As if the Night Realm is more dangerous than the fae riding the bus!”

I wondered what was the point of the bus if they all could have just walked through the gate, but I was a little afraid of the answer I’d get, so I asked a more pressing question. “They’re all here because they’re curious about *Chase*?”

“And the howling wolf keychains—they were quite taken with it. I do hope you have extras,” Lord Linus said.

“Does Chase know you were coming here?” I asked.

“I imagine so. Chrysanthe defended all her souvenirs from our first trip to the death, to the point where Chase had to pull her off a fae who tried to make off with one of her magnets.”

“Wow,” I said. “I’m glad she liked the stuff she’d bought that much.”

“Of course.” Lord Linus rested his elbows on the desk and leaned in. “She was mere days away from asking if she could join the royal guard before she came here—she was that desperate to see him. Since then, however, she’s managed to talk to Chase several times about Timber Ridge as a discussion topic.” He abruptly straightened up and peered around. “She’s here with us—though I believe she was going to check out a few of the werewolf owned businesses Chase recommended. In particular she wanted to see the Sweets Shoppe—she got a list of Chase’s favorite candies and intends to use them as bribery.”

“You should tell her she’s not in as dire straits as she thinks she is,” I said. “Chase called her by her first name. That’s practically halfway to marriage for a stiff workaholic like him.”

“She shall be heartened to hear you think so.” Lord Linus slapped the desk with the palm of his hand.

“Good. She seems nice, and I think a fae will be good for Chase.” I did a quick head tilt from side to side as I inspected the fae, made sure none of the pamphlets had run out, and straightened the sign that promoted the Pack website and phone app.

“Indeed?” Lord Linus half turned so he could also watch his fellow Night fae. “Regardless, we’ll soon be out of your way. We have a list of places to visit, and I only rented the bus for the afternoon, so we’ve a limited time to see everything.”

“Take your time,” I said. “Timber Ridge is a tourist city. We’re used to getting buses in the summer.”

“What a fascinating custom,” Lord Linus said.

Before he could continue, a gorgeous fae with pearl encrusted netting attached to her hat approached the desk. “I beg your pardon, but do you have any tea for sale here?”

I shook my head. “Sorry, no.”

The fae visibly drooped.

“But...they do serve some tea down the street at Howl-In Café,” I said.

She must have been a representative, because the seven fae closest to my desk politely clapped for me—one even threw a purple rose to me.

I took the rose with a smile. *Just another example of how wildly different customs are between the various supernaturals.*

“We can go there after we finish in the gift shop,” Lord Linus announced. “I believe Howl-In Café is also where they have the hunters working in their uniforms.”

“Oh!” A fae male wearing a burnt toffee, wool sweater vest took a picture of me with his cellphone. “I require their picture.”

“Yes, I’m sure they’ll allow it,” Lord Linus said.

“Do you think we’ll happen to see any werewolves?” another fae asked.

“Don’t you see werewolves in Magiford?” I asked.

The sweater vest fae gave me a pitying look. “Obviously, but werewolves in Magiford are not members of the Northern Lakes Pack.”

The door swung open and the bell jingled as Greyson filled the doorway. His golden eyes glowed as he stepped inside. “Lord Linus, welcome back to Timber Ridge.” He dusted off the polite smile he hadn’t used in a while and shook Lord Linus’s hand.

“It’s good to see you as well, Alpha Greyson!” Lord Linus pitched his voice a little louder than usual.

Immediately all the fae gathered near my desk got their phones out and started taking pictures of Greyson.

Greyson nodded to them, then pivoted so he faced me, and stared.

“Lord Linus and Lady Chrysanthe organized a busload of Night Court citizens to come visit Timber Ridge,” I said.

Greyson eyed a fae who was taking a selfie with him behind her.

A fae couple drifted from the gift shop—which was so busy Shania had opened the register that we rarely ever used in there—and approached Greyson.

“You are Alpha Greyson, leader of the Northern Lakes Pack, yes?” the fae lord asked.

“Yes,” Greyson reluctantly admitted.

“Wonderful. Might I request, then, that you sign this?” The fae lady ripped a brown paper covering off the giant

rectangular package she was holding, revealing a large canvas print of Greyson in his glorious white wolf form.

“Sure,” Greyson said.

I started digging through the desk, looking for a permanent marker, but Greyson joined me behind it.

I found the marker and handed it over. “I was getting something to write with, you didn’t have to come back here.”

“I really did,” Greyson said. He took the canvas print from the fae and scrawled his name on the upper right corner.

“Thank you.” The fae nodded in satisfaction as she studied the print. “It is perfectly lovely.”

The sweater vest fae rested his arms on my desk and leaned in. “I am intrigued by your Timber Ridge, Alpha Greyson, and must ask you, what is your reasoning behind making such an effort to get along with humans?”

All the scrutiny—the fae who had been in the gift shop had mostly wandered out by now and were also taking selfies, putting Greyson in the background—must have been getting to Greyson.

He didn’t back up or anything, but he shifted his weight, making sure our hips and legs touched before he answered the fae.

“I believe that for supernaturals to survive in the future, we must not only work together, but we must also work with the humans.” Greyson trotted out his polite smile again, all smoothness and control as he crafted his careful response. “Timber Ridge is the work of several generations of werewolves working to achieve that goal.”

The fae couple who had bought the canvas print were working together to slide it back into its protective sleeve. The female narrowed her eyes as she studied Greyson. “Ahh, yes,” she said. “I can see why our Queen Leila decided she wanted you as an ally.”

“Because he’s a wolf?” I guessed.

“No,” the fae lord said. “Because he’s just as disconnected from reality and optimistic as our Queen Leila,” he explained with exactly zero rancor. “Although she has changed much for the better, so I suppose there is hope for you.”

The sweater vest fae rapped his knuckles on my desk. “If you’d like supernaturals to start working together, might we request you consider adding a tea bar to this welcome center? Or at the very least sell teacups and loose-leaf teas.”

“Wolves don’t typically drink tea,” Greyson said.

“You should,” Lord Linus advised. “It really is a superior drink. You could set up a stand right there.” Lord Linus pointed to the door to Moira’s office, where I was pretty sure I could hear her snores through the cracked door, over all the noise the fae produced.

“Ahhh,” I said.

I was saved from having to answer when the door opened and another fae, holding a paper bag and eating a square of fudge, stuck her head in.

“Hurry up,” she ordered. “I was with Lady Chrysanthe in the Sweets Shoppe, and they just put out some fresh batches of fudge with samples! I got Peanut Butter Paws fudge, the official Pack favorite, but the best was the turtle fudge.”

The sweater vest fae recoiled. “They make candy out of reptiles?”

“No, no—it’s an ingredient matching,” Lord Linus translated. “It means it contains caramel, chocolate, and pecans.”

“That does sound delicious!” another fae said.

The lords and ladies began to sashay over to the door, elegantly waving farewell to Greyson and me before they adjusted their hats and stepped outside.

The fae who’d stopped in to tell everyone about the fudge held the door open and peered into her sack. “Chrysanthe bought several yogurt-covered so-called ‘dog biscuits’ to give to Chase for a snack.”

“No, no!” I grabbed Lord Linus by the sleeve of his jacket. “Linus, don’t let her give those to him—those are literally for *dogs*, not wolves. She’d be better off getting him the cookies and cream fudge, that’s his favorite.”

“Aren’t you a nice young lady for your concern? Fret not, I shall pass along your words of wisdom.” He started to pat my hand, then glanced at Greyson and settled for winking at me instead. “Good day to you both, Hunter Pip, Alpha Greyson!”

Turning away from us, he raised his flag topped stick and shouted into the gift shop. “Night Court—we are leaving the welcome center in favor of fudge samples. Come along now, let’s go.”

“But we’re not done yet!”

“Yes, I haven’t purchased half as much as I would like to.”

“Don’t worry, Lady Demetria.” Lord Linus patted the back of an older fae woman—the only one I’d seen in the group. “You can visit the gift shop again next time.”

He stepped outside with the last of the fae, the door swinging shut as his words finally sank in. “Wait...*next time*?” I repeated.

Greyson dropped an arm over my shoulders as he studied the door. “Perhaps we should expand our tea offerings in Howl-In Café after all. We’ll have to see how often they come and if it makes it financially worth it to keep all the extra tea stock in storage.”

“Mayor Pearl is going to kill us,” I said.

“Maybe we’ll luck out.” Shania staggered out of the gift shop and leaned against the howling wolf statue that had been touched so often its nose looked gold. “Maybe Lord Linus can bat his pretty purple eyes at her and she’ll be smitten enough not to fine them.”

“I think she’s more likely to try to crack him upside the head with her umbrella,” I said.

Greyson stepped back, letting his hand slip from my shoulders and glide down my back.

Before I could try to elbow him, he was out and in front of my desk, heading out the front door with a wink worthy of a fae. “That’s where I’d put my money, too!”

The following day, I visited the storage unit I rented that was filled with my parents’ stuff.

I’d like to say I was trying to be proactive about my magic, but it was mostly because I knew Hector and Ember would ask me about it if I didn’t get to it soon.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like remembering my parents—I had mementos of them back at the cottage.

It was just...remembering them—looking at my photo album and the bear my dad had made me—I could do that.

But the storage unit was too strong a reminder.

When I rolled the door up in the temperature-controlled unit, the smell of our old home—books, metal from all the weapons, and a splash of vanilla since Mom had a thing for candles—hit me like a brick wall.

“Okay. It’s been over ten years. I can do this.” I rubbed my forehead and studied the space—which was about five feet by ten with padded walls so nothing would get scratched, and a vent in the ceiling.

There wasn’t much furniture—just one massive antique chair that had belonged to my dad’s grandmother and two beautiful, locking gun cabinets my mom’s parents had built for mom and dad when they’d gotten married.

There were also two racks of weapons—one for bladed weapons, and one for the guns. Some of them were more modern, but most of them were antiques that had been passed down to my parents.

I scooted past a giant spear that I would never have the strength to wield and opened the nearest box. It was filled with

a china tea set I recognized that Mom had told me she'd gotten from her grandmother and some old pictures.

Once I confirmed there were no books or files, I closed the box again, set it aside, and started on the next one.

I opened it, and sifted through the contents, my heart squeezing when I realized it was filled with the picture books my parents read to me as a kid. Most of them were faded, and a few were sticky from my grubby kid hands, but it was one of the sentimental things I'd kept when I'd been forced to get rid of so many other familiar things—like the couch mom and dad used to sit on with me to listen to me read while they cleaned their weapons.

Mama Dulce and Papa Santos had kept as much as they could—the bed in the loft was my childhood bed, as was the dresser, and there were boxes of my family's Christmas and Easter decorations in the attic.

But a lot of the stuff had been liquidated and put in a trust along with the insurance payout for me, as instructed by my parents' wills. I hadn't understood as a kid, but now as an adult I'm pretty sure it was done to protect my finances so no hunter family would adopt me just for the money.

“And I got to keep the stuff that mattered most,” I reminded myself as I opened up a box of old family photo albums.

I found a massive box of recipe books, boxes of sentimental blankets, and more. All of the boxes held cherished memories that warmed my heart.

It wasn't until I got to the box that contained some of my parents' old hunter clothes—their uniforms with the Sabre and Ward emblems, Mom's favorite leather bandolier and Dad's sharpening stones—that my eyes ached.

I'm getting closer. I brushed my fingers across the stretchy fabric of my mom's jacket. *If Dad kept any information on the Sabres, it would be with their work stuff.*

The next box had logs of their missions, but when I opened the box underneath it, using a pocket knife to cut through the

clear packaging tap before I popped the flaps open, I knew I hit the jackpot.

“Here we go.” I knelt next to the box and leaned in, grabbing two thick leather journals.

Each hunter family has a book that contains special notes left behind for future generations.

You’d think it would have notes on magic, but those were actually few and far between. Most of it was practical advice—like what scents to avoid wearing when tracking a wolf, special recipes for creams to rub on feet chafed from a long hunt, that kind of thing.

But if the powers of a Wolf’s Kiss were at all recorded by my dad’s family, it would be in the Sabre family journal.

One of the journals was made of black leather with metallic corner protectors and a faded ribbon pressed into pages that were scrawled with handwritten notes and an enormous family tree—that one was for Mom’s family, the Wards. Her family was actually older than Dad’s, so it was at least a third thicker than the second journal, which was for the Sabres.

The Sabre record book was more of a wine-red color and was torn and tattered around the edges. The pages looked more worn, too, and some of the handwriting was so old it had faded with age.

I tried looking through a few of the pages. Some of it was written in cursive handwriting I could barely decipher, but I didn’t see anything that mentioned a Wolf’s Kiss.

Not an encouraging start, but if this magic really does run in the Sabres, it’ll have to be mentioned at least once. And if it’s not, I’ll have a few questions for Pre-Dominant Harka and her resources.

I wrapped both of the family journals in bubble wrap—taking a moment to pop a few of the bubbles, because why not—then slid them into the backpack I’d brought with me when I felt a werewolf ping on my hunter senses.

I slung my backpack over my back but made sure my daggers were at an easy-to-grab position before I started rearranging the boxes, restoring order to the mess I'd made.

I was about halfway through when I heard footsteps pounding on the flooring of the otherwise quiet and empty hallway that my storage unit opened up into.

Suspicious, I popped my head out and was surprised to see Rio.

“Pip!” His yell was close to a roar, and his hair was disheveled as he booked it down the hallway, skidding to a stop just outside my unit.

I didn't like the look in his eyes, so I felt for one of my daggers. “Yeah?”

Rio slammed a fist into the door of the neighboring unit, rattling it. “You have to come.” His breath was raspy, his eyes overly bright. “Teresa's been bitten!”

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Chapter 14

Pip

My backpack thumped against my back as I ran down the street, my throat squeezing painfully—not from the effort, but fear.

Teresa is ten. That's too young to survive the change.

I silenced the horrible thought and chased after Rio.

“Where is she?” I hollered—he hadn’t told me much more as I’d slammed the door to my unit shut before we flew out of the building. I’d jumped the handful of stairs outside the doors, landing on the sidewalk in a crouch.

“Near the school,” Rio snapped as he led the way, jumping over a crack in the sidewalk.

“The wolf bit her near *school*?” I repeated, my voice growing hotter with my anger.

Biting a child was a cruelty. But biting one in Timber Ridge near the school where humans and children of werewolves went to school?

It was a move designed to incite fear and discord.

Rio growled at me, flashing his teeth.

“*Not now!*” I snarled back at him, my fury killing my normal ability to ignore Rio’s hostilities.

Surprisingly, he backed down. “Classes let out half an hour ago,” he said. “She was on her way home.” He made a turn, taking us past the post office and down a street of townhouses and apartments.

I wanted to find whatever monster had done this to *Teresa*—innocent and sweet *Teresa*—and make them pay for every ounce of grief they’d inflicted on their victims. Tears prickled my eyeballs, but I focused on the jarring thud my feet made on the pavement, and on listening as well as I could for—

A sob of pain tore the air.

Teresa!

I was shoulder to shoulder with Rio when we rounded another corner, which put us across the street from the school campus and its immense lawn.

Since Timber Ridge was a small city, the elementary school, middle school, and high school were all located on one campus. The high school and middle school shared a building, but the elementary school had a small, separate structure that backed up into a thicket of trees.

Teresa was an elementary student, so I pointed myself at the elementary building until I heard another sob coming from the direction of the little forest behind the elementary school.

I could see color through the trees—it had to be Teresa and whoever was with her.

I poured on the speed, charging across the muddy lawn and jumping a shrub before I reached the woodchip covered path that led into the thicket.

Rio was right behind me as we wove through the trees, screeching to a stop when we found Teresa, Ember, and a few white-faced elementary kids.

I dropped to my knees next to Ember, who was half cradling, half hugging her daughter, rocking back and forth as silent tears dripped down her face.

“How is she?” I asked.

Teresa was pale, and her whole body was shivering as blood seeped through her clothes on her shoulder. Based on the way Ember had her tipped on her side, and the blood pattern on her clothes, it seemed like the rogue wolf had caught her from behind. It had clearly bitten her on the shoulder, her arm, and her opposite leg once it had her down.

Ember mutely shook her head, then exhaled, making a soothing noise as she patted Teresa.

“We called the paramedics,” Jayden, Teresa’s younger brother said. “But Mama doesn’t know if they can help.”

“Is Teresa gonna be okay?” Francisca, Teresa’s little sister, asked, her voice shaking with fright.

“Yes,” I promised, though looking at the little girl I wasn’t too sure. “She absolutely will. Children can survive a wolf bite, and Teresa is strong and brave.”

“Pip?” Teresa’s voice was tight and raw.

“Hey, Teresa.” I did my best to smile as I leaned over her and tucked a curl of her dark hair out of her face. “You’re going to make it through this.” I tried to sound casual as I rested my fingers over the pulse point on her neck.

Her heartbeat was too slow—she was fading. “Your hand feels nice.” Teresa shut her eyes.

Ember and I exchanged looks.

“It has to be your magic,” Ember said. “Can you try holding her?”

“Of course,” I said.

Ember and I carefully shifted places.

I could hear the sirens of an ambulance off in the distance, but there wasn’t anything they could do until we knew if Teresa would pull through.

Either she beat the werewolf compound or it beat her.

Ember shifted, her entire body tensed with concern. “Teresa, honey, you have to keep fighting,” she said. “Keep breathing, you aren’t breathing enough.”

Tears spilled out of Teresa's eyes. "I'm not going to turn into a wolf, am I?" Her voice was so broken, it wrenched my heart. "I just wanted to be a wolf like you, Mom. But I'm too young."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "You have to survive. You're precious to the Pack—they'll love you no matter what."

"But I won't be able to run with Mom and Dad," Teresa cried, then half choked since her breathing was so labored. "I won't be able to run with the Pack. That's all I wanted."

I'm going to kill the wolf that did this.

I could feel the vow harden in my heart, as my hunter magic hooked on to it.

"We'll find a way." I had my knee folded at an awkward angle so I could half prop her up as Ember held one of her hands. "A new way. We'll make it work. You just kick this werewolf spit's butt. And then we'll have time to think of something."

Teresa stared at me, her breathing too raspy and her heart too slow. A long second passed, and I held my breath until she nodded.

"You're going to make it, baby." Ember brushed her fingers across Teresa's forehead. "I know it."

Teresa closed her eyes, then her face wrinkled when another wave of pain wracked her body and she screamed.

The wail of the ambulance was so loud, I was pretty sure they had to be out in front of the schools by now.

"Pip." Teresa licked her lips when the wave of pain passed, and to my relief her breathing wasn't so rattled. It wasn't even, but it was better. "I knew you'd come."

"Of course I did," I said. "There's no way I'm letting you go, kiddo. Not on my watch."

A short smile flickered across Teresa's lips. "I thought of you when I got attacked. I asked myself what you would do. So I grabbed hard onto the wolf, and I got this." She struggled

to raise the hand that her mother wasn't holding, which she had clenched in a fist.

It was the arm of her bitten shoulder, so I slipped my hand under hers so she wouldn't have to raise it any higher.

When she slowly uncurled her fingers, a tuft of sandy brown fur fell out and dropped into my palm.

I stared at it, shocked. "Is this...?"

Teresa briefly closed her eyes again in her pain, but when she opened them again I saw triumph in them. "It's from the wolf that attacked me."

I laughed outright, and a small part of me hoped that maybe Teresa wouldn't just make it. She was so strong, so special, maybe she'd become a wolf after all. "Teresa, you're a hunter in your heart!"

She grinned, but the fear was still bright in her eyes. "You'll stay with me?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Until you're good. But—spoiler—I know you'll be fine." I held up the tuft of fur. "Because you're way stronger than anything this wolf could have thrown at you."

I felt a werewolf ping on my hunter senses and looked back over my shoulder.

Rio was shaking in rage. He was as sweet as a lamb to Teresa. Of course this attack would hit him hard—though I was a little surprised he'd show it so openly in front of her.

"Rio," I called.

He stared at Teresa, his eyes glassy with sadness and anger.

"*Rio*," I snapped.

He shifted his gaze to me.

"Who is approaching?" I asked.

"Oh. Um." He slowly turned around to peer up the path, but by then East was running down the path.

“Ambulance is here,” he called. “Paramedics called me to help. Can we move her?”

I glanced down at Teresa. She was still shaking and pale, but when I felt her pulse again, it was a little stronger.

