

REJECTED MATE WOLF SHIFTER ROMANCE



# Betrayed

## WOLF MATE

SILVER WOLVES BLACK OPS

RUBY KNOXX

# BETRAYED WOLF MATE

*Rejected Mate Wolf Shifter Romance*

*Silver Wolves Black Ops Book 5*

Ruby Knoxx

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## Chapter 1 - Stella

The autumn chill nipped at my skin as I made my way through the town, keeping my head down against the wind and trying not to think about why Farrow might have summoned me. When he wasn't throwing insults, he typically ignored me. So the fact that he'd ordered me to come to his office couldn't mean anything good. If I'd needed more convincing that something was wrong, he'd sent along one of his cronies to "escort" me.

We hadn't spoken a word since he'd arrived at my doorstep this morning and told me Farrow wanted to talk to me. We'd just walked in silence, him at my shoulder every step of the way as if waiting for me to flee.

Which was stupid. If I was going to run, I would have run a long time ago.

Farrow, the Full Moon Pack's alpha, worked out of the largest building in the center of town. The red brick structure towered over everything else. We were still a quarter mile away, but it still loomed over us ominously.

The streets were relatively empty, and the people who were out were hurrying as if anxious to get their business over and done with so they could return home. A year ago, it would have been a different story. Shifters would have been roaming the town, enjoying the last traces of warmth before winter fully set in.

I mulled this over as we walked up the steps, my silent shadow still following me. It wasn't until he led me through the halls to Farrow's office and knocked on the door that he finally said anything. And it was to the shifter on the other side of the door, not to me.

"It's Oscar," he said. "I've got her."

*Her.* I didn't even warrant my actual name. That was how low I was on the social totem pole here.

"Come in," the gruff voice from inside the room growled. Oscar opened the door and pushed me inside.

Farrow was standing at the window, his brow creased in thought. He was tall and imposing, and the look he gave me when he turned his gaze from the window to me was enough to make me shrink back just a little.

It was impossible not to notice that Oscar had stepped inside the room and closed the door. He positioned himself in front of it, blocking my only escape route.

“Have a seat, Stella.” Farrow motioned at the wooden chair in front of his desk. It wasn’t a suggestion; it was a demand. I hurried to follow his orders.

“What’s this about?” I asked once I was seated.

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he drummed his fingers against his folded arm as he looked at me like I was an interesting specimen. The look was enough to make my stomach clench in unease. I hated the silence, but I knew better than to rush him. So, I waited nervously.

Finally, he said, “I’m assuming you know who Akron is by now.”

Of course I knew who Akron was. He was the reason everyone stayed inside whenever possible. He was a demon, and he and his underlings had taken up residence nearby. They’d decided the Full Moon Pack was their playground and had spent the last six months terrorizing the town.

I had no idea what Akron had to do with me, but I nodded.

“Akron and I were able to come to an arrangement,” Farrow said. He gave a feral grin that made ice crawl up my spine. That was not a good look.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’m glad you’re glad.” Farrow turned to face me, looking down at me with cool indifference.

After a long pause, I realized he was waiting for me to ask the obvious question. Something told me I wasn’t going to like the answer. It was the look in his eye. But I found myself asking the question, anyway.

“What arrangement, exactly?”

He gave me a grin that showed all his teeth. “He would stop terrorizing our town if we offered him a... we’ll call it a tribute.”

“A tribute? Like a sacrifice?”

He tilted his head from side to side. “Not a sacrifice. They’re not going to die. Think of it as more of an offering.”

“What’s the arrangement?” I asked. A clipped, almost panicked edge

had entered my voice.

“He’ll stop attacking the town and come to an alliance in exchange for you.”

The world came crashing down around me as the words hit home. My mouth dropped open, half-convinced I must have misheard him.

“You can’t be serious,” I managed to say.

“Believe me, I’m very serious.” Farrow walked over to me and leaned forward, putting his face so close to mine that I actually leaned back. “I offered you in exchange for the alliance. He agreed.” He grinned again, but it didn’t penetrate the cold in his eyes. “Congratulations. You’re about to get married.”

“I’m not,” I said before springing to my feet and marching toward the door. I stopped short. Oscar was still there, arms folded like a club bouncer. The look on his face dared me to try getting past him.

A strong arm grabbed my bicep and spun me around so I was face to face with Farrow again. The smug smile had been replaced by a sinister, disconcerting scowl.

“Yes, you are,” he said, his warm breath brushing against my face. “Even if you’re an outcast, even if you’ve made some stupid decisions before now, you’re still a member of this pack. And I’m still your alpha. You’re going to do your duty.”

“I’m pretty sure this goes beyond what’s expected of me.” I tugged my arm from his grip. I half-expected him to grip tighter, but he let me go. “Don’t I get a say in any of this?”

He gave me a feral smile that seemed to fill my vision. “No.”

“This isn’t fair,” I managed to say. Everything around me was swimming.

“I think this is perfectly fair,” he said, folding his arms as he frowned down at me. “If it makes it easier, you can think of this as punishment for disobeying our laws.”

“That was one time, and it was years ago,” I burst out, unable to hide my anger and disbelief. “I don’t see how the two things are connected. Haven’t I paid enough for it by being ostracized ever since?”

“No.” The single word was like a knife to the stomach. “You made the choice of falling in love with an outsider when you knew it was against our rules. That sort of disobedience can’t be forgiven.”

I’d been young and stupid. A group of military men had come to town and set up camp right outside. I’d fallen in love with one of them; he’d seemed kind and sweet. I’d fallen for him, and I’d thought he was in love with me. But it was forbidden. The pack had a strict rule against being with an outsider. The soldier had told me we could just leave together, but when the time came to leave, he didn’t show. The camp left the same day. Everyone in town seemed to have known about the affair, and I was punished for the rest of my time in the pack.

It seemed like the punishment wasn’t finished yet.

My jaw clenched, and I tried to fight back the tears of frustration threatening to spill down my cheeks. All my life, I’d been taught to be obedient and do what I was told, especially if it was for the good of the pack. But marrying me off to a demon who had been terrorizing the town...

“Think of the countless number of lives you’ll be saving,” Farrow said. “And think of how much stronger the pack will be, having Akron as an ally. And if you refuse, think of how Akron would react. He’ll be furious, and he’ll take it out on the pack. Who knows how many people will be caught in the crossfire?”

I looked away, rage rolling off me in giant waves. Rough, strong fingers gripped my chin and jerked my head back so I was looking directly into Farrow’s cold eyes.

“Do you really want to be responsible for that much death?” he snarled.

I shook my head as best I could, his fingers still digging into my jaw.

“Good. Now stop whining.”

He released his grip on my face and stood back. There was no remorse on his features. If anything, there was an almost savage triumph there. He was getting everything he could possibly want: an end to the violence, an alliance with a powerful demon, and the most disliked pack member out of his hair for good.

“If I get any word of you trying to weasel your way out of this, Stella,

believe me when I say you will regret it. Have I made myself clear?”

My limbs were shaking, and I couldn't tell if it was from fear, anger, or resignation. I supposed it didn't matter. I gave a curt nod of my head and stood silently.

“Good,” he said again. “In that case, it seems like you have a wedding to plan for. I'd suggest you start packing, too.”

I clenched my jaw as tightly as I could. If I said anything, it was only going to make things worse. Besides, it was like Farrow had said—it was for the good of the pack. No matter what else, I had always done my duty for the pack, done what I was told to do. I'd made the mistake of going against the pack only once, and look how that had turned out. Rules were there for a reason. Decisions were made intentionally and always had a purpose. So even if Farrow had multiple motives for offering me to the demon, it had to be the right choice for the good of the pack.

It had to be, because if it wasn't, then I was binding myself to an evil demon for nothing.

“Stella?”

I paused, my hand on the knob. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. I needed to be by myself and process everything that had just happened. But I forced myself to turn back and look at my alpha.

He was smiling, and his grin was wide, malicious, and feral. It was enough to freeze my insides.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” he said.

As I stepped outside, Oscar on my heels, I looked up at the quickly graying sky. I had to wonder if any of this would have happened if I hadn't been so stupid as to fall in love with an outsider all those years ago.

If I had never met Sam.



## Chapter 2 - Sam

The mid-afternoon sun hung overhead, illuminating the patches of orange, yellow, and red leaves surrounding us as we lounged behind the mansion, clustered on the second patio as we all chatted.

“Yeah, I can see why you guys decided to settle down here,” Mark said, sipping beer as he looked out at the lake below us. “Honestly, I kind of wish I’d joined you guys when you first left. I’m looking forward to a quiet life.”

“Oh, trust me,” Klyte said, clapping Mark on the back, “I wouldn’t call our life here necessarily quiet. But at least we don’t have to wander around from place to place for adventure and danger anymore. It seems to find us no matter what we do.”

Watching the interactions from the side while I nursed a beer, I couldn’t argue with Klyte. Ever since a group of us had retired from the Silver Wolves, a covert black-ops group of shifters that had specialized in taking care of dangers to the Wolf Council and packs in general, and moved to Brixton, Colorado, home of the Obsidian Pack, things hadn’t exactly been easy. But the original group of us who had come here a couple of years here—Jameson, Luke, Alek, Klyte, Oliver, myself, and later, Evelyn and Malcolm—had made it work and made the place our home.

Now, it looked as though we were going to have three new additions to the group. Rand, Tannen, and Mark had all been Silver Wolves with us, but they had stuck around after we had left. Then about a month ago, they’d reached out, saying they were thinking of retiring and asking whether Brixton was worth settling down in. We’d all said yes. So now, here they were, our little mini pack within the larger pack that made up the town of Brixton.

“Still, we’re happy to have you guys join in the fun,” Luke said, raising his beer bottle in a half-toast. “There are a lot of cool places around here that we can show you.”

“I’ve found some great places to hunt over the years,” Oliver said. “Not too far from here. Tons of deer and rabbits, and some larger game if you know where to look for them.”

“Internet is great here, too,” Tannen commented, looking down at his

laptop. “Really great, considering how high up in the mountains we are.”

“Leave it to you to be excited about internet service,” Klyte remarked, rolling his eyes, but grinning broadly as he did. He and Tannen had always had a good relationship. Possibly because Klyte kept breaking our tech equipment, and Tannen kept having to fix it. They’d spent a lot of time together.

“Let’s be real,” Malcolm, our old boss, said, “I don’t think Tannen could settle down anywhere that had subpar internet or was too far away from a tech store.” He laughed.

“I’m just glad you guys have seen reason,” Luke said, leaning back and brushing his curly dark hair from his face. “Being black ops was fun for a bit, but retirement is where it’s really at.”

“I don’t know, is there going to be a house big enough for Rand?” Alek joked.

It was a fairer question than one might think. Rand was so large, he seemed to dwarf the chair he was sitting in, and the beer in his hand looked comically small. The large shifter grinned and winked at Alek.

“Don’t worry about me on that end,” he said. “I’ve lived in army barracks before. I can handle a house.”

Mark snorted, rolling his eyes. “You complained all the time that the barrack beds were too small for you.”

“Sure,” Rand said. “But I survived.”

“I’m sure there’s someone in town who can help out,” Jameson said. “I wouldn’t worry too much about that.”

The light-hearted conversation continued, as if there hadn’t been a couple of years where we hadn’t spoken much with one another. We were picking up right where we left off.

I stayed off to the side, watching the group and listening. It was nice being together. Considering how busy everyone was, it felt as though we rarely spent time with one another anymore. But this was a special occasion. And having more of the gang back together was something I hadn’t realized I’d missed until now.

I was fine with standing off to the side and watching. A lot of times, I

preferred it. Blending in and staying silent could come in handy during black ops missions, even if it didn't always make sense when it came to having a social life.

But it never lasted forever. Even if sometimes, I wanted it to.

"Sam, you still like exploring on your time off?" Tannen asked, finally roping me into the conversation. "Find anything interesting?"

"Yeah," I said. Silence lingered, but instead of filling it, I took a sip of my beer and stared off into the woods.

"Very loquacious," Klyte commented when it was obvious I wasn't going to say anything else. "I swear, Sam, sometimes you need to stop talking for a few minutes. I know you like the sound of your own voice, but —"

"Leave him alone," Jameson said. "He doesn't have to give his life story if he doesn't want to."

"Sam has a life story?" Rand asked, raising his eyebrows as he gave me a broad smirk. "First time I've ever heard of it. Come to think of it, I don't know if I know anything about your history from before you joined up with the Silver Wolves."

I shrugged. "I like to keep things private."

"Pretty sure there's such a thing as too private," Alek said, shaking his mop of red hair out of his face.

"He's always been like that," Mark said, giving me a playful nudge. "I remember when we were just plain military together. He was quiet back then."

"Why jabber on when just a few words are enough?" I asked. "And there's nothing wrong with a bit of introspection."

But Mark was right—I had always been a bit on the quiet side. But that trait had gotten more prominent over the last few years.

And I knew exactly when it had happened.

"Wait," Klyte said to Mark, his eyes glinting mischievously, "you knew Sam before the Silver Wolves. Which means *you* actually might be able to tell us all the juicy details of Sam's life before we knew him."

My body tensed, my grip on my beer bottle tightening as I waited to

hear what Mark would say. I glanced at Mark, whose blond hair glinted in the sunlight, turning it an almost golden color. I wasn't sure what he was going to say, but I really hoped it wasn't what my mind had instantly jumped to.

Mark frowned, rubbing his chin as he looked off to one side. "Hate to break it to you, but I don't think Sam has any juicy details."

My shoulders relaxed somewhat, even as my friends groaned comically at that statement.

"There has to be something you can give us," Alek pressed. "He can't be this enigmatic without some deep, dark secrets."

"Wait." Mark snapped his fingers, and my stomach instantly sank as he glanced at me. "Wasn't there a girl at one place who you liked?"

"Really?" Klyte grinned over at me.

"Yeah," Mark said. "We were in the military moving through an area, taking care of some dispute or something like that. There was a pack nearby, and there was an absolutely gorgeous woman there. Sandra or Sydney or—"

"Stella," I said tightly, and a gorgeous woman with silky dark hair that fell in waves around her heart-shaped face filled my vision, even as I tried to push the thought of her away.

"That's right," Mark continued. "Anyway, her pack apparently didn't like outsiders, especially outsiders who showed an interest in one of their females. But I kept seeing Sam sneaking off late at night—"

My jaw clenched, and I forced myself not to growl. Leave it to Mark to talk about my love life and not realize I wanted to keep it quiet. The rest of the Silver Wolves were clinging to his every word.