Something in my gut told me she was going to make it, and my heart whispered that maybe, with my powers and her will combined, *maybe* she could make it and turn into a wolf. Regardless, I wasn’t about to leave her. She was still scared—and grieving.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’ll carry her out to the ambulance. She’ll need the bite marks looked at.”

East hesitated, glancing from the girl in my arms to me. “Is she going to change?”

Teresa scrunched her eyes shut—as if the question hurt more than the bleeding gouge left in her body.

“No,” I said quietly. “She won’t change. But she’ll survive.” I glanced down at Teresa and smiled when I saw her peering up at me. “And she’s got the only lead we need to find the wolf that did this.”

Teresa didn’t change. The trembling, fever, and side effects of the compound that sparks the change subsided, and Teresa stayed human.

No one—not even Teresa—was surprised. But I wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d failed her in a way.

Maybe if I’d retrieved the Sabre journal and read up on it, if I hadn’t dragged my feet so much...

But she survived, which is all her family had hoped for, and the most important thing.

Knowing that, I focused on the second most important task: the fur she’d given me.

I refused to let go of it.

East had asked for it, as had Rio, but I wasn't letting the tuft out of my hand until I could directly hand it over to Greyson—though I had stuck it in a baggy at the hospital to better preserve the scent.

Teresa had paid a terrible price for this lead, and she specifically wanted to give it to me. I wasn't letting go of it until I knew we could nail the sicko who had done this to her.

I sat in the hospital room, plopped in one of those vinyl padded chairs next to Teresa's hospital bed.

She was sleeping—she'd officially beaten off the change and survived. She'd remain a human, and immune to the effects of werewolf spit in the future, but the hospital staff had cleaned all her wounds and wrapped them.

She'd been hurt worse than I'd realized and had needed a blood infusion. They'd hooked her up to an IV, too.

I yawned and held Teresa's hand as I stared outside into the sky. I couldn't see many stars—there was too much light pollution from the hospital's well-lit parking lot. But it was a lot more soothing to focus on than the sterile smelling room and the ugly bruising and stitches that riddled Teresa's arm and leg.

“Hey Pip?” Teresa asked.

“Yeah?”

“Did your mom ever sing to you at night? Your hunter mom?”

I stopped jiggling my foot that I had crossed over my other leg. “Sometimes.”

“Could you sing to me?” Teresa asked.

“I'm not a wolf—I'll sound horrible compared to your mom,” I warned her, hoping to get a smile.

“I know,” Teresa said. “But the songs Mom sings call me a pup and are about wolves and the Pack. But I can't be that anymore. I don't want to hear them.”

I sucked in a breath of air and had to wait a minute for the white-hot desire to go stalk down the rogue wolf to pass, combined with the pain in my heart that screamed that Teresa should have become a wolf, and maybe I'd failed her and hadn't supported her enough to make it happen.

"I can understand that. Don't worry, I'll serenade you in my most mediocre voice. You'll be so wowed by my bad singing, it won't make you think of any other songs." I cleared my voice and tried to recall what my parents had sung to me.

The memory came more easily to my mind than I'd expected, the words and notes spouting out of my mouth before I even mentally recognized them.

"Sleep, little hunter, under the star-kissed sky. The moon loves you, and so do I," I said, more speaking than singing the words. "Sleep, little hunter, on your soft, sweet bed. Tomorrow will come, so rest your head." My gaze drifted back to the sky as I remembered my mom's smokey-sweet voice. "Sleep, little hunter, like the fox in the woods, like the bunny in its den, and the bird in the tree. Sleep tight, close your eyes, and dream of me."

Either my voice was nicer than I thought, or the medication the doctor had given her hours earlier kicked in, because I didn't even have to start a second round before Teresa fell asleep.

I waited until my arm was numb from the angle I was holding it out at before I pulled my hand from hers.

I wonder what's keeping Hector?

The staff had asked to keep her overnight. Ember was running home at the moment to get a change of clothes for Teresa and to put her two other kids to bed while Hector had stepped outside the room to talk to the hospital staff, and to call East, who was heading the investigation with the police and the wolves back at the school.

Teresa hadn't seen who had attacked her—but she didn't need to. The tuft of fur—even if it was muddied by her scent

and mine—would be more than enough for the wolves to tell who had done it.

The door snicked open.

I turned around in my chair, unsurprised to see Hector and Greyson in the doorway.

Hector nodded to me, then took my spot in the chair when I got up and strode toward Greyson.

He held his hand out. I assumed he wanted the fur, so I put the baggy in his palm.

He pinned it in place with his thumb, but then grabbed my wrist and reeled me in for a hug—one that took all the weight I didn't know I'd been holding, and all the pain I'd been keeping in.

I rested my forehead on his chest. "Thanks," I mumbled.

Greyson slid his fingers through the belt loops of my pants and half held me up as we slipped out of the door.

"Hector will stay with her tonight," Greyson said as soon as the door closed behind us. "Original Jack and a few of the humans are staying at their house with Klancy and Roanne."

"So they'll be guarded," I said.

"*Very well* guarded," Greyson said. It wasn't quite a growl, but given how I was tipped against him, I could feel that the words came from his chest.

Greyson got us down the staircase, around the few staff who were working and striding through the hallways, and outside the front doors where I felt like I could finally breathe again.

Hospitals didn't have great memories for me. I'd seen Mom and Dad slip away in a hospital, and Mama Dulce had died in a hospital as well.

It's not the staff's fault, or even the hospitals'. But I can't stand how sterile and stale they smell.

I stepped away from Greyson and stretched my arms high over my head, flexing my fingers as if I could reach the sky.

“Well?”

I turned around, and Greyson already had the plastic baggy open, sniffing the fur, which he was careful not to touch.

His eyes gleamed gold in the dim light of the street lamp behind us. “I’ll have to smell it as a wolf to be certain, but I think it’s Aspen.”

“*Aspen?*” I gaped. “No, that can’t be! She’s Harka’s niece!”

“It’s Aspen,” Greyson reiterated. “Which Hector and I were starting to suspect. She was the only wolf not to answer the call out.”

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Chapter 15

Pip

The hot fury I'd been holding in my chest twisted into the bitter, more painful knife of betrayal.

Aspen?

But she'd been a part of the Pack for years. She had played with Teresa, and laughed when Young Jack and Forrest had faced off in the various sport competitions I put them through.

How could she hurt them? How could she do this? And why? She's Pack! Rio loves her, the Pack adores her!

"There was a possibility something happened to Aspen to keep her from checking in," Greyson continued, "but the area where Teresa was attacked had her scent all over. Still, we wouldn't know for sure without this." Greyson resealed the bag. "There was another child present—she might have been the actual target—but Teresa figured out what was going on and stepped in. She did well."

"Teresa did *amazing*," I snapped. "A ten-year-old girl facing down a full-grown wolf? She was so brave, and—"

Greyson pulled me into another hug. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything." I mashed my cheek into the soft fabric of the long-sleeved shirt that covered his shoulder.

“Aspen did this. Besides, I’m not the one you should be worried about.”

“Your heart is breaking,” Greyson said with a sureness that made me flinch. “And somehow, you’re blaming yourself.”

My spit tasted sour and bitter at the same time. “I was hoping she’d make it, and be a wolf,” I whispered. “I was hoping my magic would be enough...”

“You’re a Wolf’s Kiss, Pip. Not a miracle maker,” Greyson said. “She survived. She had a one in ten chance of that. You made her live.”

“But it was everything she wanted,” I whispered.

Greyson’s arms tightened around me. “Sometimes life can be cruel. It’s not anybody’s fault. It’s the broken world we live in.”

There was something about the way he said it, his words echoed an emptiness or a pain. I peeled my cheek off his shoulder so I could look up at him, and sure enough I thought I saw pain in his eyes.

His mate, I realized. He’s got to be thinking about his mate.

Remembering that his mate even existed brought a slice of pain, and then a boatload of shame.

Of course he is. His mate is bound to him by her soul! The whole Pack has known she existed since the day he arrived. It’s stupid of me to even be sad about that. I’m not going to be shameless and have so little self-respect that I pine over someone who isn’t available. I don’t care if he hasn’t found her, I’m not like that. I wouldn’t do that to her, much less him.

I wriggled my way out of his grasp and sniffed. My nose was numb with the cold as I was still sashaying around in my work clothes and backpack—I’d left my jacket at the storage unit. “You’re going to look for Aspen?”

“We leave tonight—just a small group,” Greyson said. “Aeric, Wyatt, and myself. Depending what we find,

tomorrow we'll call in a bigger group—including you hunters.”

I nodded. “You don't need any help tonight?”

Greyson shook his head and glanced at the sky. “We've got a thunderstorm rolling in. It won't entirely erase Aspen's trail, but it will make it harder to find after it rolls through. A group of three wolves will move faster, and with the trail this fresh, we'll be able to follow her. If we don't find her, we'll need you and the Fletchings tomorrow.”

“Got it.” I chewed on my lip, something bothering me, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. “How did you keep Hector and Ember from demanding to come with you?”

“They never asked. Ember will be staying with Teresa tonight, Hector will be coordinating everything from his home—though Klancy and Roanne intend to spend the night with him and the kids as well, and East will be keeping an eye on the elementary school in case Aspen returns.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” I still couldn't exactly define why I felt uneasy, so I asked another question. “How's Rio?”

“Upset,” Greyson said.

I frowned. “Violently so?”

Greyson tilted his head. “You expect violence?”

“He's been pretty hotheaded lately,” I said. “Though who knows what Aspen told him in private? She was certainly trying for some kind of goal when she stirred up the wolves, threatening to leave the Pack.”

Greyson rubbed his bicep. “Probably. But while I'd say Rio was nearly violent, he wasn't quite. He's certainly too angry to think clearly, so he's staying behind at his house. I've got a wolf keeping an eye on him—just in case he tries to come after her.”

“Yeah, that seems like it could be disastrous. Have you told Harka?” I asked.

“The Pre-Dominant has been notified,” Greyson said. “She’s picking a team and intends to come here herself. She won’t move until we get back and decide what to do.”

I clenched my fingers so roughly my nails bit into my palms. “Aspen isn’t going to get off lightly, is she?” I asked. “Just because she’s Harka’s niece?”

“No.” Greyson’s voice was as set as concrete. “I won’t allow that.”

It wasn’t a vow lightly given, because Greyson was Alpha enough to force Harka into backing off. It might spark an upheaval in the werewolf community, but if Harka let Aspen get off, it’d be necessary.

“But it won’t come to that,” Greyson said, as if he could hear my thoughts. “Harka is fair. She cares for her family, but she’s not going to set Aspen free to frolic around the Midwest. She did ask, however, if possible for us to bring Aspen in alive—if possible.”

I gritted my teeth and warred with my emotions for a moment. On one hand, *how dare she?*

Everything Aspen did would have killed people if I hadn’t been skulking around the Pack.

Of course, Aspen knew I was around, so there was a high probability she chose the marks that would create the greatest emotional trauma, thinking they would survive.

“I guess she hasn’t killed anyone,” I said. “But she’s still a psychopath.”

“We’ll find her.” Greyson headed to the parking lot. “Come on.”

“Where are you going?” I hurried after him.

“To my car—to drive you home. I’ve got twenty minutes until Aeris and Wyatt will be ready to go. I can get you back in that amount of time.”

I hurried after him. “You just expect me to go *home* with everything that’s happening?”

Greyson looked back over his shoulder at me. “Forgive me, Lady Hunter, I didn’t know you felt like staying out here, freezing and enjoying these delightful parking lights.”

“Oh, shut up,” I growled, but there was something about the return of Greyson’s cocky attitude that let me take a breath of air.

We’re going to be okay. They’ll track Aspen tonight, and tomorrow Radcliff, Scarlett, and I can work together to help bring her in if they don’t get her.

Greyson is the best Alpha in the Midwest. He’ll get her.

I didn’t feel quite so confident when six in the morning rolled around, and there was no news from Greyson, Wyatt, or Aeric.

I checked in with Hector, who confirmed he hadn’t received any updates either.

“Do we just sit tight, then?” I pinned my cellphone to my ear with my hunched shoulder as I prepped the Bedevilments’ breakfast.

“For now, yes,” Hector said. “The projected storms have only just started. It’s probable they followed her trail until now. I imagine we’ll hear from them soon.”

“And if we don’t?”

“We will give them until the noon hour. Then we’ll create a search unit of our own.”

“Gotcha. How is Teresa doing, by the way?”

“Awake and mischievous. She already got the nurse to give her pancakes for breakfast.”

I exhaled. “Good. I’m glad to hear that. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Understood. Try to relax, Pip.”

It was times like this that I knew I underestimated Hector. Greyson was an over-powered Alpha, but Hector was a rock of strength—physically and emotionally—thinking of others even when his world had been shaken.

“Okay. Bye, Hector.” I set my phone down, then delivered Prince’s and Princess’s dishes to them.

“I don’t like this,” I told them. “Not one bit. It seems...too sketchy. Maybe Aspen has help that we didn’t know about?”

Princess sniffed her food, then peered up at me.

“That’s all you’re getting,” I told her. “Eat up.”

Princess sat with her tail curled around her paws as Prince chowed down on his dish.

When he finished his food he tried to move on to Princess’s, but she batted him in the face and hissed.

Occasionally, it does my heart good to see that they may hate me, but it’s not like they like each other all that much, either.

Still, I kept an eye on them as I peered outside. It was six thirty now, and it was only starting to get light outside. And by light, I meant that the sky was covered with angry sooty gray clouds that rolled with thunder and were starting to rain.

The droplets hit the side of my house, creating a drumming noise, and the wind kicked up wet leaves that plastered themselves against my windows.

I grabbed one of Papa Santos’s paperback mysteries, but as soon as I plopped down on the couch I knew it was a very bad choice, as the story opened up with a murder.

“Nope. Not gonna entertain that. So what else is there?”

I glanced at the bookshelves of books, but my attention was drawn to the hunter journals that I’d put on an end table. I remembered the magic practice session I’d had with Hector, Ember, Scarlett, and Radcliff.

They said I should try using my magic in different ways... but I still can’t figure out anything besides what I already do.

Maybe I should try to mess around with my magic at the very source? I should at least explore the possibility again, then look in the books.

I sat up on the couch and mentally traced out my magic, trying to recall what my parents and then the instructor the Quillons had hired for me had said about using magic.

I remembered during one of my lessons with the instructor, she'd talked me through the idea of starting and stopping the flow of magic while making it clear it was possible but not something I should ever do.

Hunter magic was different from other humans with magic—like wizards—because we always had it active and flowing for our innate powers, like our hunter senses or my puppy pheromones. Wizards, however, could start and stop the flow of their magic.

For hunters, stopping our magic flow would mean more than just pressing pause on our magic, it'd be the removal of all our natural defenses—our ability to thumb our noses at Alphas, our increased strength and stamina, and perhaps most dangerous, our hunter senses.

Simply put, cutting ourselves off from our magic—even temporarily—made us powerless humans until we reestablished the connection.

But it can't be that big of a deal. We're hunters! We're just a flavor of human that has magic. Besides, if I cut myself off, maybe when I restart it, I'll be able to track the flow to any innate Wolf's Kiss abilities and see how the magic is wielded there.

Since it seemed like a perfectly logical plan, I decided to follow through with it.

I got a good grip on my magic, braced myself, and then... sat and stared at my hands. What was I supposed to do to cut it off?

If I stop mentally holding on to my magic, it'll just ooze around. Logically that means I must have to sheer myself off at

the source where wild magic flows into my blood. I think? Maybe.

I followed my magic and felt it in my chest, tracing the curls of magic up to that point where I felt like I walked into a wall. Beyond it, I could feel wild magic, so the wall was the wellspring of my magic.

Okay, so now what?

I could feel my magic throb in my chest as I mentally poked at the wall of fortification.

Hmm, yeah. I think if I can patch up the holes in my source, that should cut off my magic and give me actual trails to follow when I restart it instead of just...magic, everywhere.

I tried mentally covering my source, but that didn't do anything except make me feel like an idiot.

If magic is something natural, like the beat of my heart, maybe I just have to refuse it—reject wild magic in a way so it doesn't pass through the source of my magic and become something I can use. That should cut me off.

Not really thinking much of it, I did it—mentally pulling back from wild magic, walling myself off so I didn't feel it filter through me anymore.

Nothing felt too weird—even as humans we couldn't really *sense* wild magic. We had ways of measuring it, but it wasn't a power we were naturally blessed with.

My source kept oozing magic—I guess it took time to filter wild magic into something usable? Or maybe I hadn't really cut myself off from wild magic.

Several minutes passed as I contemplatively stared at the ceiling.

I guess this doesn't work. It must be too abstract after all. I better check the journals and—

A few final droplets of magic trickled out of me. Then my heart stopped beating in my chest, and it felt like a part of me *died*.

My magic winked out, my hunter senses collapsed, and I felt blinded and deafened at the same time.

I hadn't realized just how much my hunter senses—the ability to find werewolves—really was another *sense*. Without it, I felt lost, like I was missing a limb I'd had my entire life.

This was only the start, though.

I felt it, my mental shield that protected me from the intimidation tactics of Alphas, lift and start to peel off. I hadn't even been aware that it existed before, but now—as it dissipated into nothing—I felt exposed and incomplete.

There was nothing protecting me. I was utterly defenseless.

I tried to cry—to scream—but nothing would come out of my mouth.

It felt like the world was darker, deadened somehow. And the reassurance and burst of power my magic constantly delivered was *gone*.

I was alone. A sitting duck. I could *feel* the strength sapping from my muscles as a coldness spread through my chest.

Alone...I was so alone, and powerless.

No. No! NO!

I hurriedly reestablished the connection, opening myself up to wild magic as panic ripped through me.

I tasted blood in my mouth as I shook, hoping that my magic would start flowing again. I waited for several long, horrible moments for the unseen wild magic to return to me.

I sobbed with relief when my magic began trickling through me again. It stretched my senses for werewolves in the area, locked my thoughts in my mind, and bolstered my every weak spot.

I hadn't realized just how familiar my magic was to me. I'd been left behind—willingly and unwillingly—my entire

life. But my magic had been with me as long as I could remember.

I sat back on the couch, a cold sweat beading on my forehead, shaking like a terrified rabbit. I threaded my magic around me just so I could *feel* it there.

Something soft brushed my hand, and thunder shook my cottage.

I squealed and sat up straight, only to find Princess standing next to me on the couch, giving me a look of disgust.

“S-sorry,” I stammered.

Princess flicked her tail at me and sauntered off.

Prince was sitting on the back of the couch. When I looked at him, he jumped down and landed on my stomach, eliciting a wheeze out of me.

I threw an arm over my stomach and snarled at the unapologetic felines.

“Hey, I feed you! The least you could give me is some sympathy—uck.”

Prince walked up my stomach and stood on my chest.

Despite my additional strength of a hunter, the immense hulk of the overweight cat was enough to make it a little hard to breathe.

“Yeah,” I eventually got out. “You’re right. I did this to myself.”

Prince purred and moved along, taking the opportunity to shove his butt in my face and twine his tail under my nose so I sneezed before he moseyed off after Princess.

I threw my arm over my face and tried to calm my frantically beating heart.

That’s one experiment I won’t be repeating.

I was never cutting off my magic like that again. It was too much a part of me—and the only thing that had been constant in my life.

When I felt like I'd recovered enough, I sat up. The room spun for a moment as I stood, but I pointed myself in the direction of the kitchen—determined to get some hot cocoa, or maybe even hard liquor after that experience.

I staggered past the end table that held the hunter family journals, and paused long enough to scoop up the Sabre book, then tottered into the kitchen.

I wasn't sure what I wanted, so I got out a mug and a wine glass—for options—then filled my kettle with water and turned on my stovetop.

Stuck waiting for the water to heat, I cracked open the journal and leaned against the counter.

I paged through the book, being extra careful with its brittle papers.

There were a lot of hand drawn illustrations of weapons and wolves for reference, but I didn't see anything that I'd associate with magic, until I got to the very back of the book where someone had drawn—in intricate, loving detail—an image of a hunter, sitting on the grass covered ground with a giant wolf curled around him, snoozing.

This is it—this has to be a Wolf's Kiss!

I eagerly studied the page, but there was only one line of writing on it.

The powers of a Wolf's Kiss are often useless for hunters who strive to protect humans from rogue, rabid, and feral werewolves, as the powers use magic in an opposite direction and instead aid werewolves.

I checked the page before and after, but there was nothing else. Just that one page.

Wow. So helpful. I am absolutely enlightened.

Sarcasm aside, it did at least prove that the Sabres did have enough hunters with such magic to record it.

Hopefully I'll find more as I more thoroughly read the journal.

The kettle chuckled as the water in it started to boil, breaking my concentration. Then something scratched the side of my house.

I shut off the heated burner and moved the kettle to a cool burner, then suspiciously listened to the silence.

Was that just my imagination, or...?

There was a grating noise that again came from outside.

I narrowed my eyes and padded over to a window, adjusting my bathrobe.

Lightning flashed across the sky, briefly lighting up my front yard. I thought I saw something *big* move out there, but I couldn't be certain—the sky was too overcast.

Where's my gun?

I got my best weapons, my fae-created gun, my twin daggers, and my pink metal baseball bat.

The last one might seem like an unlikely weapon, but if you need a weapon that can deliver *a lot* of pain with a small amount of strength and all completely silent—until you crack your attacker, that is—a metal bat can't be beat.

I kept one in my upstairs loft, and one in the closet on the main floor—just in case I had to beat off any foxes or hawks that would attack Prince and Princess in hopes of a meal.

I swapped out my robe for my black rain slicker, went around and shut the shades of the biggest windows, then dropped to my knees and scuttled around the cottage so I could get to the back window. I cracked it open—I oiled it for times just like this—and got my gun through.

My gun was a ranged weapon—not ideal for close up situations like this might be—so I was better off with my daggers and bat for the moment, until I scared off whoever was doing this, then I could shoot at them as they fled—my gun was already loaded with stun bullets, so one shot and I'd be able to drop the attacker.

Just watch. I do all of this prep work, and it'll be that overweight possum that came through a couple weeks ago. He

probably fell off the railing of the porch or something.

I cracked the back door and slipped through it, staying low.

A poke of my restored hunter senses said there was a werewolf out there, but chances were it was the wolf Greyson had assigned to watch me—whom I pitied for having to stand out in the rain.

Maybe they're approaching and are going to ask to come in so they can get out of this.

The wind was everywhere. It was so blustery it was sweeping in all directions. I had no hope of figuring out how to stay downwind.

On the plus side, the now torrential rain meant smelling anything wasn't really an option for a wolf. The scent of wet dirt and moldy leaves was too strong, and while a light rain could sometimes revive scents, downpours like this one dispersed them.

I clutched my baseball bat as I snuck around the exterior of the cottage as my heart hitchhiked its way up to my throat.

I slipped around the corner of my house, and lightning lit up the front yard, revealing what stood in my driveway.

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Chapter 16

Pip

Rain dripped off the top of my hood. “Rio?”

Rio, wearing a black t-shirt and jeans that were soaked through and plastered to him, stared at my house.

Well. That explained the werewolf I sensed. Though it was a little troubling that I couldn’t sense the wolf that Greyson had promised would be watching my house.

I debated for a moment—Rio was Aspen’s boyfriend, but he was also Hector’s brother, and I knew he’d sooner die than cross Greyson—before I approached him.

“Pip,” Rio said.

I twirled the bat and took a few steps closer to him. There was something about the way he was standing that made me stop when he was still halfway across the yard.

“You should know better than to stand in the yard like a stalker,” I said. “What would have happened if I hadn’t realized it was you and nailed you a good one?” I swung my pink baseball bat for good measure.

“Pip,” Rio repeated.

I frowned. “What?” I took another few steps closer, pausing when I was finally close enough in the drab gray

morning that I could see his expression.

His eyes were glassy, as if he had a fever, and they were unfocused.

The lightning struck, followed immediately by a crash of thunder that shook the earth. I jumped, but Rio didn't. He didn't even seem bothered by the pelting sleet.

In this icy rain, with just a t-shirt and jeans, even a wolf would be cold. But he's not shivering. He seems completely unaware of the storm.

I shifted my weight, and Rio's feverish eyes moved to me. "Pip," he repeated.

"Is that all you're capable of saying right now?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

He didn't answer, and my throat squeezed tight.

Wait...he's unfocused, got glassy eyes, and he doesn't seem aware of reality...

"Crap," I said. "Aspen was also the supplier of the wolfsbane, wasn't she?" I studied his expression as I shifted into a position that would give me maximum batting power. "And based on how you acted at the Pack meeting, I'm guessing she's been dosing you over the past few weeks."

Rio leaped at me, a howl tearing from his human throat.

I barely jumped out of the way in time, and he crashed into my porch railing, splintering it like kindling.

Ooohhh boy. I'm in for a world of hurt if he gets ahold of me.

"I'll just have to take him down first," I muttered.

I considered my daggers, but dosed as Rio was, I didn't want to *stab* him. I didn't like him, but I didn't want to kill him, and I wasn't positive I wouldn't nick a large artery, particularly in this sloppy rain.

That left my bat and my gun, and my gun wasn't going to work since a potion-fueled Rio was not going to give up or run away.

Metal bat, it is!

I swung, hitting Rio in the back of the knee cap as he struggled out of the pile of kindling he'd made of my porch railing.

Rio swung around and took a swipe at me, but I was already skittering backward, trying to keep to my gravel driveway so I didn't slip or fall like I would on my rain-slicked lawn.

"It's your fault," Rio panted. "All your fault!"

"That's definitely the chatter of the deluded." I ducked under his arm when he reached for me and popped him in the gut with the bat. I couldn't get a swing in, but it had enough force to at least make him wheeze and let me line up my next shot.

"Which," I grunted, "in my defense, you are pretty deluded at the best of times!" I nailed him on the shoulder, well aware I needed to shut up, stop talking, and focus on the fight.

But it was so *aggravating!*

This is insufferable Rio! I don't like him very much, but I thought he was better than this! Though I guess I don't know if he was being willingly dosed or not.

Rio tried again for the throat—what can I say? It's a wolf's favorite target—then cursed when I sidestepped and brought the bat down on his arm with enough force that it had to have broken a bone.

But Rio—in his potion-induced rage—didn't even yelp. He rammed his other fist into my belly with enough force to knock all the air out of my lungs and make me gag as I flopped over his wrist.

I feebly clung to my bat, aware that it was my only hope of salvation as I dropped to the ground.

Rio loomed over me, lightning illuminating his chiseled face so he looked maniacal. He smiled—something unhinged and so foreign from his usual grins that it made his face unrecognizable.

I coughed, clutched my bat with one hand, and wildly swung at his knee.

This time Rio roared as the leg—the same one I’d smacked from behind—gave out underneath him.

I struggled to my feet, biting back unnecessary words as I focused on Rio. Mud soaked through my cotton pajama pants as I adjusted my grip on my bat, then struck before he could recover, hitting him in the head.

I paused long enough to see him topple over—his eyes even hazier than before—then ran to the back of my cottage and grabbed my gun. I had it loaded and the safety off as I stalked up to Rio, who was trying to move his limbs with the coordination of a baby.

“Say good night, Rio.” I shot him at close distance with my enchanted bullets, and he immediately fell unconscious, the spell enveloping him so his eyes closed and he stopped fighting.

I stood in the howling wind and rain for a minute, just to make sure his chest still rose as he breathed.

Woah, what was that? I’m used to getting my butt handed to me by the Pack, but I just gave Rio the beat down! That was awesome! Well...except the part about Aspen also apparently being the wolfsbane supplier. Does that mean she also swiped Amos’s flash drive with the encrypted files before returning it a few hours later? Or was that just an accident?

A part of me wanted to take the opportunity to dance, maybe do a little shimmy. But I had to at least pretend to be responsible, so I took my phone out of my rain jacket and ignored the cold droplets that spattered me in the face as I raised it to my ear.

The phone rang, until voicemail picked it up.

“Hey, Hector,” I said after the beep. “I’ve got your brother over here at the cottage. It looks like Aspen dosed him up with wolfsbane. He’s unconscious—I used my spelled bullets—but I’m pretty sure you’re going to want to take him to the hospital to get checked for a possible...make that almost certain

concussion. Oh, and bring a couple fae potions, too. I think he's got some broken bones.”

Twenty minutes passed. I tried finding the wolf who was supposed to be on guard duty over my house, but I couldn't sense anyone—maybe something had happened and Hector had been forced to call him in?

I returned to my cottage and changed so I wasn't stalking around in my pajamas anymore. I put on clothes much more suited to the weather—wicking exercise pants that would dry fast if they got soaked, a sweater, and my rain jacket with the armpit vents in case I got hot doing...whatever.

I grabbed a banana and ate it as I watched Rio from the dryness of my open garage.

It was still storming outside. The lightning wasn't quite as bad as it had been, but the power of my house flickered on and off.

Hector must be putting out fires everywhere. I finished my banana, tossed the peel in the garbage, then grabbed my gun and squelched my way back out to the driveway.

I shot Rio again—the first stun spell wasn't going to wear off for a while, but I didn't want him waking up as I dragged him to the garage. It wasn't like I could just leave him outside—getting rained on while possibly concussed.

I put my gun back in the garage, then grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him.

It is a hard thing to move a werewolf—one as big in Rio, in particular. He was so big that no matter how I pulled, he didn't move more than a handful of inches, even though I was sweaty.

I got out my scooter, tied a rope around the foot of his uninjured leg, and tried dragging him.

It worked—only once I made a ramp of tarps for him so he slid around more easily than dragging him across gravel.

Once he was in the garage, I tied his hands and legs together with a combination of duct tape, zip ties, and scratchy baler twine.

I felt a little bad about that—even though it was a necessary precaution—so I also put an old blanket on him. Before I could shut the giant garage door, the power winked out. Using my cellphone, I checked on my fuse box—but everything looked fine to my uneducated eyes.

“Most likely the wind knocked a tree over into some power lines,” I grumbled.

I gnawed on my lip as I considered my options.

If I couldn't get through to Hector before, I sure as heck won't be able to now—the Pack is probably blowing up his phone with calls.

But if Aspen has any wolfsbane left, that drastically changes how we need to deal with her. It makes it even worse that Greyson and the others haven't returned yet. But almost all of my tracking abilities will be useless now that it's rained.

Still...there had to be something I could do. I wasn't going to sit around and wait for Rio to wake up. I needed to notify other wolves, but the ones I was closest to were either missing or not answering their phone.

Except for East and Jack...

I didn't know where Jack was...but Greyson had told me East was staying at the school.

That's where I'll go.

I went inside, made sure the cats had plenty of water, then headed back out, locking all the doors.

I called Hector again as I stood on my porch, shivering a little in my rain jacket—mentally praising myself for springing for the extra expense and getting reinforced hems so the jacket didn't leak.

“Hector, hi,” I said when I got his answering machine again. “Rio is in my garage—the door is stuck open since the power went out, but at least he’s out of the rain. I shot him with another stun spelled bullet, so now you’ve got about an hour and a half before he wakes up. I’m heading out—I’m going to hike out to the elementary school. I think East is still stationed there, so I’ll check in with him. Bye.”

I grabbed my gun and daggers, then regretfully left behind my bat.

While it had served me well against Rio, my gun and daggers were better weapons on the move. And unless Aspen spiked the Timber Ridge water system and dumped barrels of wolfsbane in the water, I didn’t think it was possible for her to easily dose more than Rio with it, so the chances of me having to fight again were pretty much nil.

It was going to be a long, wet walk out to the elementary school. But the lightning had eased up even more, and it wasn’t pouring quite as much.

Maybe they’ll get the power up in a few hours?

I trudged up the gravel path that would lead me to one of the main roads that cut through the Pack’s lands and contemplated calling ahead to let East know I was coming—with my luck he’d relocated, and when I got out there no one would be around.

I started to unzip my pocket so I could fish my phone out.

“P-Pip?”

I paused, peered around the road—but there was no one around. Confused, I turned around to look behind me, freezing when I saw scared, soaked Shania trip out of the forest, crying when she was wrenched to her feet by *Aspen*.

Aspen wore a dark brown rain jacket that was spotted with swirls of grays and greens that would make it easier for her to blend in with the forest. Her makeup was flawless, and she was completely unbothered as Shania—her hand secured behind her back with a zip tie—took in a shuddering breath and sagged in her grasp.

“Hello, Pip,” Aspen said. Her smile was just as polite as always, which made the whole situation feel even more bizarre and terrible.

I fitted my fingers to my mouth so I could form my hunter whistle, but before I could make a note, Aspen had a knife to Shania’s throat.

“No, you won’t be calling for help today,” she said.

I froze. My fingers were so cold that they were a searing sensation on my lips as I tried to think.

What do I do? Obviously no one knows she’s here.

I was still only half twisted around, and my pocket with my cellphone faced away from her. *Maybe I can unlock it and speed dial someone?*

It seemed unlikely I’d be able to pull it off without looking at the screen, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

I casually lowered my hand, and worked on sliding it into my pocket.

“Awfully gutsy of you to roam around Pack land like this,” I said. “Greyson will gut you when he finds you.”

Aspen laughed. “Greyson isn’t going to be a problem.”

That’s not good. That’s definitely not good.

“But you—you’ve gotten stronger.” Aspen tilted her head and sounded genuinely complimentary. “I thought Rio would have been enough to rough you up. But it seems he didn’t even scratch you. Congratulations.”

How can she sound so normal in all of this and hold a knife to Shania’s throat?

I’d managed to unlock my phone; it vibrated a little in my hand when it opened.

“Even now, you’re trying to dial for help. You are quite the hunter. But we can’t have you notifying others, so show me your cellphone, please,” Aspen said. “And turn around to face me.”

I pressed my lips together in my disappointment, but I wasn't giving up quite yet. I took my time turning around as I turned the volume down on my phone as low as it could go with the buttons on the side. I then made a show of pulling it out of my pocket and switching my grasp on it so I could swipe open my recent contacts list.

I made sure to point the back of my phone at Aspen, while I tapped my thumb on the phone screen and called whoever's name was within reach of my thumb. I didn't even see the name as I was trying not to look at it and draw attention to it.

"Throw the phone into the woods," Aspen ordered.

I made a face as I prayed the rain covered up the quiet ringing noise my phone made even with the volume turned down. "Can't I gently toss it?" I asked. "This is a new model. I had to save for this for *months* since the Bedevilments eat most of my paycheck."

"Don't worry about it," Aspen told me. "You won't be using it again."

That's not good either.

When I glanced up at the phone I saw it had connected—to Scarlett Fletching.

Not my first choice, but she'll work!

"If I throw my phone into the forest, will you let Shania go?" I asked, pitching my voice extra loud in hopes that my phone would pick up on it.

Aspen raised one eyebrow. "No," she said. "Throw the phone, Pip. *Now.*" It was the first note of anger I'd heard in her voice, and I really didn't like the way she pressed the flat of her knife into Shania's throat.

Shania stared pleadingly at me as she squirmed a little in the werewolf's powerful grasp.

"Okay, I'll throw it. What do you want next?" I threw the phone across the road so it landed just off the gravel—hopefully still close enough that it might pick up on *something*.

“Throw your gun.”

I thought about protesting this, too—my fae modified gun was even more expensive than my phone.

But I saw she’d switched from having the flat of her knife pressed against Shania’s bobbing throat to the edge of her knife.

So I slipped off my gun case, which was slung across my back, and tossed it into the forest as well.

“Daggers, too.”

This is the real danger of the enemy being a packmate. She knows me, and she knows how I operate.

I gritted my teeth as I pulled out my matching silver daggers and tossed them into the forest as well.

I held my breath as I waited to see if she remembered that I usually carried a belt knife when I was outfitted for hiking.

She did, unfortunately.

“And lose the belt,” Aspen said. “I know you keep hidden knives and daggers there.”

I unbuckled my belt and tossed it as well—though I didn’t throw it very far in since Aspen didn’t seem too concerned about it, and I tried to toss it under a bush so it would hopefully avoid getting soaked through if the downpours started back up and retain more of my scent.

“Come on.” Aspen smiled at me and nodded at the forest. “We’re going off path, and you’re going in first.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Please, Pip. Give me some credit. I’m not stupid enough to tell you that. Now pull your hood down and get your hands behind your head as you walk. Your human friend, here, will pay for any sudden movements you make.”

Shania’s teeth chattered—from both fear and the cold as she wasn’t dressed for the rain like I was.

I had my hands folded behind my head, but I paused at the edge of the forest. “Can I give Shania my jacket?”

Aspen slashed Shania’s arm.

Shania yelped in pain and momentarily struggled, but Aspen held her with an iron grip, using just one hand as she watched me. “Stop stalling and scheming, Pip. I’m going to run out of patience.”

I plunged into the woods. Wet plants and bushes slapped me on the thighs, soaking through the thin fabric of my exercise pants.

“Head left,” Aspen directed.

I did as I was told, but climbing through the rough terrain was a little difficult when I had my arms held high, so I stumbled on roots, rocks, and downed trees.

I could hear Shania dragging behind me. Considering she was now bleeding and walking with a knife at her throat, I was awed she hadn’t descended into hysteria yet—I would have!

I think I could get away from Aspen now. She’s got her hands full with Shania, and I’m versed enough in hiding that it’d be doable to screen myself from one wolf. But I’m almost certain she’d kill Shania.

I stumbled, and almost fell, but righted myself at the last second.

“Hunter reflexes.” Aspen heaved a sigh of aggravation as Shania fell to her knees behind me. “It’s a nifty thing to have—it makes you so much more tolerable than humans.”

Letting Aspen march us to wherever her secret den is may be the worst thing we could do, but I can’t turn around and attack Aspen—she’ll kill Shania before I get the chance.

Every so often Aspen barked out directions to me, changing our route. I purposely dragged my feet through the leaves and tried to leave a clear path, but Aspen took us through a few of the smaller streams and did some circling back—making our trails as confusing as possible to anyone who might follow us.

It also confused the heck out of me.

Between the twisting non-paths she took us on, and the dark skies that made it impossible to tell what time it was or what direction we were heading in, I got turned around within twenty minutes of our hike.

But I didn't give up. I made sure to turn around and peer back at Aspen whenever she gave directions, brushing up against as many plants as I possibly could. And I didn't try to rein in my stumbling all the time—the more things I could plant my scent on the greater chance there was that the Pack could follow our trail, even though we went through water.

The rain started picking up again, and more lightning flashed overhead as thunder rolled at a deafening volume.

I couldn't even hear Shania's unsteady breathing anymore, and without my hood, my white hair got soaked, and freezing rain trickled down my back, soaking me through and drowning my hopes that the Pack could follow us.

It felt like we hiked forever, but when we finally popped out of the woods, it was into a meadow—or what once was a meadow, it'd been taken over by prairie grasses, weeds, and sapling trees—which housed a large, barn-like building.

Its gray paint was peeling, and it looked like it had some significant roof damage considering a bunch of shingles had been ripped off in places—in other words, the perfect setting for a horror movie.

It took me a few moments to realize I recognized the building—it was the old lodge.

The Pack had a new one built when I was starting high school and left this one. Hudson said the location was too remote from Timber Ridge—which was starting to be important as werewolf businesses were flourishing—and the place had been built in the early 1900s by the original members of the Northern Lakes Pack, so the AC, heat, and electricity were primitive at best.

For a while the Pack had talked about turning it into a recreation center, or a storage location, but in the end it was

too far from the Pack's new lodge for everyday use. It also wasn't safe to use as a hangout since all utilities had to be turned off as it was a giant fire hazard.

Some of the kids of the Pack used to come out here to hang out when I was in college. But even that hadn't lasted long, because what was the point? The new lodge was—in comparison—practically a five-star hotel, and if they even drank a sip of alcohol or walked through cigarette smoke, their werewolf parents would smell it on them before they got through the front door of the house.

(Werewolf parents have interesting parental concerns considering how different they are from humans. You want to jump off the second story of a house or leap from a tree into a lake? Have at it. But if you do *anything* that could at all impair your judgment and make it anything less than perfect, you'd get the smack down of a lifetime. It made sense, considering werewolves—the strong ones, anyway—were all about control.)

Apparently Aspen's parents didn't teach her enough about control, however, so maybe it's just a Northern Lakes Pack thing.

It seemed unlikely—Harka was just as fierce and serious about werewolves being responsible with their abilities, and she was Aspen's aunt.

“We're going to the lodge,” Aspen told me in a casual tone—as if we were hiking together for fun.

Yeah, no, this has nothing to do with how she was parented. She's just absolutely nuts.

“Got it!” I kept my voice cheerful, hoping that if I could match her crazy, maybe she wouldn't be impulsive in offing Shania or me. “Are you sure it's not going to fall down on us?”

“I'm certain,” Aspen said.

Hmm, sounds like she's been here a lot. Is this what she's been using as her base?