"Leave him alone," Evelyn said. "If he likes being enigmatic, that's on him. It's not fair of you guys to pry all of his secrets out of Mark. That's cheating, if you ask me."

She was leaning lazily against her mate, Oliver, and looked entirely at ease. But I knew her well enough to know by the way she was looking at me that she was trying to shift the topic away from dangerous waters. I appreciated it. Out of everyone here, Evelyn was arguably my best friend, and she was the only person who knew the full story about what had happened with Stella, and how badly I'd fucked up.

I shot her an appreciative glance. She nodded imperceptibly, giving me a small, reassuring smile.

The conversation moved on, but the damage was done. Stella had crept back into my thoughts, the way she always did. Whenever I thought I was over her, she reappeared again, and a fresh wound of guilt and loss opened up.

I sighed internally, keeping my face a mask. The truth was that I missed her, and I wished I could change what had happened. But I couldn't, and trying to would just make matters worse, even if I tried to convince myself otherwise.

Even though I knew it was a bad idea, I'd thought about going back to Stella more than once, but I'd stayed away, worried about what might happen if I did. The urge had been there, but I'd always resisted. The truth was that I put the safety of others, including her, before anything else, even if it hurt to do so. I'd made my choice, and I had to live with it now.

But telling myself that didn't calm the wolf pacing and snarling inside me. He still missed her, still wanted to go back. But we both knew we couldn't. Which made him even angrier.

*What's done is done*, I told myself. *It's best to just move on at this point.*

I wished it were as easy as that.

## Chapter 3 - Stella

I didn't meet Akron for another week, though I had a shadow the entire time, either Oscar or another of Farrow's men. They didn't follow me into the house, but from the moment I woke up to the moment I fell asleep, someone was outside, watching. And if I left to get groceries or go to work or for whatever reason, I'd see them behind me. They didn't even bother to hide. I guess Farrow thought I would run. But where would I go, even if I planned to run?

By the third day after Farrow had told me about Akron, it was obviously everyone in the pack knew about the upcoming wedding. I didn't know if they knew just how much of a say I lacked in the arrangement, but it was clear by the way people looked at me and the whispers behind my back that everyone was aware of what was going to happen.

I kept to myself as much as possible, not sure what else there was for me to do. It wasn't as though I had any friends to confide in about it.

During the week, I began to wonder why I had stayed here after all. At first, after the incident with Sam, I'd stayed because my parents were still here. They had been understanding enough, though not exactly pleased with me. Yet, they hadn't cast me out and shunned me like the rest of the town. After they'd died a couple of years ago, I'd stayed because I'd never been anywhere else. I'd been determined to prove to them that I wouldn't make the same mistake again, that I was loyal to the pack and always had been. I hated the hand I'd been dealt, but I would do my duty if it meant keeping the pack safe and showing them I was loyal.

After a week had passed from my conversation with Farrow, I opened my front door to see Oscar standing outside. His face was expressionless.

"Farrow wanted me to take you to Akron," he said. "The deal's all taken care of."

"Fantastic," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "And I'm guessing I don't have a choice in the matter?"

His stony look told me everything I needed to know.

"Joy," I muttered. I sighed, running my fingers through my hair as I braced myself for what was going to happen next. "Let me get my jacket."

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Akron lived in a mansion. Not exactly what I'd been expecting.

I looked up at the expansive house as we pulled up to the front. There was something unpleasant and ominous about the whole place. It made my skin crawl unpleasantly, and I repressed a shudder.

Oscar and I didn't say anything as we got out of the car and walked up to the house. My hands trembled more than I wanted to admit, but I jammed them deep into my pockets. I wasn't going to let Oscar or any of the demons lurking in the house see me nervous.

The front doors opened as we approached. I kept walking before realizing that my shadow had stopped. I turned to see Oscar standing several feet back, staring up uneasily at the mansion. His gaze moved back down to meet mine. I couldn't tell if it was fear or pity in his expression, but either way, my stomach twisted itself into a knot.

"I'm not allowed to go any further," he said. I expected to hear something like "good luck" or "I'm sorry," but he just turned on his heels and marched away, leaving me to face whatever was inside alone.

My footsteps echoed in the empty halls, muffled only by the lavish tapestries on the wall and the plush carpet beneath my feet. I felt like someone was watching me, but when I turned to look back over my shoulder, I was alone in the otherwise empty room. I would have turned and walked out of the house, which seemed to be closing in on me, but the front doors had closed behind me.

There was only one door open. Inside was an elaborate sitting room with a grand fireplace that had a giant fire lit inside. Sweat beaded on my forehead the instant I stepped inside. The plush chairs looked like you could fall asleep for an eternity in them, but the couch reminded me more of a coffin than anything else.

I moved into the center of the room, looking at the macabre art on the walls. The entire mansion seemed a grotesque blend of modern human architecture and something that literally came from the underworld.

"Well, it's a pleasure to finally see you in person," a smooth, poisonous voice said from behind me.

I turned to see a tall, thin man standing in the doorway, blocking my only exit. His face was unnaturally angular, and his hair and eyes were an inky black color. And not just his irises—both eyes were entirely black. His arms were folded as he stared at me, a smug, predatory smile on his too-red lips. “Granted, that photo Farrow showed me doesn’t do you justice.”

My skin crawled under his gaze, and I wanted nothing more than to run and hide. Even my wolf wanted to back away and find somewhere far away from the creature in front of me. But I held my ground, staying silent.

He tilted his head, smirking. “What, no thank you?”

“You’re Akron?” I asked. It was a stupid question, but it was the only thing I could think to say.

“That’s one of my names.” He pushed himself off the door frame and walked toward me. The door shut, seemingly of its own accord, leaving us alone in the room. Though I wasn’t certain, I could have sworn I heard the lock click.

I took an unconscious step back, and Akron stopped. “Are you scared?” he asked. It sounded like amusement tinged the edges of his words.

“Not really,” I lied.

I must not have been particularly convincing, because he smiled, and I could have sworn his teeth were unnaturally sharp.

“I can sense it.” He stopped right in front of me, so close that if I took a half-step closer, I would have been touching him. “It’s cute that you’re lying, though. But I expect honesty as well as obedience from my bride.” He reached out and tugged hard on a lock of my hair. “Do you understand?”

My entire body tensed. I wanted to take a step back, but my legs weren’t listening.

When I stayed silent, he frowned, and the chips of coal that were his eyes seemed to smolder in irritation. He yanked harder on the strand of hair.

“I said, ‘Do you understand?’”

I nodded.

“Good. Farrow said you were...compliant. Now, be honest and tell me what’s bothering you.”

There were a dozen things that were bothering me: the fact that I’d



effectively been sold off to someone, the fact that my apparent betrothed was a literal demon, and the fact that I got the sinking suspicion that he saw me as more of an object than an actual person. But I settled on the most immediate issue.

“Are your eyes always like that?” I asked.

Akron blinked, tilting his head as if puzzled. Then he grinned again, showing all his teeth. I’d been right: they were all razor-sharp.

“Ah, is this better?” He blinked again, and his eyes were suddenly normal. The irises were still that coal-black, but besides that, they looked like any other human’s. When I nodded, he said, “Good. I want my bride to be comfortable.”

I took a large step back. “Look, you really don’t want me,” I babbled. “I don’t know what Farrow told you about me, but I’m probably the worst person imaginable to be your wife.”

“Oh, he told me plenty about you.” The way he said it, and the lecherous look he gave me made my stomach churn violently. “He told me all about how you thought you fell in love with an outsider, and how he abandoned you. He told me how you’d do anything to make up for it. And he told me just how obedient you are when it comes to the pack.”

I took another step away, and my back slammed into a corner. When had I backed up this far? “I think you’ve got the wrong girl,” I said.

“On the contrary. I’m pretty sure I’ve found the perfect woman.” He closed the distance between us, his body pressing me further into the corner, trapping me in place. Instinctively, I raised my hands to push him away, but he grabbed my wrists and pinned them over my head with one strong hand. “And from now on, your only loyalty will be to me.”

“Let me go,” I said, heart pounding as I tried to wriggle out of his grip. My wolf was snarling, hating being touched by the demon. His grip was stronger than a shifter’s, but there was nothing I could do.

“No.” The grip on my wrists tightened, nearly strong enough to break bones—and I knew if he wanted to, he could. “You belong to me now. I can do whatever I want with you. And the sooner you learn that, the easier time you’ll have. So unless you’re particularly stupid, that shouldn’t be an issue for you.”

That was too much for my wolf. Before he could do anything else, I shifted, transforming into a dark-furred wolf and pushing Akron away. The demon stumbled, surprise flicking across his features for a brief moment before being overshadowed by anger and distaste.

My wolf snarled, fur bristling, looking around for a way out. She didn't want to be contained. We'd been too compliant for too long, and this demon was a step too far. She bared her fangs, ready to lunge toward the demon's throat.

Akron scowled, then faster than my wolf could track, he was right in front of us. His hand darted out, grabbing me by the throat and squeezing.

"Not so compliant, after all," he mused. "Change back now before I crush your windpipe. And don't think I won't."

I had every confidence he would crush us like a bug if we disobeyed him any further. My wolf resisted for a moment longer, then complied. We shifted back, and my hands shot up to his fingers, trying to pry them away from my throat as I choked.

Akron smirked. "Good girl." He released me, and I collapsed to the ground, coughing, my hand rubbing my throat. He stood over me, regarding me with cold amusement. "So you do have some fire in you after all. I'll have fun breaking that." He crouched next to me until his face was directly in front of mine. "You are mine now. You'll do everything I say, or you'll be punished. And I mean *everything*. Do you understand?"

I wanted to scream. I wanted to claw his eyes out. But all I could do was nod meekly.

"Good."

He stood and strolled over to the door. The lock clicked, and he pulled the door open. There was a creature that had been waiting on the other side. If I hadn't known any better, I would have said it was a chubby baby with bat wings and razor-sharp teeth, but there was no way that was what I was seeing because that was just too absurd.

"One of my underlings," Akron said when he saw me staring. "You'll get used to them."

The underling grinned, baring its teeth in a way that made it seem like he wanted to sink his fangs into me.

“Show Stella to her new room,” he said to the underling. “I’d advise you lock the door after her. She’s still having a hard time adjusting.”

The underling nodded and glided over to me. He grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet, nearly yanking my arm from its socket. For a small creature, he was unnaturally strong. He gave me another of those horrible grins.

“I think you’ll like your room,” Akron said conversationally as if nothing had happened. “I considered moving you into my room initially, but I figured that could wait until after the wedding. I figure it’s best if you stay here until the wedding so you don’t get any ideas.”

He was afraid of me running. I didn’t say anything but looked away. “When is the wedding?” I asked.

“The sooner, the better, I think,” he said. “I already have the dress picked out for you. I think two days works, don’t you? That way, you can get some of those wedding jitters you’re clearly dealing with out of your system beforehand.”

Before I could respond, I was dragged out of the room. I didn’t even try to fight; I was too numb. I just let the underling drag me like a puppet through the huge mansion and up a marble staircase. After what felt like several hundred halls, he opened a door and pushed me inside. The door closed behind me, and the lock clicked shut.

The room was beautiful. The four-poster bed was massive, with a plush comforter and comfortable-looking pillows. Light streamed in through a large window on the other side. Elegant and clearly expensive drapes hung on either side. The room was large and tastefully decorated. There was a door that led to a private bathroom with a giant tub complete with jets. It would have been gorgeous if it weren’t a prison.

I walked over to the window and glanced out. This room was on the third story, and the ground seemed impossibly far below.

I glanced down. My clothes had been shredded when I had shifted, and I was completely naked. That was at least a problem I could do something about. I looked around and saw a closed door. Maybe there were clothes in there. I opened it and froze.

There were clothes in there, but they were all skimpy and form-fitting.

The most conservative of them would show nearly everything. I wasn't a prude by any stretch of the imagination, but these were so obviously meant for every part of my body to be on display. The fact that there were no other options beyond these nearly made me vomit.

But it was either wear these or be naked. I took a deep breath, resigning myself, then began flipping through the options. My hands froze as they gripped a creamy white dress. It was sheer, except for the chest and a small section of the skirt. It would cling to my body as the train ran behind me. It was unmistakably a wedding dress, and an incredibly revealing one at that.

I ran to the bathroom and vomited.

I panted, wiping my mouth as my thoughts raced. I couldn't stick around here. I *wouldn't* stick around here. I'd been obedient my entire life, putting the pack before myself at nearly every turn, and this was what I was getting in return? A skimpy wedding dress I didn't have any say in, and getting married to a demon who'd killed dozens of shifters?

I took a deep, shaking breath and forced myself to calm down. I wasn't going to let this happen. I was going to take my life into my own hands for once. I wasn't about to get pawned off to a demon. It was time I did something for myself.

I would have to leave the pack. I couldn't stay here. But I'd worry about that later. The first thing I would have to do is get the hell out of this room.

Forming a plan, I ran over to the bedroom window. By some miracle, it was unlocked. I guess Akron didn't think I'd consider running. But it was too high to safely jump.

Not giving myself enough time to think about what I was doing, much less debate if this was a good idea, I jerked the comforter and sheets off the bed and hastily tied them together, pausing periodically to listen for sounds outside the door. It took longer than I thought it would to tie the sheets together tightly enough to make sure they would support my weight. When I was satisfied, I tied one end of the makeshift rope to one of the bed posts, tested its strength, then pushed the window wide open before tossing the rope over the sill.

It ended between the first and second story, close enough that the

short jump I'd have to make wouldn't be an issue. Giving one last look at the closed door, I clambered out the window, grabbing the rope and beginning the descent.

I half-expected to get caught during my escape attempt, but nothing happened. I landed on the ground with a soft thump. Not giving myself time to savor the small victory, I shifted and darted into the woods.

I had no idea where I was going, only that it had to be better than what I was leaving behind. For the first time in my life, I was finally free. I was finally my own person.

## Chapter 4 - Sam

“Okay, so why exactly are we all gathering together? And why does it feel like we’re being dragged out of retirement again?” Alek asked.

I had to admit he had a point. All of the Silver Wolves—save Evelyn, who was out on patrol—were sitting in the mansion’s spacious living room, lounging on the various chairs and sofas as we all looked at the only two wolves who were currently standing: Jameson and Rand. Alek had directed his question to them, and based on the look on their faces, the youngest Silver Wolf had been close to the mark, if not dead-on accurate.