I mean, she had to be storing the wolfsbane *somewhere* remote enough that the Pack wouldn't smell it when she poured out doses to give to Rio.

"Push the door," Aspen ordered me. "*Slowly*. It'll open."

I nudged the door with my hip, and it creaked as it swung open.

I stepped inside, wrinkling my nose at the smell of mold, dust, and mouse and bird droppings.

"This place is probably a toxic mess," I said. "How do you stand it with your nose?"

"Thanks for your concern—" Aspen started.

That was not concern.

"But I'll survive as I have." She dragged Shania inside, out of the rain, and I finally got a chance to hear Shania breathe.

She was even paler than she had been when she and Aspen emerged from the trees—her lips were practically purple—and her breath was coming in painful wheezes that were fast and sounded like they ripped her lungs apart.

"Shania." I took a step toward them, until Aspen flashed her giant knife again.

"Head down the hallway, Pip, and take the stairs at the end," Aspen instructed. "Keep your hands up."

My arms ached and were numb from holding them up so long, but fear is an excellent encourager, so I held my shaking arms up as I walked through the dusty innards of the abandoned lodge.

The front part of the old lodge was open concept, with tarp covered counters and a huge open space that used to house a table and lots of couches and chairs for the Pack to sit in.

The hallway Aspen directed me to was at the back of the open area—it led to two bathrooms, what used to be Hudson's old office, and a guest bedroom.

I measured my steps as I walked toward the hallway, aware this was probably my last chance to do something—it'd be a

lot harder to get past her and get upstairs.

Though if I can just get her away from Shania, I could try taking her on. In that case, the bottom of the stairs is ideal.

It was cold—the rims of my ears were so cold it hurt—and with my wet hair I was starting to shiver, too.

Raindrops dripped off me, splattering the dirty floor as I picked my way over the bird poop that crusted the floor. When lightning flashed and was followed by a violent roar of thunder, the entire building shook and creaked.

I sucked in a deep breath, getting a lung full of the musty, sour smelling air, and started down the wooden staircase, which turned at a ninety-degree angle halfway down and opened up into another hallway.

I went down the stairs faster than I knew Aspen could with a struggling-to-breathe Shania.

“Pip, slow down,” Aspen called, but I’d already reached the base of the stairs. “*Pip.*”

“I’m here.” I stepped to the side and turned around so I could face Aspen, my hands still above my head. There’d been some natural light from the windows on the first floor, but down here there was only one tiny casement window at the far end of the basement, which made the place nearly pitch black and extra creepy.

Thankfully, as a hunter I had better night vision, but there wasn’t much to trip on down here. There was only dust, and doors to smaller rooms.

Easier to fight in—though I’d give anything to have my bat right now.

I shuffled to the side, appearing to make room for the pair. But when Shania had one step left in the staircase, I moved. I reached past her, smashing the palm of my hand into Aspen’s throat.

Chapter 17

Pip

Aspen gurgled, but she kicked Shania down the last stair and pushed her away.

Shania huddled on the ground, struggling to breathe as Aspen and I fought.

I managed an eye jab. Aspen howled, but she grabbed my wrists with her hands and latched on, still coughing as she tried to recover.

I tried to slam my knee into her—aiming for her side and lower back.

Aspen moved away so I wasn't able to hit her with my full strength, but it was enough to make her stagger.

She smashed my wrists together so my bones practically ground on each other, held them with one hand, then yanked hard enough on my hair that I saw stars.

I really, seriously have to get better about braiding my hair when I go out!

Though I couldn't see, I was lining up my next move—if I could get my knee up between us, I could probably kick her backward and free my wrists again.

I heard a door creak open—but it sounded heavier than it should have. She flung me into the room, and my skin scraped painfully on cement as my vision cleared enough for me to see again.

I jumped to my feet and ran at the door, but Aspen slammed it shut just as I reached it.

I cursed under my breath as I slammed my fists into the door—then regretted it immensely as I realized it was not a wooden door, but something that felt like it was reinforced with cement.

“Aspen!” I shouted.

I planted my ear to the door, but I couldn’t hear much—Shania’s breathing was too quiet to hear.

I groaned as I turned around and leaned against the door.

I would have had her if I had just a little more time—but I didn’t plan for her to corner me like this!

I eyed the room I’d been shoved into.

It was nearly dark—there was one bubbled window to the outside that was covered with rusted metal bars. The floor was bare concrete, the walls were cinderblocks. Besides the door out, there was what looked like one of those through-doors that zoos use to let animals in and out of their enclosures.

The room was approximately the size of the bedroom, and for a moment I wondered if this had been a cellar, until my eyes finally picked up the splashes of blood on the wall that were so old, they were brown and faded with age.

There were jagged marks in the cinderblocks, and one of the metal bars over the window—which I tried shaking but didn’t budge—looked like something had gnawed on it.

“This is a panic room,” I realized.

Back in the 1900s—when the lodge was built—wolves weren’t organized quite as well as they are today because there were so many more of them. Some Packs didn’t even have true Alphas because the elves had actively hunted them before they in turn were eradicated in the war decades prior. For a

wolf, not having an Alpha made the change from human to werewolf a lot more violent.

Frequently, humans who wanted to attempt it were thrown into rooms like this one—so they couldn't hurt anyone or escape while they shifted. The little doors were to give packmates access to see if they'd survived or not.

It was an ugly part of werewolf history, one that was thankfully no longer needed today.

But just because a half-crazy, half-changed human-werewolf couldn't get out of a room reinforced to hold them doesn't mean a hunter can't!

The window was my first option.

The metal bars were woven in too tight a pattern for me to get more than two fingers through, and the plastic window bubbled so I couldn't reach it.

I started checking my clothes to see what else I had that Aspen hadn't thought to make me leave behind.

I had my keys, but even holding my keys I still couldn't reach the window—and even if I could, it was unlikely I'd be able to scratch the window open.

Shania screamed—a painful sound ripe with terror.

“Shania!” I ran back to the door and tried to rattle it.

Shania's screams turned into sobs and trailed out a lot faster than I would have expected.

It's her asthma, she probably can't breathe anymore.

“Aspen!” I shouted, putting all the fury and force I had behind the word. “Don't hurt her!”

She had to be able to hear me—werewolf hearing is amazing.

Come on, magic! Work! Hudson left because I was unknowingly taking control of the Pack from him. I'm capable of it—do it!

“Aspen!” I shouted again. I mentally puffed my magic up around me, hoping it would do something. “Open the door and stop whatever you’re doing to Shania!”

I pushed at my magic with everything I had, to the point where the cold rain drops that dripped from my hair felt hot against my skin.

If I can't figure this out, my magic can just do it! I gritted my teeth as I tried by sheer force of will.

Outside, someone yelped in pain, and my heart stuttered.

“Aspen!” I snapped.

Silence passed for several moments, before the door creaked open.

Did my magic actually work?

Aspen threw Shania at me.

We both fell before I caught more than a glimpse of Aspen—who was wearing the sack-like dress the Northern Lakes wolves wore when they came out of a transformation.

My lungs seized up.

No, no, no, no—she didn't.

I rolled Shania off me so I could get a better look at her.

Between my eyesight and the tiny bit of light that came in through the window, I could see that Aspen had mauled Shania as a wolf.

She set off the change...in Shania...who has asthma, and will never survive.

“Shania, Shania can you hear me?”

Shania’s breathing was fast, pained wheezes. “P-p-pip.” It took her several tries to get enough oxygen to say anything. “T-tell Aeric...this i-isn't his f-fault.”

“You can tell him after you survive this,” I said. “Because you’re going to.”

Shania shut her eyes, and a cough wracked her system as her muscles started jumping. “Don't lie, Pip.”

“I’m not lying,” I said. “You’re going to get through this. Do you hear that, magic? She’s Pack, she has to get through this.”

I babbled to myself like an idiot, but Shania was coughing so hard she’d never hear.

“She’s my family—she’s Pack. I don’t care if she has a pre-existing condition. She’s going to survive. I will *make* her survive. She’s family—Aeric is in *love* with her for crying out loud! She’s my closest friend—I can’t let her die.”

Shania’s entire body shook with her coughs. “Y-you have to tell Aeric.” She held her breath for a moment as she tried—unsuccessfully—to cut off her asthma attack. “Or he’s going to think...b-because I got involved with him...I died.”

“It’s not going to happen.” I did everything I could think of. I tried to spread my magic through the room and let my senses rest just inside. I tried channeling it, tried grabbing more.

None of it felt right, but I was going to do everything I could think of, because Shania *had* to survive!

I was clinging to Shania’s hand—I wanted to hug her but she was coughing so hard she was curled up in a ball.

Desperate as I watched her coughs become weaker, I gulped. “Save her. *Please*.” I was crying as I clutched her hand. “It can’t end like this. What’s the point of having these powers if I can’t save her?”

I darkly remembered the illustration in the Sabre journal.

The powers of a Wolf’s Kiss are often useless for hunters who strive to protect humans from rogue, rabid, and feral werewolves, as the powers use magic in an opposite direction and instead aid werewolves.

“Opposite direction.” My teeth chattered from the cold and fear as I watched Shania fight to breathe. “Okay, fine. I’ll do that—I go in the opposite direction.”

I savagely grabbed my magic at the source, but instead of letting it flow through my body, I slammed it in the opposite

direction.

It's hard to explain what it felt like, because there's not really a way to go up or down in your own body. It was more like...I was reversing the flow of magic. Instead of gushing downstream like a river, it was glowing uphill.

It was like seeing a waterfall in reverse—it felt so weird, so *wrong*, but it still felt like my magic, and it was moving.

It didn't pool at my fingertips like my regular hunter magic did. I couldn't even tell exactly where it went, but I had to hope it was doing something to help.

The small door on the opposite side of the room scraped open.

I squeezed Shania's hand, torn between investigating the other room, and staying with her.

The decision was made for me when two huge wolves pushed their way through the door.

One was dark brown in color with a brush of gray on the chest—he was built with obvious muscles in his haunches and chest. The taller one was leaner with a reddish coat and a small black mask that splashed across his face and muzzle.

I released the breath I'd been holding and had to brace myself in my relief. "Aeric, Wyatt. How did you two make it in here? Did you get Aspen? We have to hurry—Shania is..."

I trailed off as I studied them.

Neither of them wagged their tails. Wyatt sniffed the air and licked his chops, and Aeric was breathing heavily.

When they glanced at me, my relief died a violent death.

Their eyes were glassy and unfocused. Like a wolf on a heavy dose of wolfsbane.

The plastic bubble of my window cracked, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. Outside, someone peeled back the bubble, filling the room with the soft sound of rain and distant thunder.

I glanced up, unsurprised to see Aspen, flopped down on her belly so she could watch from the wet safety of the outdoors.

“I assume you recognize the signs of wolfsbane,” Aspen said. “You’ve witnessed it firsthand, after all.”

Wyatt twitched his nose again and licked his chops. His hackles raised as he took another step into the room, but he jostled Aeric in the process. Aeric snarled at him, showing his teeth. Wyatt growled in return.

“How?” I shook my head, unable to believe that my two oldest friends were so far gone...they weren’t even mentally *here*.

I hurriedly dragged Shania away, positioning her so she was huddled in the corner. She was fever hot, and her breathing sounded worse, but I had to protect her as well as I could.

One hunter versus two wolves was pretty poor odds, especially since I was facing Aeric and Wyatt. Both of them were incredibly strong. But if my magic perked up, I could maybe beat them back temporarily.

Maybe I could shove them back in the previous room and just hold out until the Pack comes? Because they have to come. They will come!

Aspen propped her chin up on her hands. “The potion can be loaded into a dart, much like a tranquilizer.”

Aeric and Wyatt continued their standoff, flashing their teeth until Aeric broke and went for Wyatt’s throat. For the throat of his *best friend*.

Wyatt smashed his head into Aeric’s and rammed him, rolling him onto his back.

Aeric snapped at Wyatt’s belly, then they abruptly looked back behind them at the open door and separated.

“It’s easy enough to shoot them from their open window. They’ve been juiced up for hours, now—nice and feral, mad enough to kill you and your human friend.” Aspen said this all

in a factual tone, as if she wasn't talking about two wolves—werewolves she knew and had hunted with—ripping us to pieces.

“No,” I breathed. “How could you *do* this? Aeric and Wyatt won't mentally recover from something like this!”

“After everything I've done, do you really think that would concern me?” Aspen asked.

“They're your *Pack*!”

“You seem to have some mistaken ideas about Pack, Pip,” Aspen told me. She watched nonchalantly as Aeric finally seemed to notice Shania and me. Ropes of drool dropped from his mouth, and his eyes glowed as he lowered his head into a stalking mode.

Behind me, Shania's wheezes had stopped, but they were swapped for yelps of agony—she was going to die soon from the change, if Aeric or Wyatt didn't get through me first.

“Pack doesn't get foisted off on you—it's not a label you can slap on in an attempt to make them loyal,” Aspen continued. “Each wolf decides who Pack is to them. And the Northern Lakes wolves never were Pack to me.”

“Not even Rio?” I almost plopped down in surprise, but Aeric was still stalking closer.

Wyatt, thankfully, seemed more interested in Aspen, and was standing beneath the window, growling up at her.

“Not even Rio,” Aspen informed me. “My family has always been what I care most about.”

“Then why are you doing this?” I scrambled to my feet. “Why come here at all if you cared about your family? You could have stayed with Harka and Rafe and their Pack in Magiford and spared us all your psychopathic breakdown!”

Aeric lunged at me, snapping his massive jaws.

I front kicked him in the throat, shoving him backward.

It only worked because he had made a slow invasion and hadn't jumped—or he would have broken my leg with his

momentum.

“Whatever,” Aspen said. “There’s not really a point in telling you—you’re not going to survive.”

“And neither are you,” I snapped. “The whole Pack knows what you’ve done!”

Aspen tapped her fingers on her cheek, then adjusted the hood of her raincoat. “Obviously. Why do you think I arranged for all of this?” She motioned to Aeric and Wyatt. “Although the best has yet to arrive. Seems like it’s sleeping.”

My heart rattled in my chest—I was either running on adrenaline or magic, I couldn’t tell the difference anymore.

Aspen leaned back, peering down the length of the old lodge. It seemed like she was looking at the window of the room Wyatt and Aeric had come from.

“They’ll hunt you down,” I gulped. “And make you pay for all of this.”

Aspen glanced down at me again. “And will that make you feel better about the lie that all wolves in the Pack actually mean something to each other? Please.” She laughed. “Even without me, there are wolves within the Northern Lakes Pack who hate each other and don’t get along. Rio disliked Greyson long before I arrived. Some of the fringe wolves will hate Easton for trying to work with humans and lowering himself to do police work. Packs are not the happy family units you think they are.”

Wyatt wandered away from the window and turned in my direction. He crouched close to the ground, taking up a stalking position.

Wolves generally chase their prey, they don’t stalk. But the crouch Wyatt took up was one I’d seen wolves use to attack one another. Except this time his sight was set on me.

The potion really does have him. I was hoping he wasn’t entirely gone...

I stood as tall as I could, not moving so I hopefully wouldn’t further incite him. “Enough,” I snapped at Wyatt,

using my firm voice in hopes that I could maybe get him to back down.

I could *see* Wyatt's gaze narrowing in on my throat, and it sent shivers down my spine. But when he jumped at me, I was ready. I dodged to the side then rammed my elbow at the base of his skull.

He retreated, circling back behind Aeric, who was already lining me up again.

“Seems like it’s just about the end. I’ll just go stir up the finale.” Aspen pushed herself up, until I could see only her feet and lower legs.

“Aspen!” I shouted. “It’s not too late! You can still let us out!”

“And undo the mountains I moved to make all of this? Hah!” Aspen laughed, then disappeared from the view of the window.

Wyatt streaked toward me. I nailed him with a kick, but my aim was off, and I got him in the chest rather than the throat. He grabbed me by the arm and bit down.

Hissing in pain, I shoved my arm back into his molars—which were for crushing, but he’d have a harder time of that while we wrestled instead of his teeth up front that could rip my arm to shreds and have me pass out from blood loss.

I slammed my free fist into his head as I pushed into him, trying to knock him off balance.

Aeric growled.

I kept hammering away on Wyatt’s skull, but turned just in time to see Aeric pounce at me.

I dropped to the ground, but he’d measured his leap too well—he was going to land on top of me.

An angry wolf snarl came from behind me—one that made the hair on the back of my neck tingle.

Chapter 18

Pip

I sucked my neck into my shoulders, and looked up as a red wolf jumped over my head, colliding with Aeric midair.

Where did—

Confused, I swung around.

Shania was gone—all that remained was her tattered, blood-spattered clothing.

Impossible. Even if I got Aspen talking, that wasn't nearly long enough for her to change!

I swung back around, my shock so great I didn't even feel when Wyatt squeezed my arm with his teeth.

Shania had changed and become a werewolf.

She'd shifted into a beautiful wolf with a tawny red coat that was shorter than a typical wolf's. She was smaller than Aeric. Actually, her build was almost similar to a greyhound—far leaner and with longer and more slender limbs.

But despite her size, despite the fact she'd been a werewolf for *moments*, Shania plowed into Aeric. She rammed him to the wall, completely overwhelming him.

I swear she got bigger before my eyes, taking up more space as she bit down on the back of Aeric's neck.

Aeric yelped as Shania forced him to the ground, rolling him onto his back.

The display restarted my brain, so I jabbed my fingers into Wyatt's eyes.

He scooted backward, releasing me and snarling in pain.

Aeric got out from underneath Shania and regrouped with Wyatt, snarling at us.

Shania circled back to me, panting as she leaned into my side and wagged her tail.

I grinned down at her, finally feeling hopeful about the situation. *We've got this. Shania can more than handle one of them. I just have to keep the other occupied so they can't double team her.*

"Wow, the power of a Wolf's Kiss is stronger than I thought," Aspen said.

She peered down at us from the window once again. "I really thought she'd die because of her asthma—that's why I went through the trouble of finding her. But I guess your magic is that impressive."

"I always thought you were crazy for dating Rio," I said. "Now, I get it. You're really one of those ax murderers who's good at pretending to be normal."

"Nah," Aspen said. "I'm just willing to sacrifice anything—and anyone—for my family."

"If you think *Harka* would be okay with you doing this, you've got another think coming."

Aspen shrugged. "Maybe. Still, with your magic it's a shame it had to be you sacrificed for this, but it makes the maximum impact. Sorry."

Wyatt moved toward us, but Shania snarled deep and loud, and he stopped in his tracks.

I laughed. "Yeah, except you're totally out of touch with reality—Shania and I can survive this."

“You can survive these two, certainly,” Aspen agreed. “But him? Not so much.”

She pointed to the door, and my heart fell as an enormous, white wolf stepped through the between door.

Greyson.

He was so big, he had to hunch down to fit, but when he looked at me, his eyes had the same glassy shine that Aeric and Wyatt had, and his breathing seemed weird and off.

No. Greyson.

We’d never survive him. He was too strong and overwhelming. He’d kill us...and realize what he’d done when he woke up.

It will destroy him.

Aeric and Wyatt would never forgive themselves for this, but *Greyson*—he’d feel like he had to pay, and the Northern Lakes Pack would fracture irrevocably.

...that’s what she wants.

I snapped my head to Aspen. “*This* is why you’re trying to get me killed—because you’re hoping *Greyson*—an Alpha—killing a hunter—will ruin him. *Greyson* has been your target this whole time, from selling wolfsbane to changing wolves! Everything you did—threatening to leave, inciting fear in the Pack—all of it discredits *Greyson*!”

Aspen studied *Greyson*—she didn’t look particularly hateful, just very matter of fact. “Yep. And it’s going to work perfectly.”

“He never did anything to you—no one from the Pack has. What could you possibly have against him?” I demanded.

“Call it a preemptive move,” she said.

“Wha—”

Greyson growled, and I nearly bit my tongue I closed by mouth so fast.

He stalked closer, his gold eyes glowing in the darkness of the room.

Wyatt snarled at him, but in the blink of an eye Greyson had him pinned by the throat and stood over him as Wyatt whined.

Greyson moved away, his gaze locking on to us.

“Goodbye, Phillipa Sabre.” Aspen maneuvered herself so she was crouching. “I’m sorry it had to end this way—there was a possibility, but in the end I think this is the most impactful plan.”

I gulped as Greyson glanced at Wyatt and Aeric, and they backed up, their tails tucked.

No, this can't be it.

In the distance, I heard wolves howl.

It's the Pack. Maybe, maybe if we push Greyson back, we'll survive?