“Because we are,” I said, taking a sip from my beer.

“Or, at least we are being strongly encouraged to come out of retirement,” Luke said. He sighed, closing his eyes. “Andi’s going to kill me.”

“Andi? That sweetheart?” Klyte scoffed. “It’s my hide you should be worried about. Jenn’s going to be furious.”

“You don’t have two young kids at home,” Luke retorted.

“Guys, settle down,” Malcolm said. “We don’t even know what’s going on yet. For all you know, you could be wrong.”

“Oh, no, they’re absolutely right,” Rand said. “At least about the recruitment thing. Their mates killing them? I’ll leave that for them to find out themselves.”

“What’s the job?” Oliver asked.

“I’ve got a request from an old friend of mine,” Rand said. “A guy from my old hunting days. He wanted to see if we’d been willing to look into something and take care of it.”

I nodded. Before Rand had been recruited to the Silver Wolves a few years ago, he’d been a hunter, someone who would go out and deal with supernatural monsters, usually in packs of two or three or on their own. It seemed as though he still kept contacts in that world.

“What is it?” Oliver asked.

“Some of my old buddies who are still making the rounds in the hunting world told me that a demon’s set up shop outside of a pack town,”

Rand said. “Apparently, he’s slowly been taking over the pack to the point they’re basically his playthings. My friends are too busy hunting down a rogue chimera to go after it, so they figured we might be able to get there first.”

“Which pack?” Jameson asked.

“Full Moon Pack. A group up north.”

My bottle of beer slipped from my hands.

“What the fuck, Sam?” Klyte barked as the liquid slowly spread across the hardwood. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do something even remotely clumsy before.”

I didn’t answer. I was too fixated on what Rand had just said.

“Full Moon Pack?” I asked, still ignoring the spilled beer.

When Rand nodded, Mark frowned and asked, “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“We were there before,” I said. My mind was racing back in time, thinking about the woman I’d left behind there. “Not for very long. The pack ran us off.”

Mark snapped his fingers, eyes dawning with recognition. “Right, right,” he said. “Wait...wasn’t that where Stella was from?”

I nodded tightly as my mind began to spin, trying to make sense of everything as my wolf snarled in anger, flexing his claws.

Stella’s pack was being antagonized by a demon. I had never gone up against one before, but I knew Rand had. They were bad news.

So if there was a demon terrorizing Stella’s pack, that meant she was in trouble.

The idea of Stella being in any type of danger made my wolf pace irritably inside me. I’d made the mistake of leaving her there when we were younger, and it was one of my biggest regrets. Now, she was in trouble. If I hadn’t walked away, she would be with me now, and she would be safe.

In a way, if she was in danger, it was my fault.

“Do you know how bad it is?” I asked as I finally mopped up the beer. “The demon, I mean.”

“No, I don’t.” Rand was slouched in the chair nearby. “It’s just a rumor, anyway.”

That wasn’t reassuring to me. Just the thought that Stella might be in trouble was enough to make me want to drop everything and run off to her pack, even if I wasn’t welcome. But was that a good idea? For all I knew, she wouldn’t want anything to do with me. At the same time, I didn’t particularly care; I wanted to make sure she was safe. If she told me to fuck off after I checked on her—which, given what had happened, she absolutely might and would have every right to do so—then at least I would know she was safe.

Over the next couple of hours, while the conversation moved on from the subject of demons and faraway packs, my mind agonized over whether or not I should go. If the rumors were true, then Stella was in danger. And even if they weren’t true, if I went, I could see her. Maybe I would get the chance to explain myself.

Except, then I remembered what might happen if I did. I’d made a promise. And if I broke it, then she and her family would be the ones who would suffer for it. I didn’t want that to happen.

But if Stella was in trouble, it didn’t matter whether I pissed off someone else or not. Just as I’d made up my mind to go check on her, my thoughts were interrupted by Evelyn hurrying into the room, her long red hair swaying behind her.

“Babe?” Oliver asked, straightening up as his mate rushed in.

Everyone else in the room stiffened in alarm. We could all sense the tension radiating off her. The grim expression on her face alone would have been enough to tell us that something was wrong.

“I was on a hunt and caught an unfamiliar shifter’s scent,” she said, looking around until her eyes found Jameson. “I wasn’t sure if they were friendly or not, so I tracked them. It turned out to be a woman. She looks pretty bad, a bit beat-up and exhausted. She was really skittish, too—she ran when I found her. I thought she might be dangerous, so I chased her. But when I caught up to her, it was obvious she was harmless. She wouldn’t tell me what was wrong or why she was on her own in the woods, but I managed to convince her to come here to at least get a warm meal and some rest.”

“She didn’t tell you anything?” Jameson asked.



“Definitely not suspicious at all,” Rand muttered.

“Nothing,” Evelyn confirmed, ignoring Rand. “And I didn’t want to press. But something’s definitely up. I was hoping you could talk to her and get her to open up. I got her some clothes. She’s outside right now.”

Jameson nodded and stood. “I can see her in my office if she’d rather not talk in a room full of shifters.”

She nodded. “I’ll join you, if she doesn’t mind. I think having a woman around would probably help.”

“I was going to suggest that,” Jameson said. “Come on.”

Jameson and Evelyn walked out of the living room, and the rest of us listened to the pair of footsteps going down the hall toward the front door. We heard the door open and Evelyn say, “It’s all right. This is Jameson, our alpha. Come on in.”

“Hey, there,” Jameson said. I could tell he was using his you-don’t-need-to-worry tone. “It’s nice to meet you. What’s your name?”

I caught the faint trace of a familiar scent, one I hadn’t smelled in years. It was sugar and raspberries, evoking memories of summer. My entire body froze, tensing for the briefest of moments before I sprang up.

“What—?” Oliver asked, but I was already gone, heading into the hall so I could see the shifter whose scent that belonged to. Because there was no way it could be her. Not after all this time. It was too much of a coincidence.

But as I ran into the hall and turned toward the door, I realized that my nose hadn’t been lying. My wolf growled, pacing excitedly as I saw that familiar long dark hair, that golden skin and soft face. She was dirty and clearly exhausted, but she was even more beautiful than I remembered.

I said her name before she could answer Jameson.

“Stella.”

## Chapter 5 - Stella

“Stella.”

That familiar, almost musical voice made me freeze. I turned my head away from the alpha and looked down the hall to where Sam was standing, looking as startled as I felt.

He hadn't changed much since I'd last seen him. There were a couple of new scars I had never seen before, but he still had that same strong build, that same smooth skin, and the same tattoos swirling down his left arm. His black hair was cut shorter than it had been when I'd known him, but his brown eyes had that same intensity that had made my heart pound wildly whenever I saw him.

My eyes widened, and my mouth dropped open. Sam was here? It seemed impossible, too much of a coincidence that for a moment, I had to wonder if I was hallucinating. But I also knew there was no doubting what I was seeing. I could smell him—that scent of musk and leather was unmistakable. How many times had I smelled that scent when he'd held me in his arms?

It was him, unmistakably him. And this moment was real, despite how absolutely impossible it all seemed.

Evelyn's eyes grew wide. “Stella?” she asked, looking from me to Sam. “*That* Stella?”

*That Stella.* Something about the way she said it made me prickle self-consciously.

But Sam didn't answer. He didn't even seem to hear Evelyn. He walked straight past her and toward me. His scent grew stronger, seeming to overwhelm everything else. My wolf stirred excitedly, pacing internally as the familiar shifter came closer. Clearly, she didn't have the same issues I did about how things had ended between us.

“What happened?” His eyes scanned my entire body, looking me up and down and cataloging every injury. I'd gotten a bit scraped up during my escape, running through the woods and not paying attention, but for the most part, I was unharmed. But I could tell by the expression on his face that he wouldn't be satisfied until my last small scratch had healed.

“I’m fine,” I said. I didn’t want to tell Sam what had happened. He’d abandoned me before when he’d promised he wouldn’t leave my side, leaving me surrounded by unfriendly, untrusting shifters. I’d put my trust in him once before, and it had backfired. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake a second time.

But one look at Evelyn’s concerned face and Sam’s clear disbelief told me that I wasn’t going to get out of this that easily.

“Stella, we can’t help you unless we know what’s going on,” Evelyn said gently. “And it’s obvious something bad has happened. We’re here to help.”

I glanced over at Sam, doubt and suspicion no doubt crossing my features as I did. He noticed and visibly winced, but he didn’t look away.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I asked him, changing the subject. “I thought you were all gung-ho about joining the military.” That last part might have come out a bit more bitter than I’d intended.

“I did,” Sam replied. “I joined the Silver Wolves, but we retired and settled here.” He paused, as if considering something. “Granted, it’s been more like semi-retired than actually retired.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. I’d heard about the Silver Wolves. Considering everything they’d done for shifters all over the states, it was impossible not to have heard of them. But I hadn’t realized Sam was a member. The revelation made me pause for a second as the implication sunk in.

“Stella, please tell me what happened,” he said, tearing me from my thoughts.

“I’m in trouble.” The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of it.

Something dark crossed Sam’s expression, and his body stiffened in anger. His eyes flashed, and a growl sounded in his throat.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t—”

His hands went to my shoulders. “Trust me,” he said, his voice low and intense. “I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. You’re safe.”

Let us help you.”

“Sam—” Jameson began, but Sam’s head snapped around to Jameson. I couldn’t see his face, but the low growl Sam gave was enough to tell me he was glaring at his alpha. But Jameson kept going, undeterred. “We’re going to do our best to help her, obviously, but don’t push her.”

Sam said nothing, but he didn’t let go of my arm. For whatever reason, I didn’t mind. I hated admitting it after everything, but I liked having him close. It was comforting to have him there.

But I didn’t want to rely on him. I had run because I wanted to be my own person for a change. Relying on Sam or this pack might put me back in the same position as before, and the thought terrified me.

I still remembered waking up the morning when Sam and I were supposed to meet. Something had just seemed off, but I had brushed it away. I went to the tree where we always met, only he wasn’t there. I waited for hours, expecting him to come eventually. He always came. But he didn’t that day, and I went back home.

And Farrow was waiting for me with a smug smile on his face. He told me that Sam had left in the middle of the night and wasn’t coming back. I didn’t believe him at first, assuming that he must have done something to Sam. But eventually, I realized he was telling the truth. Sam had just vanished, leaving me in a pack that now saw me as an outcast.

Farrow gloated about my failed relationship for a week. He never let me forget my mistake or what it had cost me.

I had trusted Sam once. I didn’t know if I could do it again. And I wasn’t sure how to tell the pack what had happened, or if I even wanted to. Because the moment I did, I knew they would get involved. Including Sam.

Jameson seemed to have read my mind, because he said, “If there’s a problem, it could end up impacting the pack. I need to know about external threats. So there’s a chance you would help us by telling at least me what’s happening.”

He was right. If Akron came after me, they needed to know what they were up against. I knew from our brief interaction that the demon wouldn’t stop just because I had run away. I didn’t know how long I had until he caught up with me.

Just those thoughts made the frustrating reality of my situation hit home: I needed help. And the people best equipped to give it to me were the Silver Wolves.

I hesitated for one last moment, then nodded.

“All right,” Jameson said. “Why don’t you and Evelyn come to my office, and we can talk about it?”

“I’m coming, too,” Sam offered.

“Sam—” Jameson began, a warning tone to his voice.

“Either I’m going to listen at the door, or I’m in that office,” Sam insisted, dead serious.

Jameson scowled at Sam, who clearly wasn’t backing down. The alpha sighed, then looked at me. “Would you rather he be in the room or eavesdrop outside?”

I wasn’t sure how much Jameson knew about my history with Sam, if anything. But I appreciated the fact that he was giving me the option. He knew something was up.

I looked at Sam. There was an almost pleading look in his eye as he stared at me. I knew he would respect whatever I said, but he wouldn’t be happy about it.

Besides, he would find out either way.

“It’s fine,” I said, and Sam’s shoulders relaxed.

Jameson nodded once and motioned for us to follow. As we passed a spacious living room, I saw several male shifters watching us, all of them clearly interested in whatever was happening. I had to wonder if any of them would listen at the door.

The office was large and looked out at a beautiful lake far below the mansion. Jameson ushered us all in, then closed the door.

“So, what’s going on?” Jameson asked me, leaning his back against the desk as he studied me.

I took a deep breath and began my story. It was surprisingly short, but it felt like it took hours to tell, and I didn’t feel as though I was getting the point across properly.

The entire time, I could feel Sam's eyes on me, his intense gaze piercing through me. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, and I could see him tensing more and more with every word. He growled when I told them that Farrow had me followed for a week, and when I got to the part where Akron had choked me, his entire body went rigid, and he snarled.

"He *what?*" he interrupted, his fists clenching.

Jameson shot him a look, then nodded at me to continue the story. I kept going.

"—and the minute I hit the ground, I ran," I said. "I've been running for three days since it happened. I haven't been able to get as far as I would like. I kept covering my scent so that I couldn't be followed. Otherwise, me running is pointless."

"He's going to come after you regardless," Jameson said, frowning. "Demons aren't known for letting something go when it escapes them."

I tensed up, and I felt the blood draining from my face. I knew he was right. But the thought of seeing Akron again, of seeing those coal-black eyes and his leer as he loomed over me made the blood in my veins turn to ice and my wolf bristle. I heard his voice whispering in my ear. *You belong to me now.*

"I don't want to go back," I said.

A warm hand clasped my shoulder. I hadn't noticed him move, but Sam was now standing next to me. I could feel the rage radiating off him as he looked down at me.

"You're not going back." There was a fierce sincerity in those words that was both unnerving and soothing. "Not as long as I have anything to say about it."

He met my gaze firmly, and I knew by that look that he planned on protecting me with every bone in his body, or die trying.

The problem was, there was a strong chance it would end up being the latter.

## Chapter 6 - Sam

Jameson relayed the story to the rest of the Silver Wolves once they had all gathered. I stayed in the corner, letting my fingers lengthen to claws and back again, trying to get the worst of my rage out of my system.

The only problem was that it wasn't working. I was still fuming. I wanted to find the demon and claw him to shreds for laying a hand on Stella. My entire body bristled with rage and the desire to protect her. But I knew from the looks she had given me that she didn't trust me, which, considering what had happened when we were younger, I couldn't exactly blame her for. I'd left her without an explanation. I had wanted to explain, but I knew that I would have been asking for trouble if I had. It had been too dangerous. But she didn't know that.

But the fact that she was here after all these years was too much of a coincidence for me. I had thought I'd lost her forever when I left. I had a second chance now.