At least I could tell Shania as much. With the other wolves off in crazytown, they wouldn't understand anything I said.

“Shania,” I said. “We have to focus on Greyson. If we're lucky, Aeric and Wyatt won't step in.”

Shania huffed and shifted so more of her weight was on her back paws.

“Now,” I said.

Shania lunged forward, and I moved with her.

She was a little faster than me, so she reached Greyson a half a second before me, her lips peeled back in a snarl.

Greyson—far bigger than she was—struck, grabbing her by the neck. With one twitch he flung her into the wall.

Shania hit it with so much force she bounced off it and collapsed in a whimper.

While pulling off this move, Greyson had his neck wide open, so I tried to kick him there—and hopefully choke him—but before I could even brush his fur with my foot, Greyson

evaded to the side. He had me pinned to the ground in an instant, one massive paw planted on my chest.

He curled his lips back—revealing his teeth—and snapped at my exposed throat as I tried to wriggle out from under him.

Shania recovered and rammed him from the side, but Greyson again caught her—this time by the scruff of her neck, and tossed her down so she hit the floor with an audible crack.

I tried kicking him in the gut, but Greyson leaned harder onto my chest, his nails digging through my thin rain jacket.

Outside, the howls grew closer, and I could hear Aspen shifting as she impatiently waited for Greyson to finish the job.

I'm ashamed to admit when he lunged at me, his hot breath hitting my throat, I clenched my eyes shut, braced for pain, and felt...nothing.

I cautiously opened an eye and nearly screamed—Greyson's head was *right there*, his muzzle a hair's width from my throat.

He wasn't showing his teeth anymore, instead he was sniffing deeply. His wet nose brushed my skin, and I felt something graze my boot—his *tail*.

Is he...is he wagging his tail?

I peeled my neck off the floor—just high enough to confirm that yes, Greyson's white tail was faintly wagging.

Did he snap out of it? Is Greyson seriously that powerful that he just broke the spell of wolfsbane?

He backed up off me, and I cautiously sat up, coughing a little from the stinging pain his heavy paws left on my chest. My mouth dried up when I got another look at his eyes—which were still glassy from the potion.

When Aeric shifted, Greyson turned on him, snapping. Then he returned all of his attention to me and circled around me, brushing my shoulders as he wagged his tail.

How is this possible? I sat, stunned, as Greyson nosed my cheek. *The only thing that can reach a wolf gone feral is their mate, but that's not possible. Hunters can't be mates—we're physically incapable of it. It must be because I'm a Wolf's Kiss?*

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Aspen slammed her fist into the mud, and a broken sob tore from her. “The chances had to be a million to one—or *smaller!* And...” She broke into hysterical laughter. “I did so much work—for nothing! It shouldn’t even be possible!”

I set a hand on Greyson’s shoulders as I warily watched her.

Her plan was absolutely diabolical—she really wants to hurt Greyson. There’s no way she’s going to just let it go, even if the Pack is closing in.

Aspen abruptly stopped laughing and pushed herself up to her knees, her upper body disappearing for a moment. “But it’s not over. If I can’t take him out politically, I’ll just wreck him personally.”

“What, are you an emotional assassin, now?” I snarked.

“Yes.” Aspen knelt at the window again, holding a handgun. She racked the slider, loading a bullet into the chamber, then flicked off the safety.

My blood turned cold. *This is bad. Using a pistol, from this close a distance, it’ll be easy for her to get a clean shot.*

Aspen poked the barrel of the handgun through the iron grate and aimed it at *me*, not Greyson. “At least this way you won’t suffer,” she offered, as if it was a consolation prize.

I didn’t get what she was talking about, but I wasn’t going to waste effort asking. My hunter-given adrenaline kicked in, and I pushed off Greyson, rolling to make myself a harder target.

The howls of the Pack were so close. *If I can avoid getting hit for just a minute, I can still make it!*

A shot hit the cement floor mere inches away from where I was rolling. The bullet took a chunk out of the floor—pummeling my side with grit—then ricocheted off and hit the cinderblock wall.

Aspen growled a curse that I barely heard over the pounding of my heart, but before she could take another shot, Greyson lunged.

He growled—a noise of blood and fury—as he flung himself at the iron grate. He slammed his front paws into it, and *bent* it.

I gaped at him, and Aspen fell backward in surprise.

Greyson rammed the grate again, and it crunched, breaking through the cement wall, leaving the window open.

Displaying more grace than any shifter his size should possess, Greyson leaped, dragging himself through the small window as he howled.

I heard wet squelches as Aspen ran. There was the angry shout of another shot, but she must have missed because Greyson chased after her.

“Greyson—don’t kill her!” I shouted through the window. I glanced back at Shania, who was still laid flat, and Aeric and Wyatt, who were warily pressed into the wall.

They’ll be fine for a minute. Hopefully Aeric and Wyatt don’t try to come out after me.

The last thing we needed was for them to run into the rest of the Pack while feral.

I grabbed the ledge and boosted myself through, scratching the palms of my hands on the torn-up cinderblocks of the wall and launching myself into a mud puddle outside.

I struggled to my feet as Aspen wildly shot at Greyson. I lost count of how many times she shot as she tried to push him back. It was useless—with the wolfsbane pumping through his system, he didn’t even hesitate as bullets went whizzing past him.

They were about halfway across the meadow, and Greyson was nearly on her.

Aspen aimed at his chest.

“*Greyson!*” I screamed, terror flooding me as my heart jumped into my throat.

Aspen squeezed the trigger, but Greyson had ducked low and peered back at me when I screamed, so the shot went over his head. He blinked at me, but whatever made him stop seemed to no longer bother him. He lunged at Aspen, biting the calf of her right leg and yanking it out from underneath her.

She fell on her back with a wet thump.

I sprinted toward them, almost skidding out on the grass.

Greyson stood on Aspen’s chest, but he still wasn’t thinking clearly, so he ignored her right hand that was still clutching the handgun, and was snapping at her neck.

Aspen shoved her left arm into his mouth and screamed when he bit down. She raised the gun, pointing it at his head.

I dropped to my side and slid in like a baseball player, grabbing the gun and wrenching it from her.

“No!” Aspen shouted.

I released the handgun’s magazine, which dropped to the weed riddled ground with a splat, racked the slide back and tipped the gun so the bullet fell out of the chamber, then threw the empty handgun as hard as I could, flinging it into the forest.

My hunter instincts cried at the thought of letting go of a weapon, but it was too much of a risk—Aspen could easily wrestle it away from me. Besides, Greyson could keep her subdued without me needing to use any kind of weapon.

Aspen screamed—a sound that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I swung around, my adrenaline skyrocketing again.

Greyson must have broken her left arm—it was flopped limply at her side.

He crunched down on her shoulder as she was feebly trying to protect her throat with her remaining good arm. He lifted her off the ground as his teeth sank into her muscle, then threw her down—her head hitting a rock with a painful crack.

Aspen wheezed in pain as Greyson attacked her leg next, biting into her left ankle with a crunch. She wouldn't be able to stand anytime soon.

When he lunged at her throat, I realized—he was going to kill her.

“Greyson, no!” I wrapped my arms around his neck—all of my hunter instincts screaming at the stupidity of this idea—and tried uselessly to pull him back.

He ignored me and had his teeth around Aspen's throat, when I slipped and fell on my rear with a surprised shout.

Greyson dropped Aspen like a rag doll and whirled around, nosing me with concern.

I breathed heavily and tried to ignore the blood that speckled Greyson's muzzle as I stared at Aspen.

She was white and motionless—I was pretty sure Greyson had given her a concussion, a broken arm, possibly a dislocated shoulder based on how she was twisted, and an injured if not broken ankle.

She's not going anywhere. We won.

I exhaled a shaky breath as the rain kept falling, spattering my face and wetting Greyson's coat.

The howls of the Pack were so close, they had to almost be to the meadow.

It's over. I survived. I eyed Greyson, trying to figure out if I needed to shout to the Pack and tell them to hang back until he wore off more of the wolfsbane.

Between the rain and the Pack's howls, I almost missed the faint sound of snarls.

I paused, then boosted myself to my feet with a curse. “Shania!” I sprinted back to the old lodge, fear once again spurring me on.

I threw myself into the mud puddle outside the window and peered in the panic room.

It looked like Shania had tried to follow us out, but she wasn’t quite as agile as Greyson, and was now backed into a corner there, pinned by Aeric and Wyatt.

Both Aeric and Wyatt had their lips curled up, showing their teeth, as they growled at her, their hackles raised.

“No, no, *no!*” I slipped through the window, falling on the floor in a heap. I lurched to my feet and moved to join Shania.

My fingers were numb—either from getting poured on, or from fear, I couldn’t tell which—as Wyatt slunk closer.

He crouched down in a pouncing position, when Greyson slipped through the window, landing on top of him.

Flattened, Wyatt didn’t even try to get up, and Greyson immediately turned his attention on Aeric.

Aeric took one step backward, his ears shifting, showing his unease.

Greyson snarled, his ears flattened, and slammed into Aeric, sending him sprawling.

I’m so, so, so happy Greyson is an over-powered, over-blessed, genetic miracle, I thought reverently. I’ll never complain about his strength again. Never ever. And I’ll never complain about my magic again, my frustrating but beautiful, life-giving magic.

My abrupt swell of affection for my own magic and Greyson’s overwhelming...overwhelming-ness made me lightheaded with relief.

Shania whined as she leaned into me.

Greyson snapped around and growled at her, bracing himself in a stance that clearly said she was next.

“No!” I again got between her and Greyson, my heart pounding in my throat as I desperately hoped my magic didn’t fail me anytime soon. “No—she doesn’t need to be disciplined.”

Greyson stood still, tilting his head like a dog as he studied me.

Please, please, please whatever it is that is keeping him from slaughtering me—don’t stop working!

Shania, using her head like a shovel, pushed me away from her.

Greyson relaxed, his ears perking again as he crossed the room in two steps and then sniffed my scratched-up palms.

A mournful wolf’s howl pierced the air.

“Down here!” I screamed.

Shania flattened her ears, and Aeric and Wyatt actually winced despite their addled state—maybe the potion was starting to wear off, and Greyson had burned it off first?

Greyson smashed his head into my belly with enough force to knock some air from me. He rubbed his face in my jacket, until Shania shifted in her corner. He leaned around me to snarl at her.

I dropped to my knees and threw my arms around his neck. “We’re down here,” I shouted again. I’m not ashamed to admit my shout broke off into a scream when Greyson licked my cheek.

His teeth were massive, and they were *so close* to my face.

Outside there were snarls, howls, and enraged growls.

I shivered—from a combination of adrenaline, the freezing temperatures and my soaking wet hair, and general fear—and my teeth started chattering.

I dug my fingers into Greyson’s soft undercoat, greedily trying to suck up his warmth, though I got him wet in the process.

Greyson didn't seem to mind. He was industriously sniffing me, taking breaks to lick my cheek.

My ears were so cold they ached, and I just wanted to bury my face in Greyson's fur to thaw out, but I heard footfalls outside.

"We're down here!"

"Pip?" Hector called, his voice muffled by the soft rain and the howls that ringed the building.

"We're in the basement," I shouted. "Wyatt and Aeric are coming down off wolfsbane."

"Klancy—you heard her? Take a group downstairs." Hector crouched down by the window, silhouetted by the gloomy sky. "Is Greyson with you?" Hector shone a flashlight inside.

My eyes teared up in the sudden light. "Yeah. He got a dose, too, but I think it's almost worn off—"

Greyson threw himself at the window, snapping.

"Greyson," I said, relieved that there was something I could be annoyed about and not terrified. "Stop that. You know Hector."

"This is what you believe 'almost worn off' looks like?" Hector mildly asked as Greyson snarled, his lips curling up so high it made the top of his muzzle dimple.

"I thought it was—how else am I alive?" I asked.

Greyson set his paws on the windowsill, and for a moment it looked like he was going to hop out and go after Hector again.

"*Greyson*," I snapped.

Greyson huffed, hopped down, then circled back to me, half sitting on me when he curled around me.

Hector was silent for several long moments. "Did you use your powers?"

“Somehow,” I said. “Otherwise maybe it’s my puppy pheromones?”

“You’ve been attacked by other wolves juiced up on wolfsbane,” Hector pointed out.

“Yeah, we can think about it later. Can you get us out?” I asked.

“I think so. We’ve brought the Fletchings and their spelled ammo to take care of Aspen—though it seems like you handled that?”

“Greyson caught her outside,” I said.

“Ah. We have secured her, so she is in our custody. But if you stopped her outside, why are you down here?” Hector mildly inquired.

“I came back because I heard Shania—Aeric and Wyatt were ganging up on her again.”

“I take it Shania is the red wolf?”

“Yep.”

“I see. It seems you really did activate your magic. In any case, we’ll see if the Fletchings can use their ammo to take Aeric and Wyatt down,” Hector said. “I’m not sure what we’ll do about Greyson.”

“It should affect him too,” I said. “Did you find Rio?”

“Indeed—he was still knocked unconscious, but Ember has called to tell me he has since awakened.” Hector studied me through the window, then turned around to shout. “Pip’s blue with cold—someone get a blanket down to her.”

“You caught Aspen?” I finally unzipped my rain jacket and shucked it off—with the hood down I’d gotten soaked anyway—then huddled even closer to Greyson, enveloping myself in the smell of wet dog.

“Yes,” Hector said. “And the Pre-Dominant has been informed.”

My teeth chattered so hard it was difficult to reply. “Good.”

The door creaked, and Greyson whisked away so fast I almost toppled to the ground before I caught myself.

Greyson threw himself at the door, which slammed shut, his nails scraping the door.

“Klancy, open the next door. Shania and I can get out that way—we’ll leave Aeric, Wyatt, and Greyson here until they can be stunned,” I shouted. “Hector, you’ll have to watch the window in case they try to make a run for it.”

“Got it.” Klancy’s voice was muffled through the reinforced door, but I could still hear him.

Shania had, too. She picked her way around the perimeter of the room, slipping through the dog-door.

“I don’t think it will be a problem,” Hector said. “Aeric and Wyatt are too out of it to notice the window is a weak point. And it seems Greyson can easily be...distracted.”

Greyson was still occupied with the abandoned door, so I grabbed my jacket and tip-toed after her. I had to get down on my hands and knees to duck through the door, and when I popped into the room where Aspen had been keeping Aeric, Wyatt, and Greyson I had to bite back my anger.

The room was bare concrete, like ours, but the floor was littered with emptied darts.

I’m not sure how much wolfsbane a wolf has to ingest or be exposed to for a dose, but this seems excessive.

“Fletchings, reporting for duty—you doing okay there, Hunter Pip?” Scarlett crouched down outside the window—the plastic had also been torn away from this room’s window, but it looked like Aspen had done it a while ago based on the puddle of water that dripped down the wall and pooled on the floor.

“Yep. A little cold.” I rubbed my arms as Shania impatiently pawed at the door.

Radcliff briefly elbowed his sister out of the way. “We’ll have you out in no time. Let’s go.” They disappeared from the

window, though I heard the familiar clicks of guns being loaded.

“Ready?” Klancy asked through the door.

“Yep!”

The door opened, and Shania streaked out. I was right behind her, and I walked into Roanne—who was holding one of those shiny, metallic survival blankets.

I wrapped it around my shoulders as she rubbed my head with what felt and smelled like a used t-shirt—but I was soaking, cold, and not about to protest.

As Klancy started to swing the door shut, Greyson poked his head through the throughway door. He growled and tried to rush the door, but Klancy already had it in place.

Greyson hit the door with enough strength to make it buckle—as reinforced as it was.

“Hurry up with the tranquilizing,” Klancy shouted—though I wasn’t sure if the Fletchings would be able to hear him through the walls.

Roanne squeezed more water from my hair and glanced down at Shania. “Forrest is driving a truck up—he should be here soon. We’ll get you two into the cab and warmed up.”

Though I was a lot warmer, my teeth were still chattering uncontrollably. “That sounds wonderful.”

Roanne smiled. “You did well, Pip. You survived.”

“And Greyson caught Aspen,” I reminded myself. “She’s not going to get away with this.”

“No,” Klancy grimly said. “She’s not.”

Chapter 19

Greyson

Mate...

The darkness around me started to turn gray.

Must...protect her.

I shot upright, half blind and deaf but on my feet. “Pip!” I spun in a circle and felt wet concrete beneath my bare feet.

My sight was still shoddy, but Pip’s scent brushed my nose, and I realized it was fading. *She’s not here—where is she?* “Pip!” I roared.

“Greyson’s awake!” Klancy shouted.

“Get the Fletchings on hand—we might need to stun him again if the wolfsbane hasn’t worn off,” Hector ordered.

My head throbbed with pain, and my mouth was dry, but the metallic taste of blood had set on my tongue.

I’m human? But I swear I was a wolf and Pip...

Confused, and still not able to see straight, there was one thing that pounded in my heart, more important than anything else.

“Hector, where’s Pip?” My voice felt rusty, and my breathing threatened to speed up as I peered around a blurry room that was very distinctly void of Pip.

“She’s safe,” Hector said. “Aspen didn’t get her.”

Some of the building dread in me lessened, and I rubbed my eyes. My mind felt soft and mushy as I tried to pull myself together. “Fine, but *where is she?*”

“In a truck—she was blue with cold, so we’ve got the heat blasting on her. Forrest and East are taking her and Shania to the hospital.”

I spat, trying to get rid of the rancid taste of blood in my mouth, then crouched on the ground and closed my eyes. “What happened?” My voice was so rough, I barely recognized it.

“Aspen,” Hector flatly said.

“We’re here! Everything okay?” Scarlett’s voice was breathy, and I heard the squelch of mud punctuate her words.

It sounded like she was outside, with Hector, and they were talking to me through an open window.

I pried an eye open, and my vision had cleared enough that I could see I was in a dirty room constructed of cinderblocks that smelled of blood—old and new.

I don’t remember how I got here.

“Alpha?” Hector’s voice was slightly strangled.

I glanced in the direction of his voice and saw the remnants of a busted window. Hector was kneeling next to it, his hands in a puddle as he stared at the ground.

What is his problem?

“Alpha Greyson, your powers,” Radcliff said. He squatted down next to Hector and looked uncomfortable.

Scarlett settled a rifle into her shoulder and peered down the barrel at me. “He burned through our spelled ammo way too early. He should have been down for another half an hour at least.”

I ignored the pair, still trying to make sense of everything—but my brain wouldn’t cooperate, and all I could smell was Pip...and the faint trace of her blood.

“Pip was down here with you,” Hector said—though his voice was tight. “She’s fine. She just scraped her hands. She’s not hurt, just cold!”

I nodded and rolled my shoulders back, relaxing slightly at the reminder.

Hector exhaled. “That’s better. His powers were out of control for a moment.”

Pip is fine. She’s safe. But I should get to her.

I turned, and the world veered under my feet. My thoughts were still too slow, and my reflexes were embarrassingly bad as it took a full second to correct my slumping posture.

“Do you think we need to stun him again?” Radcliff asked. “I’m not certain the wolfsbane is entirely gone from his system.”

Wolfsbane.

That would be why my brain was foggy and my body was slow.

It’s unacceptable.

I leaned against a wall and slowly sat down, closing my eyes again. The lack of extra stimulation seemed to help.

I need to control my Alpha powers first. Then clear my brain.

There was a burning impulse, no, a *need* to find Pip and to see her with my own eyes, but there was just enough restraint in me that I knew I needed to sober up a bit first, or she’d shoot me herself.

I leaned my head back against a cold cinderblock and tried to center myself. “Aspen dosed me with wolfsbane?”

“Yes,” Hector said. “Do you remember anything?”

A sharp, needling pain stabbed through my brain.

A storm. Anger—a burning rage that boiled my blood, until I smelled her: my mate, Pip. Then Aspen, aiming a gun at

Pip, and I was no longer just angry, I was ready to tear the world apart to protect her.

“Flashes.” I grimaced.

“How do you feel?” Hector asked.

“Like you shouldn’t let me out just yet,” I honestly said.

Scarlett laughed, but it didn’t cover up the clicking sound her rifle made when she flicked the safety off.

I opened my eyes. “Pip is really okay?”

“She is,” Hector said. “I was about to go check on her and send her off to the hospital.”

My body twitched against my will at the thought of her going farther away from me than she already was.

Easy. I gritted my teeth, and it took everything I had to stay sitting. “Understood. Do it.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Hector stood and disappeared from the window. “Klancy? Could you stand with Radcliff and Scarlett? And call for backup.”