I wasn't going to let her get away again.

"Shit," Klyte said when Jameson finished. That word summed up the situation rather nicely.

"So, what are we going to do?" Alek asked. "Fight the demon, beat him, and call it a day, right?"

"Not that easy," Rand said grimly, sitting up from his reclining position. His mouth was a thin line of concentration. "Demons aren't easy to kill. And they're powerful. Most of them are stronger than shifters by a decent margin."

"How much experience do you have with them, exactly?" Jameson asked.

"I used to run with a group that hunted demons before Malcolm recruited me," Rand said, scratching his stubble.

"Regardless of how strong they are, we have to kill him," I said.

"We will," Jameson said. "But if demons are as difficult to take down as Rand says, then we need a game plan." He looked over at Stella, who was leaning against the wall near me. I had positioned myself as close to her as

she would let me. Her arms were wrapped around her stomach, and she was looking at the floor.

“How much time do you think we have until he gets here?” Jameson asked her.

She glanced up. “I hid my trail fairly well, so it’ll be hard for shifters to find me. But I don’t know if Akron has some sort of special way of tracking me. For all I know, he could be right behind me.” The way her voice wavered toward the end was the only clue as to just how frightened she really was.

I wanted to go to her, to wrap my arms around her and tell her it was going to be okay, but I held back. It had been years, and as much as I wanted to comfort her, I couldn’t imagine she wanted to be comforted by me. Still, the urge was there. I wanted to be next to her. Not just to comfort her, but so that I would know she was safe.

“Rand, have you ever heard of Akron?” Jameson asked.

Rand frowned, brow furrowing as he tried to remember. Then he shook his head. “No. But I’ve still got some friends who run in those hunting circles. I can try to find them and figure out if they know anything.”

Jameson nodded. “Do that.”

“I can do some research,” Tannen offered. “See if anything comes up.”

“I’ll increase patrols in the area,” Luke added. “Which means you guys are going to get a lot more steps in. I want to hear about anything suspicious.” He glanced over at Stella. “Any chance you can give me some descriptions of the shifters? The ones most likely to come chasing after you, at least?”

She nodded.

“You’re going to need somewhere to stay, too,” Jameson said to her. “And I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to stay somewhere alone until we get a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“She can stay with me.”

All eyes turned toward me, including Stella’s. “I’ll protect her,” I added.



“I’ll be fine,” she said. “I can find somewhere to stay.”

“The whole point of us helping is so Akron won’t grab you in the middle of the night,” I said. “You need to stay with someone. I have a spare bedroom, and my place is on the edge of town. It’s out of the way, but close enough that if anything happens, help won’t be too hard to get.”

“That’s got to be a record for a Sam monologue,” Klyte said. “Four whole sentences.”

I growled at him. He held out his hands defensively and fell silent.

“It is a good location,” Evelyn said thoughtfully from where she sat next to Oliver. “Honestly, probably the best place for you right now.”

I shot Evelyn an appreciative glance.

“I...all right,” Stella said, and it was impossible to miss the reluctance in her voice. “But I don’t want to be locked up or confined or anything.”

“The town is safe,” Jameson said. “But I would suggest you don’t go out into the woods on your own until we learn more. Is that fair?”

She nodded. And despite that she was obviously not particularly happy about the situation, it was impossible not to feel hopeful about what might come next for us. And she was here. I had thought I would never see her again.

It was fate. It had to be. I knew about fated mates, those pairs who would inevitably find one another regardless of time or distance. Situations or circumstances would always bring them back to one another, no matter what got in the way.

I’d seen it enough times to know it was a thing. And when I’d first met Stella, before everything bad had happened, I’d wondered if she was my fated mate. But I’d left with no hope of ever getting that question answered. I’d assumed that, based on everything, I had been wrong, that Stella and I weren’t fated to be together. But now that she was back here, I was even more certain that she was. There was no other explanation. She could have gone anywhere, but she came here. Hell, what if Evelyn hadn’t come across her in the woods? Too many things had converged to bring her back to me.

But when I looked at her, it was obvious she didn’t feel the same conviction. She still didn’t trust me. I wasn’t sure if she would ever trust me again. But I would spend the rest of my life proving to her that she could. I

knew I would do anything to win her trust back.

## Chapter 7 - Stella

Sam's house looked exactly like the type of house I would have imagined him to have. It was decent-sized and roomy, but practical. It opened onto a nice foyer with a stairwell going up one side. The hardwood floors were warm and inviting, and I could see a kitchen island peeking out from behind one doorway further down.

"Your room is upstairs," he said, nodding up the steps as he came to stand next to me. "Can I get you anything?"

I was going to say that I was fine, but then my stomach began growling loudly. Sam's mouth tilted upward in a small smile. It was the same reserved smile that had made me notice him when we'd first met, and something in my stomach tightened.

"I'll get you something to eat," he said. "Do you still like pizza?"

"I don't know many people who don't," I said.

"I've got a frozen one if that will work."

I nodded, the lump in my throat swelling, making it hard to talk. Why did he have to be so sweet? I wanted to be angry with him, but that wasn't exactly easy when he was offering to make me food.

"I'm going to take a shower, if that's okay," I said. "Evie gave me a couple of sets of her clothes, so I have something to change into."

"There's a bathroom up the stairs and to the left. Right next to your room, actually."

"Thanks."

A few minutes later, I was stepping into the shower, relishing the feel of the nearly scalding water on my skin. I hadn't had the chance to take a bath in anything but rivers since I'd run away. Finally getting to enjoy a shower again was one of the best sensations in the world.

As the water ran over me, I let my mind process everything that had happened in the last few hours. Sam was back in my life. He was offering to protect me. The entirety of the Silver Wolves were willing to help me. It was the type of kindness I'd never seen in my pack. My old pack now.

But that meant I was reliant on them. And half the point of me

running away was so that I could become my own person and make my own decisions. How could I do that here? What if the same thing that had happened at my old pack ended up happening here, too?

And then there was Sam. That felt like an even knottier situation. Part of me—a lot of me, in truth—was happy to see him. I had missed him since he left. But at the same time, I didn't want to get too attached to him. Not after he'd already abandoned me once.

But that was another thing—I didn't even know why he'd left me. I wanted an explanation from him. But at the same time, I wasn't even sure I wanted to hear it.

It was hard not to think about the way he looked, though. He was still gorgeous. His scent was still enticing, and my wolf still paced eagerly at the thought of being this close to him again. The years had hardened him in a way that made him even more attractive. The boyishness in his face had been replaced by a strong jawline and high cheekbones, and the baby fat from when he was younger had been transformed into pure muscle that rippled whenever he moved.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized in embarrassment that my breaths were growing shallower, and a heat had started up between my legs.

I groaned, closing my eyes and forcing myself to think about anything else other than Sam. But it didn't do me any good. I wanted to run my fingers along his muscles, to have him hold me in his arms and pull me against him. To—

I growled in frustration and turned the hot water to freezing.

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I came down a little later, and the smell of pizza wafted up my nose, reminding me of how hungry I was. I hurried to the kitchen to find Sam pulling a pizza stone out of the oven and placing it on the counter.

“Perfect timing,” he said, glancing up at me as he grabbed a knife. Then he did a double take, and he bit his lip to hold back laughter. “I, uh, don't think Evelyn's clothes fit you particularly well,” he said with a grin.