“How many do you think we need?” Klancy asked.

Hector was silent for a moment. “At least half a dozen.” Once again, he crouched by the window. “Alpha Greyson? I’m going to see Pip now. I’ll verify her health, as you said.”

It took a lot more effort to nod than I wanted to admit.

Hector nodded, then stood up and strode off, leaving me fighting an inner battle to remain where I was, even though every instinct I had was howling for Pip.

No. I’m not moving. I need to find out what happened with Aspen and get myself under control. I can’t just run at her like this, or she’ll figure out what she is to me. Enough.

I clenched my teeth. “Klancy.”

“Yes, Alpha?”

“Report in. What happened?”

Chapter 20

Pip

Once the truck arrived I sat in it, the heat blasting, for about half an hour before it was decided that East, Forrest, and Shania would go back with me—all three of them panting from the heat of the cab.

Things were still pretty crazy when we left. Just before we rolled out Hector came out and said Greyson was coming out of his spell induced sleep.

It seemed like the wolfsbane had worn off him, but he was still too out of it to be sure, so they were still leaving him, Aeric, and Wyatt in the panic rooms to make sure they didn't hurt anyone until they knew for certain.

My hair was pretty much dry, and I was finally no longer shivering by the time we pulled off wolf lands and onto a city street.

“We're supposed to drop you off at the hospital,” East said—he'd insisted on coming back home with us, I think because he was half convinced someone else would try to kidnap us again, and he wanted to back up Forrest. “Ember and Jack are waiting, but I'll stay with you, too.”

“Aspen is in the Pack's custody,” I said. “No one is going to try to drag me from the hospital.”

“Doesn’t matter,” East said. “We don’t know if Aspen was working alone or had a partner. Precautions are necessary.”

I admired the sky—it was still a soup of gray clouds, but they were a lot lighter, and it didn’t seem like we were going to get any more rain. “She didn’t mention working with anyone. And I think she would have—she seemed pretty convinced Shania and I were going to die. Speaking of which, where is Shania going?”

“Back to the lodge,” Forrest said. “Remy and I are going to hang out with her—we tried to see if she could come into the hospital, but they said emotional support animals and therapy animals only. I think we could easily get one of those ‘working dog’ vests. But Mr. Heroic, here, insists that would be a misdemeanor.”

“Shania will be more comfortable at the lodge,” East said. “Do you hear sirens?”

Shania perked her ears, then let out a deafening howl.

I winced, but East got the worst of it as he was in the back seat with her—he’d insisted I take the front seat so they could blast the heat directly on me.

East cracked the window, and even I could hear the sounds of police sirens.

“I wonder what’s going on?” Forrest turned off the main road, turning on to one of the smaller roads that threaded over to the hospital.

We rounded a bend in the road, and could see cops parked across the main highway that went from Timber Ridge to the Pack lodge, blocking it from four black SUVs. I also spotted Mayor Pearl’s car—a small, boxlike car that had a maroon interior and exterior that hadn’t been popular in cars for about thirty or forty years—which was probably how old the car was, too.

“That looks like trouble,” East said.

“Fieldtrip!” I declared.

“No, I swore to Hector I’d take you straight to the hospital,” Forrest said.

“Okay, except I’m pretty sure that’s Pre-Dominant Harka that Mayor Pearl is facing down.” I pointed to the dark-haired woman our fierce mayor appeared to be chewing out.

Forrest slammed down on the brakes so hard I hit my seatbelt and croaked. “Oh. *Oh, no.*” He stared at the road, sinking into his seat.

“Come on, we better get over there and get out of the way of traffic,” I said.

“We can drop you off at the hospital and then go check,” East stubbornly said.

“You think three wolves—one of them furry—are what Mayor Pearl wants to see right now?” I asked.

“Forrest, you can’t make a U-turn at this stoplight, but at the next one it’s legal,” East said.

After Forrest navigated us through the legal U-turn, it only took a few extra minutes before we rolled up to the fight of the century: bossy old lady versus bossy wolf lady.

We popped out of the car, and after East wrapped my survival blanket around me so tightly I briefly choked, we marched up to the standoff, Shania on one side, East on the other, and Forrest hanging in back as he frantically called Hector.

The werewolves flanking Harka turned to watch us, but either my half-recovered drowned rat look or Shania’s rare wolf appearance was enough to keep them in their spots. They didn’t even try to stop us, they just slightly tilted their heads to acknowledge our arrival.

The human police saw us—one of the officers waved at East before Henry—the Chief of Timber Ridge Police Department and Mayor Pearl’s husband—elbowed him. They didn’t try to stop us either as we approached the fight.

Harka, lean and limber with the build of a gymnast and black hair she’d pulled back into a ponytail, matched with her

leather jacket and blue jeans, stared down at Mayor Pearl—who was wielding her black umbrella and black slacks pulled up to her chest—with the look of someone who couldn't quite believe what they were experiencing.

“I'm the Pre-Dominant of the Midwest,” Harka said. “The *top* werewolf.”

“I don't care if you're visiting royalty from across the sea.” Mayor Pearl waggled her umbrella. “I'm not letting you through, and this road belongs to *my* city, not your royal wolf-ness!”

“Hey, Mayor Pearl. Pre-Dominant Harka.” I tried to sound casual, like it was a common thing to find my battle ax mayor verbally owning the Midwest Pre-Dominant.

Mayor Pearl narrowed her eyes at me. “Phillipa Sabre. I was told you were kidnapped.”

Behind Mayor Pearl, Chief Henry—the source of Mayor Pearl's intelligence, no doubt—looked a little sheepish.

“I was,” I said. “The Pack found me—and we found the... rogue wolf who was changing people.” I'd almost called Aspen a psychopath before remembering that Harka was her aunt. As disconnected from reality and morals as Aspen was, slandering her now was only going to make Harka feel worse and do nothing to make me feel at all better about the past few months.

“Aspen was captured?” Pre-Dominant Harka asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And Aeric, Wyatt, and Greyson have been recovered.”

“Is Aspen alive?” Harka asked, her heart in her bright blue eyes.

“Yeah,” I said. “Though she's pretty banged up.” I tried not to sound too happy about that, after every horrible thing she'd done to the Pack.

Harka exhaled the breath she'd seemingly been holding, her relief spreading across her body as she visibly relaxed.

Mayor Pearl adjusted the floral kerchief tied over her head that made her look grandmotherly. “Then all parties are safe?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Good.” Mayor Pearl sniffed. “Do you know this werewolf?” She motioned to Harka, as if she was a rowdy high school student instead of more closely resembling a high-flying CEO.

“Yes, this is Pre-Dominant Harka,” I said.

“You say that as if it should mean something,” Mayor Pearl sourly said.

“She’s the leader of all the werewolves in the Midwest,” I explained. “Greyson and the Pack ultimately answer to her for situations outside of Pack policy—like in the summer when wolves from the Low Marsh Pack kept turning up feral.”

“Not a very good leader if I haven’t seen her until now, is she?” Mayor Pearl asked.

My eyes bulged, and I glanced at Harka, but she seemed amused by Mayor Pearl’s antics now that she knew we’d caught Aspen alive.

“Harumph.” Mayor Pearl pointed to Shania with her umbrella. “Who’s the red wolf?”

“Shania—my coworker.”

“The one dating that red-headed Canadian wolf? Should have guessed,” Mayor Pearl said. “Congratulations, Shania. Does this mean the photo booth at the welcome center will have more hours of operation?”

“Uhhh...maybe?”

Mayor Pearl frowned at me. “Are you going to open up the welcome center now?”

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “Actually, I was heading to the hospital to get checked over. The building we were held in was pretty nasty—I probably need to be checked for diseases.”

Mayor Pearl fixed her scowl on Shania. “Then will you, Shania, be opening the center?”

“Um...Shania will be stuck in her wolf form for at least a day until she gets used to the change,” I said. “So...no.”

“I suppose thumbs are needed to run the cash register.” Mayor Pearl showily tightened the belt of her trench-coat style jacket.

“Pip.”

I turned around to see Greyson, wearing his fitted pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt that was too tight in the shoulders and biceps to be his.

He jogged past Harka and the other wolves, and wrapped his arms around me. “You’re safe.”

“And you’re a lot more conscious than when I last saw you.” I was more than a little surprised by his actions—Greyson wasn’t a public hugger. But I’d been starting to list a little, and he was very convenient to lean against. And yeah, okay, I was still a little freaked out about *Aspen*, of all wolves, betraying the Pack, and there was something very soothing about Greyson’s hug that made me feel a lot better and more... secure. (Probably because he could kill anything that came after me.)

Mayor Pearl made a disgusted noise. “We’ll be going now—though I doubt you two will notice since you’re about one minute away from making out like teenagers.”

I peeled my cheek off Greyson’s shoulder. “Mayor Pearl!” I said with both laughter and outrage.

“We could give it a try if you like,” Greyson said.

I thumped my fist on his chest.

“Was that supposed to hurt?” Greyson asked. “Because I can say ‘ow’ if you want.”

I kept one arm around Greyson—social niceties or not, I’d just been dragged through a traumatic experience, I wasn’t giving up any source of comfort just yet—but I shifted enough so I could see Mayor Pearl better.

“Thank you, Mayor,” I called.

Mayor Pearl sniffed and set the tip of her umbrella down, then leaned on the handle. “I did nothing.”

“You didn’t know if Pre-Dominant Harka was backup or another attack on us, and that was why you blocked the road—right?” I guessed.

“Rude child,” Mayor Pearl said. “As if I pay attention to what you wolves are busy doing. Come along, Henry!”

Mayor Pearl sailed down the road, walked up to the nearest police cruiser, and got in.

Henry smiled at Greyson and me. “She’s a softie,” he said. “For the city and for its wolves.”

Mayor Pearl rolled down her window and stuck a bullhorn through the opening. “Henry, stop chattering and pack up,” she ordered, her voice crackling.

“Of course, dear.” Henry winked at us, his fluffy eyebrows taking over the expression, then he started instructing his officers on how to pull out before they piled into their cars.

“I do believe we just witnessed Mayor Pearl attempting to protect us,” Greyson whispered, his lips brushing my ear.

My spine curled, but I felt legally obligated to show I wasn’t affected by him, so I kept my posture straight. “You don’t object to being called the town’s wolves?”

“Not if it comes with benefits,” Greyson chuckled, his voice husky and rough in a way that made the back of my neck tingle.

I’ve got to get out more, I decided. I’ve always known Greyson is gloriously fine, but my reactions are getting to be excessive. I should go visit Chase at the Night Court again and observe all the fae lords. Fae are always gorgeous. They can help me get my immunity worked up again.

“I’m glad you’ve settled the situation,” Pre-Dominant Harka announced.

Greyson finally peeled away from me, though he kept one arm draped over me. “Yes,” he said. “The Fletchings are keeping Aspen knocked out. Rio has woken up. He seems controlled, but we aren’t certain how badly she dosed him, so he’s remaining under observation.”

Harka sighed. “I’m sorry—I can’t believe she did this. Any of it. It seems so...out of character for her.” She uncomfortably gazed at the line of trees that marked out the start of the forest.

“She was pretty cold hearted about it,” I said. “She didn’t show any signs of regret—or even a real reason why she was doing it all. You *are* going to hold her responsible, aren’t you?”

Most of the wolves visibly tensed, except Greyson—who I could feel—and Harka, who massaged her eyes.

“I have to,” she bleakly said. “I’ll try her here, then take her back to Magiford.”

“You can’t save her from the repercussions, Harka.” Greyson’s voice was casual, but there was a note of warning to it. “She’s done some terrible things.”

“I know. I won’t shield her,” Harka said. “But she’s family.”

The way the Pre-Dominant said it, it made me think of Aspen and her explanation of Pack.

Family means a lot to Harka. But she is a good leader.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “That it came to this.”

Harka gave me a sad smile. “I am as well. I’m sorry I ever asked the Pack to change Aspen—that was my own fear that we’d lose her, when we’d already lost her father, and my sister...”

Aspen had said her parents were mates. If her dad died, then her mother—Harka’s sister—either died, too, or went totally feral and then was put down because of the danger factor.

Wolves who lost mates were never quite right again. And if they went feral...there was no coming back from it with a dead mate.

“Klancy will take you to the lodge,” Greyson said. “Hector is handling Aspen’s transport—I don’t think she’ll be here for at least another hour.”

“Thank you, Alpha Greyson.” Harka turned and headed back to her SUV as the Timber Ridge police cars turned off their lights and drove on the shoulder, skirting around all the parked cars.

“You’re not going with her?” I asked.

“I’ll meet up with her before Aspen arrives,” Greyson said. “But first, I apparently have to take you to the hospital myself in order to get you medical attention.” Using the arm he had draped over my shoulders, Greyson turned me around and walked me away from the dissolving standoff.

“It’s not East or Forrest’s fault,” I said. “I saw Mayor Pearl and knew we had to do something—come on, Shania.”

Shania stopped suspiciously sniffing Harka’s car and bounded after us as we wove through the mess of cars, heading for the pick-up Forrest had haphazardly parked on the side of the road.

“I guessed as much,” Greyson dryly said. “You can’t walk past trouble without wanting to stick your nose into it.”

Shania gave an amused “Awoo!” her tail curling in her delight.

I shot her an aggravated look. “You’re supposed to be on my side. I’m your friend.”

“Maybe, but she’s now a Northern Lakes Wolf.” Greyson’s grin morphed into a frown. “We didn’t hurt her, did we?”

“You, Aeric, and Wyatt?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I glanced at Shania to see how she’d take his question. She pranced to his open side, then boinked him in the thigh with

her muzzle. Happily huffing, she ran off, her tail wagging in glee.

“I’d interpret that as I’m forgiven for anything I did, and she also inherited a little too much of your joy in thumbing your nose at authority,” Greyson said.

“Hey, I’m not a wolf. She didn’t inherit anything from me,” I said.

“That’s hardly the case, Lady Hunter.” Greyson shook his head and pulled me in tighter so we wobbled together. “Aeric approached me about changing her years ago, but we decided it was too risky given her health problems. She survived the change because of *you*. You’re practically more responsible for her being a wolf than Aspen.”

“If you say so.” I was about to lay the news on Greyson that I’d figured out at least a rudimentary way of using my magic, but I saw the way he was scrutinizing Shania and watching the way she moved.

“She got thrown around a little, and dazed, but you didn’t do anything horrible to her,” I said. “She might be sore and a little bruised, but she would have felt that from the change, anyway.”

Greyson shook his head, and we slowed down as we got closer to the truck, where Shania was waiting by the tailgate as East and Forrest argued over who was riding in the truck with us and who had to walk to the hospital.

“As an Alpha, I failed. No Alpha should throw a wolf like that outside of a disciplinary action, and Shania was new.”

“You were bespelled and out of your mind,” I said. “It’s not your fault—and if you insist that it is, then I share part of the blame.”

Greyson glanced down at me, a strange expression passing over his face. “How?”

“Because once I knew my magic as a Wolf’s Kiss could calm you, I could have gotten you calmer sooner,” I said.

“Your magic...is *that* why you think I didn’t attack you?”

“It’s the only explanation,” I said. “My puppy pheromones didn’t stop Rio or any of the other half-feral wolves I’ve encountered from attacking me. Though I’ll admit it’s probably an example of you being excessively powerful, which is why my magic could reach you and not Wyatt or Aeric.”

There wasn’t a flicker of emotion on Greyson’s face as we stopped by the driver’s side of the truck. “Sure.”

There was something about his reaction that didn’t seem quite right. Something was bothering him, though after a mental review of our conversation, I couldn’t tell what.

Maybe he’s still blaming himself for throwing Shania? Better lighten the mood.

“Which reminds me, I’d like to lodge a complaint.” I haughtily yanked the door open and climbed across the driver’s seat, plopping down in the passenger’s side and pulling my blanket tight around me again now that I no longer was near Greyson, the living furnace. “How can you be so stupidly over-powered? It seems unfair to the rest of us.”

Usually such a joke would provoke a smirk and something arrogant from him, but Greyson rested his hand on the door and stared at me for several long moments.

Something’s wrong. This isn’t like him. He almost seems... sad?

I opened my mouth to ask if he was okay, when Greyson hopped into the driver’s seat. “What’s the human phrase? Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.”

“I said you’re over-powered, not beautiful,” I complained.

“I’m both,” Greyson declared without an ounce of doubt. “Forrest, East, one of you open the tailgate for Shania, then get your tails in the truck, or I’m leaving without you.”

Forrest yanked the tailgate down—which groaned—and the truck rocked when Shania hopped in. Forrest shut the tailgate behind her, then hopped in the back with her while East jumped in the back seat.

“Sorry, Alpha Greyson.” East passed the truck keys up, then buckled himself in.

“It’s fine.” Greyson turned the truck on, which purred to life with a happy purr. “Let Ember know we’re almost there.”

“Yessir.” East started tapping away on his cellphone, texting the other werewolf.

I suspiciously peered at Greyson. “Are you driving just because you lost your phone again?”

Greyson glanced at me. “I was dosed with wolfsbane. Do you seriously think it survived the shift?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think you probably regained consciousness then crushed it the first time someone called you after you shifted back to human form.”

“For your information, I didn’t crush it when someone called me,” Greyson said, a fake haughtiness thickening his voice.

“Oh yeah? Then when did you break it?”

“When Hector told me everything that happened,” Greyson admitted.

That shadowy feeling was back, so I leaned back in my chair and rolled my eyes. “See? What did I say—ridiculously powerful.”

“And beautiful.”

“I never said that!”

“It’s fine. I’ve seen the way you jealously eye my white coat when I’m a wolf. I’m stunning.”

“Why did you have to come along again?”

“To make certain you actually get to the hospital sometime today.”

“Sorry, Alpha,” East said.

“I don’t blame you, East,” Greyson said soothingly. “Heaven help the poor sop standing between Pip and what she wants.”

“I consider my strength of mind a positive thing,” I said.

“So do I,” Greyson said, surprising me. “Until it puts your life in danger. Which reminds me. Once you’re released from the hospital you’re going to explain to me—in *excruciating detail*—why you thought it was a good idea to wander away from your cottage after you’d just beaten the brains out of Rio.”

“Ahaha, yeah that wasn’t my greatest moment.”

“Ahaha,” Greyson mimicked my sheepish laugh. “You think?”

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Chapter 21

Greyson

A cold wind rustled the branches of the trees. Given that it was early November, most deciduous trees had dropped their leaves. It left patches of the forest barren and skeletal, but there were plenty of evergreens, pines, and fir trees to keep the Pack lands sheltered.

I'd chosen this particular clearing for Aspen's trial because it was ringed in by evergreens, and the last thing Pip needed was to catch a cold after everything she'd been dragged through.

My mate bond hadn't settled since I'd woken up. The pain in my chest made it hard to breathe—because it went unfulfilled, but also because I could tell everything about Aspen and the situation pained Pip, too.

“Today, Aspen—previously of the Northern Lakes Pack—stands on trial for the following crimes,” Harka began. Although her voice was loud and unforgiving, no one could miss the way pain wrinkled at the corners of her eyes.

Aspen broke her aunt's heart with this game of hers.

I casually leaned closer to Pip, trying to hear her lungs and the beat of her heart—to make sure she was still as healthy as the doctor had declared her to be after releasing her from the hospital two days ago.

The bond twisted my heart in my chest and filled me with the impulse to scoop her up and carry her away from the trial—which I could feel upset her.

Pip didn't notice my attention. Her eyes were fixed on Harka, and she clutched Shania's hand as they huddled together—Pip in a hat, scarf, boots, downy ski jacket, and mittens, and Shania in a lightweight coat.

Aeric held Shania's other hand, but judging by his steely gaze, most of his focus was going into not snarling at Aspen, who was seated on a tree stump, studying her shoes.

“Distributing and selling an illegal potion, in addition to forcing others to unwillingly imbibe it,” Harka said.

Rio jerked on my other side.

Aspen's betrayal had cut him worst of all. He'd been in it deep for her. I think he was half convinced they were practically mates.

And she'd stolen his mind from him and pitted him against the hunter the entire Pack—Rio included, if he was being honest—had come to love.

It was going to take him a long time to recover—if he could.

Since Pip seemed uncaring of my attention, I slapped Rio on the back, then slung an arm around his shoulders, half holding him up as he stared at Aspen.

“Additionally, you illegally changed three humans—all without consulting their will—in a move that ripped away their choice, and savaged a *child* who had plans to make the shift as an adult, stealing that opportunity away from her,” Harka continued.

Hector stood at Rio's other side, wrinkles appearing around his eyes and on the bridge of his nose as he studied his younger brother. He shifted his gaze to Aspen, and I saw murder in his eyes.

It'd been a test for Hector to oversee Aspen's custody. With Rio knocked out and myself feral, it'd fallen upon him.

Given what she put Rio through, and what she'd stolen from Teresa, it spoke of Hector's immense inner strength that he'd carried the task off, and handed Aspen over to Harka, no worse injured than what I'd done to her while feral.

Wolves tend to overlook my beta because he appears more human than the average wolf. It's a huge mistake.

Hector couldn't match my Alpha spirit, but he was undoubtedly strong enough to hold a Pack of his own if he wanted. But he didn't. So he'd entrusted me the task of watching over his family.

I failed him.

I grimaced at the thought.

"Finally, you kidnapped Hunter Sabre after pitting a feral werewolf against her, and attempted to incite members of her own Pack to kill her."

I glanced at Pip, but she didn't react.

She still thought I hadn't attacked her because of her magic—and because my Alpha spirit was so powerful.

She hadn't put it together that we were mates.

I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed—which annoyed me. Feelings in general annoyed me, much less having to figure out *what* I was feeling.

When I shifted to face Harka again, I was aware that Hector glanced at me, his eyes narrowing.

I glanced at my beta and raised my eyebrows, silently asking him if something was wrong.

Hector's expression smoothed over. He merely nodded to me, then studied Harka as if she were giving the world's most fascinating lecture.

"What reason could you possibly have for inflicting so much pain on humans—and your own *Pack*?" Harka demanded.

Aspen finally raised her eyes and glanced at us.

Besides Harka's ten wolves she'd brought with her—including Rafe, which I thought was perhaps a cruel choice, even if I understood why—another fifteen of my Pack were present.

“The Northern Lakes wolves were never really my Pack,” Aspen said. Her gaze lingered on Rio, but she very carefully avoided looking at me.

“How can you say that?” Harka's voice grew harder, and I could feel her Alpha powers ripple around her. “They were your family! You chose to come here to be changed.”

“Not really,” Aspen said. “You just suggested it, and I agreed out of curiosity.”

“Then why?” Harka asked.

Aspen shrugged. “Why not?”

Rio took in a shuddering breath, and I could feel Shania's careful control fray.

They are owed an explanation.

I rolled my shoulders back as I unleashed my powers, making the wolves near me twitch.

“*Explain yourself.*” The words were heavy with my will, and Aspen was unable to resist the strength of my powers.

“It was because of you.” Aspen finally glanced at me, then immediately looked at her feet as she sagged forward against her will, feeling the pressure of my powers. “Everyone said Greyson was going to unseat Aunt Harka,” she spat out. “Which isn't fair. You aren't even from the Midwest. You don't belong here, and the Northern Lakes Pack is the way it is because of a *hunter.*”

Aspen shifted her gaze to Pip. “I should have killed you sooner. You're too loyal to be at all useful.”

“*Aspen,*” Harka snapped.

Aspen ignored her aunt and continued. “You only help the Pack you love. Which the Northern Lakes Pack doesn't deserve. Everyone's obsessed with working alongside humans

when you could be using the power for the good of werewolves and shifters.”

Rafe stared straight ahead, not acknowledging his sister as she shook her head and snapped her teeth, though he glanced at Pip, and his eyes softened a little.

He’s still trying to go for her, is he? Doesn’t matter, she has him figured out.

Admittedly, I was able to pity Rafe in this situation *because* Pip had already realized why he was suddenly interested in her. I wouldn’t have been so understanding otherwise.

“Oh, and what you did was absolutely for the good of werewolves.” Pip tapped her chin. “Yes, I see it now. You made *great* strides for werewolves the way you drugged them and unwillingly changed them—wait...”

“It’s for the best if Aunt Harka stays in power,” Aspen snapped.

“So you, her blood relative, prove that by terrorizing innocents. Wow. What a great sales pitch,” Pip said.

“I undermined Alpha Greyson’s power,” Aspen growled, her eyes nearly glowing with her anger. “I proved he’s not the infallible knight you all paint him to be.”

“Did you?” Shania asked. “Because you still call him Alpha. That shows pretty clearly you didn’t actually undermine him, you’re just crazy.”

“A total nutcase,” East added.

“It also displays a lack of sound judgment and morals of any kind,” Hector said. His voice was soft, almost casual, but there was a darkness to it that made even Pip tip forward so she could peer around me and eye him.

“Hector—nicely delivered!” She gave him a thumbs up and winked as the other Northern Lakes wolves started to stir.

“This is a trial!” There was a hint of a growl in Harka’s voice. “You will stay silent.”

The wolves quieted, except for Shania and East—both of whom looked first to Pip and then myself.

Aspen may have changed them with ill intentions, but I think she has unknowingly revealed what will happen when a Wolf's Kiss is aware of her powers. Pip can create a new breed of wolves that doesn't bow to tradition and power the way most do.

Pip tucked her chin, which made Shania and East fidget, but when I slightly shook my head at them, the new wolves quieted. For the moment.

Shania huddled closer to Aeric, and I stifled a wince.

I was pretty sure she was wary of me from the way I'd attacked her while under the influence of wolfsbane.

Not that I blamed her.

I still couldn't believe Aspen managed to fool Wyatt, Aeric, and myself and take us down.

"Did you believe in attempting to change the three humans—as well as the child—that they would die?" Harka asked.

Aspen shifted in the chair, making the bespelled shackles around her wrists clink. "Somewhat," she said. "I figured Jack would make it—and the cop, too. Shania was an unpleasant surprise."

"And Teresa?" Harka asked. "She's too young to survive a change."

"Yeah, except she hangs off Pip like a puppy," Aspen snorted. "I knew she'd make it. I didn't mean to target her, though. She was too wily—I knew she'd be able to point them to me."

Aspen glanced at Rio. She didn't smirk—like I would expect someone mentally unbalanced might. Rather, she treated the whole thing with a business-like efficiency.

Rio straightened and stopped leaning on me as his love for his niece stirred him from his misery.

“You hurt Teresa—a *child*, who you babysat and laughed with!” Rio snapped.

Aspen rested her hands on her lap and shrugged. “I originally targeted a different human child. Teresa got in the way, though. I realized she’d be able to point the Pack to me, so I bit her instead.”

The cruel irony was that Teresa *wouldn’t* have been able to identify Aspen. She hadn’t had time to recognize her. It was the fur that Teresa grabbed when Aspen savaged her that led us to Aspen.

“I don’t understand why you’re shocked,” Aspen said. “I dosed you with wolfsbane, and I’d been *dating* you.”

“Because she’s a child!” Rio said. “Why would you involve kids like that?”

Aspen shrugged. “It was a sloppy choice. I knew as soon as I did it that it was over.”

“Shania, then, is the only victim you fully expected to die?” Harka’s voice was sharp enough to pierce metal.

“Yeah,” Aspen said.

Shania set her head on Aeric’s shoulder and squeezed her eyes shut. Aeric smoothed her hair and wrapped his arms around her, as if he could soothe away the pain of hearing that someone intended for her to die—however impersonally Aspen had said it.

Next to me, Pip vibrated with anger, but the pain that raged in my heart was a better window to what she was feeling.

Ahhh yes, as a Wolf’s Kiss, she would find this betrayal just as horrific and bewildering as the Pack. She understands loyalty, and she’s hurting for everyone Aspen damaged with this show of hers.

I offered Pip my hand, and she took it—wringing it with all the anger she wanted to vent, but was keeping locked up. She seemed to realize what she was doing and glanced up at me. When our eyes met, for a moment I swear I felt something connect.

The aching black hole I'd felt in my chest settled, and I could feel the love Pip held for the Pack—bright and warm—in my soul.

She looked away, and the wall came crashing down, returning me to the unending emptiness of a mate bond that could never truly be returned.

Harka stared down at the ground, which was covered with dead leaves that crackled every time someone shifted. “Aspen, is that really all you have to say for yourself?”

Aspen glanced at her aunt, the first sign of remorse softening the set of her shoulders. “Yes.” The admission was quiet, and horrifying in a way. “Don't blame yourself, Pre-Dominant Harka. This isn't your fault.” She never even glanced at her brother, instead she kept her eyes—softened with worry—on her aunt.

If she's as insane as she appears to be, perhaps she dislikes him as he is Harka's heir apparent?

“But how could you do this, Aspen? Please, explain it better,” Harka said, her voice just a breath away from pleading. “I know you—you would never do this just to ruin Greyson. You know Greyson is an excellent Alpha!”

Aspen shut her eyes, as if she could block out the love that lined Harka's eyes. “It's exactly what I said. Alpha Greyson is too powerful. Someone needed to correct it. I wanted to, but it seems I failed.” She laughed bitterly. “And all because of a one in a million chance.”

Aspen flicked her eyes at me, hatred burning bright.

She knows. She figured out Pip is my mate. But why isn't she saying anything? It took me a moment to guess her logic. Perhaps she thinks Harka will be forced out even faster if the Midwest Packs realize I'm mated to the first Wolf's Kiss in generations?

Harka briefly shut her eyes, then glanced at the wolves she'd chosen to act as guards for the trial. “Is she telling the truth?”

They nodded.

As wolves we can't exactly smell a lie. But unless someone is very, very good at it, there are biological factors that indicate a lie—increased heart beats, increased sweat production, and even some changes on a chemical level.

We werewolves can smell and hear those changes. And while it was quite possible for someone to train themselves to repress those reactions—like Pip—it took a lot of practice.

Something I'd normally say Aspen must have, but given it was her aunt she was addressing—and seeing that Harka had finally dragged a reaction out of her—I doubted that Aspen would be capable of lying to her.

A ragged sigh tore its way out of the Pre-Dominant. “Then, Aspen, I exile you from all wolf Packs. You will be branded as a lone wolf and sentenced to sixty years in Ghost Prison.”

Ghost Prison was the high-level security prison for supernaturals—one of the very few joint efforts between the races as we all needed a place to punish those who threatened the supernaturals. We'd learned our lessons after the elves and their crazy, nearly heretical desire to subjugate humans.

She didn't have her killed—as most Alphas would probably request. But Harka is a good leader because she has kindness in her bones. I don't know if she's capable of killing a niece she loves.

Besides, given the severity of the prison and those it housed, it was highly unlikely Aspen would survive her full sentence.

Aspen didn't react. She just nodded—as if she had expected this outcome all along. She offered her aunt a sad smile that seemed too complicated to be fake.

Rafe's cheek twitched, and he finally looked at Aspen, his eyes glazed with sorrow.

Rio spun around and walked away—his confusion palpable as he didn't know how to feel.

“Rio,” Hector called.

Rio ignored him.

Hector started to go after him, but Ember patted her husband on the chest then trotted after her brother-in-law. “Rio, wait up,” she called.

Hector ruffled his dark hair, concern ringing his eyes.

At my side, Pip finally stopped squeezing my fingers and let out the breath she’d been holding. “You know, I thought I’d be glad—or at least relieved. But instead this all just feels horrible.”

“I mean, I *knew* Aspen before she pulled this,” Shania said. “I liked her. When she kidnapped me, I would have taken a rock to her head if I had a chance, but after all this...” She held her hand up, then dropped it, unable to find the right words.

“She deserves her sentencing,” Aeric said.

“Absolutely,” Pip agreed. “But it doesn’t make me feel any better about everything that happened, and I thought it would.”

Hector tucked his hands in his pockets. “Betrayal like this is perhaps one of the worst things you can experience.”

“Good,” Wyatt bluntly said. “Then it can’t get much worse than this.”

“How are you, Hector?” Pip asked. “And how’s your family? You all bore the worst of all of this.”

“You mean Rio?” Hector asked. “He’s hurting, but he loves our Pack more than he loved Aspen. He’ll hurt for a while, but he’ll come around.”

“And Teresa?” Shania asked.

Hector sighed, and for a moment I felt hot anger radiate off my beta. “Teresa is...hurting.”

Aeric cringed, and Wyatt winced as Shania’s brow furrowed in sympathy.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Pip asked.

“I believe she would enjoy a visit from her favorite hunter,” Hector said lightly, though I could feel the weight behind his words.

Pip was a supernatural, but she wasn't a werewolf, and she seemed more human than most adults in Teresa's life. Pip wouldn't be a constant reminder of what Teresa could never have, and would maybe encourage her instead.

“In that case I'll text you so I can set up a good time to drop by.” Pip leaned past me so she could make eye contact with Hector, and didn't object when I tucked her against my side and casually slung an arm over her shoulder.

She didn't even seem to notice, but based on Wyatt's thoughtful expression, my actions were no longer going unnoticed by the Pack.

If I want to keep her from finding out, I better back off.

I knew the idea was best. But I couldn't seem to make myself let her go or step away. The pain in my heart eased when she was this close, and the desire to touch her—even this little—was too overwhelming to let go that easily.

Great. I'm getting dependent. This bodes wonderfully for my abilities as a leader.

“I'm sure she'll be excited to see you,” Hector said. He briefly glanced at me, and then back at Pip.

“Can we head out?” Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck while staring at Aspen, who was surrounded by Harka's wolves as they prepared to march her out. “Or do we have to stick around?”

“You can leave,” I said. “I'll walk Henry out.” I gestured at the Timber Ridge Chief of Police, who was chatting with Harka.

He'd attended as the human representative—a necessity since humans had gotten mixed into the situation when Aspen attacked East and then Shania.

“Yes, Alpha Greyson,” chorused through my wolves before they headed out. Aeric held hands with Shania and

meandered behind Wyatt and East, who hurried out of the clearing with marked relief.

Pip surprised me by putting both of her mitten-covered hands on my chest, then peering up at me. “None of this is your fault.”

I blinked. “Lady Hunter, I’m shocked,” I said. “You sound *concerned* for me.”

“I’m not kidding about this, Greyson.” She fumbled in her knit mittens, but managed to grab onto the front of my jacket. “You can’t blame yourself for Aspen’s actions, even though she was a packmate.”

The ache in my chest twisted as I could feel my entire being call out to her. I ignored it and smiled, lowering my head so I could whisper in her ear. “Thanks. But I did fail the Pack.”

“By not finding her sooner?” Pip shook her head. “Scarlett, Radcliff, and I are trained hunters, and we didn’t figure it out either. You can’t blame yourself for not being completely perfect, Greyson.”

I linked my hands behind her back and let them settle on her waist. “Maybe not,” I agreed. “But it doesn’t mean I won’t regret it.”

Pip chewed her lip. “I can tell this isn’t a battle I’m going to win right now, so we’ll pick it up on another day.”

Grinning, I put my lips so close to her ear I could smell the lightly floral scent of her conditioner. “I look forward to it.”

“Ugh, stop that.” Pip thumped me on the chest, then backed up, breaking my hold on her. “Tell Henry I say hello, and good luck making arrangements with Harka.” Pip waved at me before she yanked her hat down, then hurried after the other wolves, kicking up dried leaves as she went. “Guys, wait for me!”

I watched her go, until I realized Hector was placidly standing next to me.

I straightened as I let all my responsibilities fall back into place. “Do you want to be present when Harka makes the

arrangements? It isn't necessary—if you'd rather you can go home.”

“You have to tell her, soon,” Hector said.

“I get the feeling we're referring to entirely different conversations,” I said.

“Pip.” Hector's eyes were sharp as he stared me down. “You have to tell her that she's your...” Hector trailed off and glanced back at the other wolves. Rather than risk them overhearing, he mouthed the word to me. “*Mate.*”

I felt my Alpha powers immediately well up—on high alert given it was a matter that involved Pip. I forced it down, but I wasn't certain I'd managed before Hector felt it given the way he bowed his head.

I laughed as I mentally planned my words—I wasn't confident in my ability to lie to Hector, so I was better with deflection. “Hector, that's impossible. She's a hunter.”

“And yet it happened,” Hector said.

I shook my head. “What about us could make you think that? The way we never agree on things, or that we like to argue near constantly?”

Hector glanced at the other wolves.

I hesitated for a moment, but Henry was still happily chatting with Harka.

I have a few minutes. I can see what tipped him off and fix it.

I motioned for Hector to follow me down the path that would lead us back to the lodge.

“What you're saying is serious, Hector.”

“I wouldn't imply it if I wasn't certain,” Hector said.

“Then what makes you even *think* something this crazy?”

“Since the Fletching incident, you've let her in,” Hector said.

“Let her in?”

“Any excuse you have to touch her. You’ve always drawn a hard line between the Pack and yourself in human form. I’ve known for a while you violated that rule for Pip when it was just the two of you—I believed it was because you knew she’d never see herself as a possibility and read into your actions the way any female wolf would. But now you’re touching her publicly, and either you’re not aware of it, or you can’t stop yourself,” Hector said.

“You’re saying she’s my mate because I’m finally giving in to the charm of the Pomeranian Puppy Power-ups?” I asked.

“When she started smelling like you, I realized something had changed. I didn’t suspect what it was until I realized your transformation time had gotten even shorter—something that’s likely only possible if you were using your mate’s power as well. I considered ignoring it, until I saw you dosed up, out of your mind on wolfsbane...and docile as long as she held on to you,” Hector said.

Ahhh, yes. I figured that stupid potion would be my undoing.

“You were the one who suggested I wasn’t violent because my Alpha powers were too strong to suppress,” I said.

“It was a possibility,” Hector said. “Potion or not, I didn’t know for certain.”

“And you know now?”

“Yes,” Hector said matter-of-factly. “Because it wasn’t until today that I realized you’ve had a sudden case of modesty for the past few months—almost as if you’re covering something up, like a mate mark?”

I suppressed the urge to rub my head.

Hector had me pinned—proverbially speaking.

“It’s on my bicep,” I admitted.

“Congratulations,” Hector said.

A harsh bark of laughter escaped my control.

“I mean it,” Hector said. “Finding your mate is a wonderful thing. It should be celebrated.”

“Even if my mate is a hunter?” I asked. “A taboo I’ve never heard of anyone breaking except for the legends that explain *why* hunter-wolf pairs don’t exist?”

Hector patted my back. “I’m sorry, too. But after everything that has happened—and seeing you two together—I’d much rather focus on the positive.”

What can I say to that, when Hector’s daughter barely survived being savaged, and his brother was betrayed in the worst way?

“Pip doesn’t know,” Hector stated more than asked.

“No. She fell apart when she found out why I became the Alpha of the Northern Lakes. If I told her about this, she’d be convinced she ruined my whole life,” I said.

“She would,” Hector agreed. “But I’m not convinced your dodgy way of handling this is going to work long term.”

I glanced at my beta as the trail we were on split into three paths. I could smell Pip had gone down the one that led to Timber Ridge.

She, Wyatt, and Aeric were going to help Shania move her things to Pip’s cottage, since she’s better off staying with Pip until she learns to control her new abilities.

Another sniff confirmed the presence of the other wolves, which I found much less interesting.

Keeping them in mind, I kept with the path that would lead back to the lodge. “Turning fatherly on me, are you?”

“Greyson,” Hector said. “I’m telling you this not as your beta, but as your friend. You need to tell her. She’s a hunter. She knows about the elf potion and read up on it after the Low Marsh Pack’s dosing episode. She’s going to figure it out. It’ll be better for you if you tell her.”

I sighed. “I will. Once I can figure out how to tell her without sending her packing.”

“Figure out *faster*,” Hector said. “You don’t have weeks to ponder this. You have days, maybe hours.”

“Why do you think I have so little time?” I asked.

Hector shoved his hands in his slacks, and worry creased around his eyes. “Because she’s a hunter, she’s smart, and she knows werewolves. I can’t say there’s something specific that will tip her off, except to point out that you’re trying to hide something from the one supernatural *designed* to hunt out a werewolf.”

“You’re right.” I peered up at the afternoon sky, which was an unfathomably bright shade of blue. “I’ll tell her. If she looks ready to flee I’ll remind her East, Jack, and Shania still need her.”

Hector eyed me, the wind ruffling his dark hair as we strolled along the path. “You will not use my child as a bargaining chip.”

“I won’t mention Teresa.”

Hector relaxed, then actually smiled, and his professor-y feeling returned to him, perhaps for the first time since Teresa had been attacked. “I’m happy for you, Alpha Greyson.”

“At least that makes one of us,” I sighed.

“She’s the only one who can stand against your power. And I’m not certain you would have been satisfied with another wolf,” Hector said.

I furrowed my brow. “Why?”

“Because she would have had a hard time resisting you. But Pip? She’ll fight you every step of the way. That’s something you would find fun.”

“Hey, you married *Ember*,” I reminded him. “You can’t look down on my romantic preferences.”

“I have an appreciation for strong women,” Hector said mildly. “So I can see how Pip will be good for you. Also, if you two fight, and you happen to mysteriously die in your sleep, I’ll know she did it, so your death won’t be in vain.”

“We get along better than that, now.”

Hector chuckled. “Yes. I think you’ll do well together, if you can get her tamed to the idea. But...while I think she’s the best for you, I am sorry.”

I briefly rubbed the patch of pain positioned over my heart. “Because she can’t return it?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged. “I’d rather have Pip.”

“I imagined as much, considering how you carried on that you would reject any mate you found,” Hector dryly said.

“The Pack is going to think I’ve lost it,” I said.

“Half of them will be glad someone is finally attempting to tie Pip down, the other half will be grateful we will no longer have random female werewolves showing up like particularly ignorant tourists.”

“It sounds like you’re in the second camp.”

“I will be happy I no longer have to watch to keep from tripping over self-indulgent romantics,” Hector agreed.

We were almost back to the lodge by now. “I’m glad my dating status will no longer impede your life,” I dryly said.

“Quite,” Hector agreed. “But, Alpha. You really do need to tell her.”

I stopped—I’d have to head back to the clearing so I could find Henry and take him back to the city. “I will.” I turned around and went back up the path we’d meandered down. “Soon.”

Epilogue

Pip

“Are you *sure* you don’t want gloves?” I asked.

Shania spread her fingers out, then laughed. “I keep reaching for them out of habit, but—believe me—I don’t need them. I’d sweat through this sweater if we weren’t going outside shortly. The extra heat is one thing I’ll adjust to quickly.”

Aeric tugged her toward the door. “Having to consume all the extra calories to keep up with our metabolism is also fun. And after moving you, today, I could eat an entire buffet.”

“Yeah, and you’re the reason why all werewolves are banned from buffets in Timber Ridge,” I reminded him.

Shania made a face. “I just wish I could figure out how to stop bending my forks.”

“That’s what tonight is for.” I folded my arms across my chest and leaned back against the stair banister. “You’ll get practice—and wisdom, since Roanne will be there to give you advice on how to regulate your new strength.”

“Hey, I’m plenty wise,” Aeric protested. “And so is Wyatt!”

“You two would just get swept up in your bromance, complimenting each other’s cooking, while Jack and I suffer

with ruined cutlery,” Shania said.

Aeric smoothed his red hair. “Hey, Wyatt is a *really* good cook. Now you’ll have a true appreciation for his homemade jerky.”

“If you have any questions, just ask Roanne,” I told Shania as the pair stopped at the door. “Aeric organized this night for you—to help you. Roanne has coached a lot of new wolves. She’s a great teacher.”

Shania exhaled and nodded. “Thanks. I need this. I want to hug my sister and not worry about crushing her. And while I appreciate you letting me stay with you, I’d like to move back home before the new year.”

“Enjoy the food—Aeric’s right. Wyatt *is* an excellent chef. Now get out of here!” I made a shooing motion at the pair.

Aeric yanked the door open and didn’t even have the decency to shiver when an icy wind gusted past. “I’ll have my ladyfriend home by midnight.”

“I know it’s a Canadian thing, but it’s still weird to hear you call me that,” Shania shuddered. “It makes me feel like we’re in our eighties.” She grinned back at me and waved. “Bye, Pip. Thanks again...for everything.”

I waved, but shut the door behind her, leaving me shivering in the cold air. “Sheesh, that’s just what I need—more people in my life who don’t realize coldness is a thing.”

I meandered off to the kitchen—I was hoping to make popcorn in Mama Dulce’s ancient rotator popcorn machine.

Something suspiciously thudded in Mama Dulce and Papa Santos’s room—that is, my room.

I have to get used to thinking of it as my room.

Since Shania moved in—most likely until Christmas or so, depending on how fast she adjusted to her new abilities—she had insisted she take the loft and I take the slightly larger master bedroom.

I’d been reluctant, but it wasn’t as painful as I thought it would be, and it was absolutely delightful to have a door I

could close to keep the Bedevilments out.

I opened the bedroom door, groaning when one of the cats—Princess, I thought—streaked out of the room. “I swear I locked you *out*.” I poked my head into the room. It looked like she hadn’t done anything—besides sleep on my pillow, if the gray hairs liberally sprinkled across the white pillowcase were any indicator.

I shook my head and closed the door, then almost tripped on Prince when I turned around.

Prince yowled and hooked his claws into my jeans.

“I already fed you.”

Prince dug his claws in so they pricked my leg.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned him.

He tucked his butt under him—a sign he was getting ready to launch himself up—when the doorbell rang.

I looked at Prince, and Prince looked quizzically up at me, just as surprised as I was at the prospect of company that he actually unhooked his claws and jumped onto a tiny end table pushed against one of the windows. He smashed his head against the pane and flicked his tail.

I hadn’t quite gotten over my happy-fun-adventures-with-Aspen, so I grabbed my cellphone and swiped it open before I made my way back over to the front door.

I cracked the door and relaxed when I saw the white wolf sitting expectantly on my welcome mat, his ears perked.

“Greyson.” I opened the door all the way. “Everything okay?”

Greyson happily pushed past me, almost stomping on Princess in the process—who looked like she was contemplating bolting outside.

I shut the door, then turned back to Greyson, who was sitting again, his ears perked with his tongue poking out of his mouth as he panted—of course my cozy home was too warm for the wolf.

“Since you don’t seem upset, I’m going to assume everything is fine and you’re just being your usual mysterious self—although, let me confirm for you that you may *think* you’re mysterious, but really you’re not. We played this game a couple weeks ago, remember?”

Greyson was handsome as a wolf, but panting and with his ears perked, he looked too cute, so I knelt down and threw my arms around his neck, threading my fingers into his thick fur.

“Your fur is longer—your winter coat must have finally finished growing in.”

Greyson sniffed my neck, getting a shriek out of me.

Satisfied, he happily padded his way over to the fridge.

“Hey, no judging my food choices,” I called out to him.

Although he lacked thumbs, he had an unfortunately excellent sense of leverage, and used his muzzle to pry the fridge open.

He stood on the bottom ledge of it, his massive wolf body blocking the entire fridge from my sight as he rummaged around it.

I rolled my eyes and hefted myself up onto my couch, draping myself so I took up as much space as possible, leaving no room for Greyson.

Greyson sneezed inside my fridge.

“Did you just sneeze on my food?” I demanded.

Greyson hefted himself out of my fridge, shut it with his shoulder, then trotted off to my bedroom. He briefly disappeared inside, then came right back out, his ears at a confused angle.

“The spare clothes are now in the bathroom,” I told him. “I moved downstairs, and Shania took the loft.”

Greyson gave me a reprimanding look with his gold eyes, then disappeared into the tiny bathroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

“This is *my* house, you know,” I called to him through the door, confident he could hear me even if he was going through the painful shift from wolf to human. “I can move stuff around however I want.”

Faster than I thought possible, Greyson opened the door. He was pulling a long-sleeved T-shirt over his head, but as he nudged the door open he turned awkwardly so he was facing the wall, his right side to me.

I thought I saw a dark mark on his left arm—maybe a bruise or something—but he finished yanking his shirt on as he turned, so I didn’t get to see more than a glimpse of it.

“I was surprised—I thought I’d have to pry you out of that loft.” Greyson stepped around Princess, heading back to the fridge.

“Don’t tell me you really came here to steal food?” I asked. “You have an office in the lodge. The Pack has so much food there, you could live off it for a month.”

“I came to make sure you *had* food.” Greyson pulled the fridge door open. “Did you eat?”

“Yeah. I grabbed some pizza in Timber Ridge while Shania finished packing some of her stuff. What’s with this sudden interest in making sure I’m fed?” I called from my couch.

“Boredom?” Greyson shut the door of the fridge, then scrounged in my cupboards. “Or maybe I’m just looking for a fight, and my Pack will always back down.”

“That seems more likely.”

I pulled the sleeves of my sweater up over my hands and rested them on my stomach, trying to warm up as Greyson banged around in the kitchen.

This was the first real chance Greyson and I had to talk since he was dosed and Aspen threw me in the panic room.

“So it turns out using my magic is weird,” I said.

“Oh?” Greyson got a mug out of the cupboard and filled it with milk, then stuck it in the microwave.

“Yeah. I basically have to get it to go backward—like a river running up a hill,” I said.

“Figures,” Greyson said. “That suits your personality.”

“I still don’t understand how it works,” I said. “I need to play around with it a lot. Right now I just fling it out into the sky and hope it does something. There are too many possibilities in terms of how it can interact with the Pack, and the Sabre journal hasn’t been much help.”

The microwave dinged, and Greyson fetched the now hot milk. “What do you mean by possibilities?” he asked.

“I still don’t know what healed me when Amos attacked the Pack,” I said. “You swear Pack magic can’t do that, so it’s not like my powers were tapping into something from the Pack. But I don’t get the feeling from my magic that as a Wolf’s Kiss I can self-heal. So what was that?”

Greyson dumped a packet of premium hot cocoa mix in the hot milk and stirred it in. “Could you have tapped into something hunter-related with Scarlett and Radcliff?” He returned to the fridge and grabbed my canned whipping cream, spraying it in a fancy little swirl on the hot chocolate.

“No. Hunters don’t have healing powers like that, unless it’s a genetic magic that runs in the family line. We heal faster, and we’re tougher than a regular human, but we don’t have any kind of magic that knits wounds back together. That’s why we always carry fae potions.”

I grabbed the crochet blanket off the back of my couch and spread it over my legs as Greyson approached, carrying the mug.

I sat up and started to scoot over, but when Greyson sat down in the spot I’d abandoned, he put a hand on my lap to stall me, then angled himself so I could half lean against the couch and his right shoulder and stay stretched out.

This was too much for my human sensibilities—it was one thing to be subjected to hugs because of my puppy

pheromones, but sitting on the couch like this was a little too close to snuggling for me to handle with a wolf, much less Greyson. But he was so *warm*.

He tucked his left arm around my shoulders as he presented me with the steaming mug of hot chocolate, topped with whipped cream.

Okay, I guess this isn't too much. I mean, he brought me hot chocolate and he's like a personal space heater. A very good-looking space heater. But I can channel my dog vibe as hard as necessary if it means hot chocolate and personal space heaters.

“Thank you.” I took the mug of hot chocolate with great delight and was distracted for a good five minutes as I imbibed my favorite drink all while Greyson seemed content to let me leech off his body heat.

When I finished and Greyson took my mug and put it on the end table, I was finally able to recall what I'd been thinking of.

Oh, right. Weird instances of magic.

“Are we sure the healing thing isn't your fault?” I asked.

Greyson used his thumb to casually wipe a bit of whipped cream off the tip of my nose, then licked his thumb. “What do you mean?”

I gulped a little at his actions, but stubbornly forged on because this was, after all, not “too much”. “I mean, you didn't completely succumb to the potion because of your Alpha senses.”

“No Alpha can resist wolfsbane,” Greyson said. “It'd be dangerous of you to think otherwise.”

“Hmm.”

I scrunched my face up as I pondered the matter.

If his Alpha spirit wasn't responsible for that, what was? It wasn't my powers as a Wolf's Kiss. Now that I know what my magic feels like when I access my Wolf's Kiss magic, I can confidently say it's what amplified the Pack when they fought

against the Fletchings, but it definitely didn't move on Greyson—he turned human almost immediately after arriving.

Greyson tipped his head against the back of the couch, and I felt his breathing slow as he relaxed. His Alpha powers wafted around my cottage—another sign that he was unwinding.

Maybe he really did drop by just to make sure I ate. He's been more thoughtful lately. The thought flickered across my brain before I made myself focus.

The weird instances of magic: focus! Greyson was with me both when I was healed and obviously when he was under the influence of wolfsbane. But Alphas can't heal others, and Greyson said it wasn't because he's an Alpha that the potion didn't fully get him. What else could do that? I know a fated mate can reach a feral wolf—including one that's been dosed with wolfsbane, and fated mates can also shift magic back and forth between themselves to help heal each other in dangerous situations. But while both of these cases involved Greyson—the only one with a fated mate in the whole Pack—he doesn't know his mate.

I rubbed the wrinkles in my forehead as I thought it through.

Greyson was totally feral...until he smelled me. And I was bleeding out with the Fletchings, until he picked me up and then bam, suddenly I was healed. Are we...?

The idea was so insane I laughed. Not a cute little giggle, but a legit cackle that made me sound crazy.

Greyson inhaled deeply, moving me as I was still propped against his chest, then exhaled. He must have been half asleep, because he folded his right arm around me as well, then tilted his head so his cheek rested on the top of my skull.

My brain stopped functioning for several long moments before roaring back to life with a vengeance.

But we can't be mates. We've been around each other for years. The bond would have solidified or been rejected as soon as we saw each other. Although...I'm a hunter. My magic that

blocks off his influence as an Alpha would also block off such a connection. So we would never be able to be mates in the first place. No mate bond would materialize. But Greyson very obviously knows he has one, even if he hasn't found her.

My head hurt from the dizzying circles my thoughts were leading me in, and I felt stupid for even pondering it.

In order for Greyson to heal me, and for him to recognize me as his mate while feral, I'm pretty sure he would have had to have accepted the mate bond—which is unlikely given he told me himself he'd reject his mate when he found her. Besides, he'd get a mark somewhere and—

I recalled how—since the Fletching fight—Greyson had taken great pains to wear long sleeved shirts directly after he transformed.

Not that he stalked around showing off his prominent muscles before, but now he didn't shift from wolf to human unless he had clothes ready. And he'd been wearing long sleeved t-shirts back when Wyatt and Aeric were still slumping around in t-shirts and tank tops in early fall.

I thought I saw something on his left bicep. Could it be...?

Thankfully, Greyson had chosen a long-sleeved t-shirt with a very loose cuff. I yanked it up his arm, and it got stuck on his bicep, but it was high enough that I could see most of what was very clearly a wolf pawprint—blacker than any tattoo ink could ever get—emblazoned on his arm.

“That's a mate mark,” I said, staring stupidly at it.

Greyson snapped upright, dislodging me from his shoulder and yanking his sleeve down.

I thought he was going to lecture me about intruding on his privacy or something—maybe tell me he'd gotten a magic tattoo on a whim.

Instead his gold eyes glowed with panic, and his Alpha powers thickened in the room. “I can explain.”

Not an excuse—no attempt to pretend. Just...what?

“Explain what?” I asked, my voice dangerously pleasant. “That we’re *mates*?”

Greyson stood and growled—not at me, though. “It’s supposed to be impossible.”

“Yeah, because I’m a hunter.” I paused, my anger balancing with...*something* that I didn’t want to identify. “But you know it’s me?”

Greyson laughed harshly. “Oh yeah. I know.”

“You said you didn’t want a mate. You told me yourself!” I stood up and drew my shoulders up, hissing like one of the Bedevilments. “Why didn’t you reject the bond?”

“*Because* it was you,” Greyson said.

My cellphone rang, its tinny tune grating on my nerves. I stalked over to my little three-seater table and saw it was Hector, then silenced the ringtone. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I would have rejected anyone except you,” Greyson said. “Pip, you’re the only one I can relax with, the only one I don’t have to have perfect control around and make sure I don’t accidentally dictate to or so completely overrule so you no longer have a personality. Even before the bond solidified, I thought I’d reject whoever it was because she wouldn’t be like you.”

“You’re an Alpha, and I’m a hunter.” My breathing was ragged, and it felt like I wasn’t getting enough oxygen. “Which means...I’ll never be able to complete the bond, and you...” I sat down abruptly at my kitchen table and turned to Greyson. He was shaking his head.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“With an incomplete bond?” I demanded. “That’s impossible! It has to be eating away at you!”

My phone vibrated—still Hector. I angrily mashed the button on the side of my phone to silence the ring again.

“Pip, you’ve seen my strength. I can stand an incomplete bond. I’d rather have *you*.”

I groaned and dropped my head to the kitchen table. “Greyson, this is a taboo that isn’t *supposed* to be broken!”

“It’s not like it’s morally wrong,” Greyson said.

“No, it’s just borderline abusive and toxic,” I snarled. “Alpha or not, I’m a hunter. I’d have all the power in the relationship—there are reasons why it was made taboo.”

Greyson narrowed his yellow eyes. “All the power? Please. You’d never beat me in a fight.”

“I can when we’re mated, and I have no bond but you do, and you’ve got the cocktail of protective instincts that come with it,” I declared. “You’d never let yourself even pretend to hurt me like that. Your instincts won’t let you! You’ll get literally every downside in this bond—why didn’t you just reject it?”

“You say this as if this isn’t something you would ever want.” Greyson tilted his head back, and I felt a fresh wave of his Alpha powers glide through my cottage. “I know you care for me. I knew it when I was feral and out of my mind.”

“Of course I do!” I massaged my forehead and wondered if I had fallen asleep and was experiencing a nightmare and a daydream at the same time. “Because I’m an idiot I would have fallen in love with you in a second if I gave myself a moment to think about it, but I didn’t because I knew I could never be your mate!”

“But you *are*,” Greyson said.

For one elated moment, I felt a shred of joy.

I’d always been overlooked in anything like this.

I was the best friend, the sidekick—the girl with the dog-like vibe.

But Greyson—the strongest Alpha in the Midwest who, no joke, could overrule the Pre-Dominant with his sheer strength—saw me, and liked me: hunter strength, lack of werewolf stamina, and all.

Wasn’t this everything I wanted?

Except...being with me is too dangerous for him.

I covered my eyes, horror filling me as I realized exactly what was going on. “You had to move here because of me, and you accepted this...will you die when I die? Because of the bond?”

“I’m arrogant and stubborn. Do you really think I’m soft enough to die when my mate dies?” Greyson scoffed.

“Yes!” I shouted. “Because you’re so, so *loyal*.”

“Ah yes, you’ve uncovered my worst personality trait,” Greyson raised an eyebrow at me. “Loyalty. How dare I?”

“This isn’t a joke!” I shouted. “If Aspen had killed me, it would have—”

“She wouldn’t have had a chance to kill you, because I would have knocked down the wall between us before then,” Greyson growled.

My cellphone ringtone started up—*again*. It was Hector—*again*.

Irritated, I smashed the button to accept the call. “*What*, Hector? What is so important—because you have the worst timing ever!”

“Don’t hang up,” Hector shouted through the tinny phone speaker. “Pip, someone just revealed what you are.”

Greyson was at my side in a moment. “What do you mean?”

I gave him the stink eye and leaned away, but before I got the chance to ask, Hector sighed in relief. “Greyson is with you? Good.”

“Yeah, yeah, we can all sing and party later. What do you mean, someone revealed what I am?” I asked.

“There was an information leak. The encrypted files on the USB flash drive Amos made that was misplaced for a few hours after the Fletching fight? Most of those files were about you being a Wolf’s Kiss, and a bunch of them were attached to a massive email that just went out to every Pack in the

Midwest,” Hector said. “I don’t know if Aspen set this up weeks ago, or if someone else did it, but that email names you as a Wolf’s Kiss. Pip, they’re coming for you. Every Pack in the Midwest is going to come after you.”

THE END

To be continued in Fated,

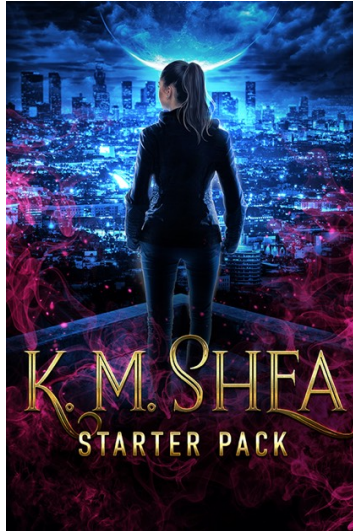
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Afterword

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My newsletter is released every month, and contains information about the books I'm working on, new freebies, and exclusive content just for newsletter subscribers!

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I am proud to say I have the best readers. Therefore, it is my dearest wish that Pip and her friends made you laugh and warmed your heart. Thank you.

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About the Author

K. M. Shea is a fantasy-romance author who never quite grew out of adventure books or fairy tales, and still searches closets in hopes of stumbling into Narnia. She is addicted to sweet romances, witty characters, and happy endings. She also writes LitRPG and GameLit under the pen name, A. M. Sohma.

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