I grimaced. He was right. The shirt was too long and went all the way to the thigh, and the jeans were rolled up so I wouldn't step on them.

"Yeah, yeah. Make fun of it all you want," I said.

"You look cute in it," he said. "I don't think many women could pull off that look. But it still might be better if we get you some clothes that actually fit you."

He put two slices of pepperoni pizza on a plate and handed them to me. I scarfed the food up in about two minutes. Though it was just frozen pizza, it was probably one of the best things I'd ever tasted. I was already reaching for another slice while Sam was still working on his first.

"There are a couple of shops in town I could show you," he said. "You can probably find something there."

"I can probably find them on my own," I said.

He shrugged. "I wanted to catch up. And this way, I can show you more of the town and the people instead of you wandering aimlessly."

I thought about it. He had a point, even if I didn't want to admit it.

"Let me finish the pizza first," I said.

"You mean the slice?"

"No." I reached forward and grabbed another two slices. "I mean the whole pizza."

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Brixton was nothing like my old town. There was something charming about it. It wasn't antiquated, but it felt like an old town.

Sam led me through the streets, pointing at the various brick buildings and telling me what was inside. We walked past a couple of clothing shops, along with a cute bakery that was producing mouth-watering scents of cake and fresh bread. In the center of town was a large square with a fountain, and I stopped to admire it briefly.

"What do you think?" Sam asked. He seemed strangely nervous, as if he wasn't sure what I was going to say or was worried I wouldn't like it. I

didn't see why it mattered all that much, considering I wouldn't be here for very long. Still, I couldn't deny that the small town's quaint charm was oddly appealing.

"It's nice," I said, nodding as I looked around. It was the truth, even a little bit of an understatement. "I can see why you retired here." I turned to look back at him. "Why did you retire, exactly?"

When I'd known Sam all those years ago, he had been all about serving others and spec-ops. He'd felt he had a duty to everyone, always putting himself second. It sounded noble, but in reality, it caused more than a few complications. Sometimes, I wondered if the reason he'd left all those years ago was because he was too invested in his job and the military. Discovering that he had retired so early was more than a little surprising.

He sighed, rubbing his chin as he considered the question. "It was just time, I guess," he said. "A lot of us agreed to leave at the same time. Black ops do a lot of good, and I'm glad I was able to help people, but it takes a toll on you as well. It's a lot of responsibility, and you can only handle something like that for so long."

I nodded. It made sense. And though I wanted to resent him for choosing spec-ops over me, it was hard not to admire his dedication.

"But that's all behind me now," he said. "Well, sort of. I still help people when they need it."

I wouldn't have expected any less of him. He looked up at me, giving me an uncertain smile, and I wondered if he was thinking along the same lines as me. About just what he had sacrificed to be part of the Silver Wolves.

Part of me wanted to ask if he regretted it, or if the Silver Wolves had been the reason he'd left me all those years ago. But the words stuck in my throat. I didn't want to know the actual answer.

Before I could muster the courage to ask the question, his gaze slid past me, and he smiled.

"Here are some people you might like to meet," he said. He waved, and I turned to see a group of women. One of them was Evelyn—I'd recognize that red hair anywhere. The others, I'd never seen before, but they clearly knew Sam.

Evelyn said something to the rest of the girls, and they came over to

us.

“Hey, there,” Evelyn said to me, beaming. “Are you settling in okay?”

“As well as can be, I guess,” I said.

“Evelyn told us a bit about what happened,” a woman with strawberry-blond hair said to me. “Not everything, of course—she’s good at keeping things under wraps. But she said you were probably going to stay here until it was all sorted out.”

“Stella, this is Georgia, Andi, and Jenn,” Sam said, pointing at each woman in turn. Georgia was the strawberry blond, Andi was dark-haired and curvy, and Jenn was blonde, her face angular. “You already know Evelyn.”

I gave an awkward but friendly wave, unsure of what else to do in the situation or what to say. I hadn’t exactly had many friends in my old pack. Seeing this group of mostly unfamiliar women all smiling happily at me made my skin prickle almost uncomfortably.

A young girl peeked her head around from behind Georgia, her hair the same dark color as Jameson’s. Her eyes lit up when she saw Sam.

“Uncle Sam!” She raced to Sam at lightning speed, colliding with his legs. “It’s been ages.”

“Hey, Elle.” Sam said, smiling fondly as he hugged the girl back. “Good to see you, too. I’ve been busy.”

Elle pouted, but it seemed she couldn’t stay mad at Sam for too long. “When are you going to take me hunting again?” she demanded.

“When he’s got the time,” Georgia said patiently. She glanced over at me with a smile. “Elle has a sweet spot for Sam,” she explained.

Her affection clearly wasn’t a one-way street, either. I’d never seen Sam with children before, but the way he handled Elle and the tender way he spoke to her told me that he was great with them. It was sweet. And even though I was trying to stay distant from him and not get involved with him again, seeing him like this made it a lot harder to remember why I was so adamant about holding him at arm’s length.

“All right, Elle,” Georgia said patiently. “Let’s let these two get back to what they were doing. You don’t need to monopolize all of Sam’s time.”

Elle pouted again, but she nodded, giving Sam another hug and then

hurrying off back to the group of women.

“We’ve got to get going,” Georgia said to me. “But it was really nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I managed to say. Why was it so strange to me that they weren’t treating me like an outsider? I would have expected at least some caution, maybe even a bit of hostility. But there hadn’t been anything of the sort.

“Let us know if you ever want to get out of the house, by the way,” Andi said. “We’re always happy to hang out with you.”

“Yeah, I will,” I stammered, doing my best not to show my surprise as they waved and walked away, all smiles as if we’d known one another for years.

“So, what did you think?” Sam asked me after they’d left.

“They’re nice,” I said, watching their retreating backs. “They’re some of the Silver Wolves’ mates?”

Sam nodded. “Georgia is Jameson’s, Andi is Luke’s, and Jenn is with Klyte. And Evelyn is with Oliver.”

I hadn’t realized Evelyn had a mate. For some reason, that surprised me. She’d always seemed so independent and free. It was hard to reconcile those traits with the idea of having a mate. But I kept the thought to myself.

“If you want to go shopping, this is probably the best place,” Sam said, nodding to a small boutique with cute, rustic clothing displayed in the window. Everything I could see in the window screamed *me*. I had a jacket like the one on the mannequin back at my old home. Whether this was a coincidence or Sam had remembered the type of clothing I wore, I wasn’t sure. And I didn’t want to ask.

I nodded curtly and walked to the front door, fully aware of him walking in behind me.

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“Did you have a good time?” Sam asked me as we stepped back into the house.



I nodded absentmindedly. The truth was, I'd really enjoyed being in town, and being with Sam the entire afternoon had been...pleasant. It had felt almost natural. In some ways, it felt as though we were picking up right where we'd left off.

*You mean the first time around when he abandoned you,* I reminded myself. I couldn't risk letting my guard down around him. It was too risky. I couldn't be hurt by him again. And I didn't want to get attached again, not after everything I'd been through the last few days.

"I'm going to put these upstairs," I said, maybe a little too quickly. "Thanks for showing me around town."

"Anytime," he said. The intense way he was staring at me made my heart thud, and it threatened to break out of my chest. I turned, hoping he hadn't seen the blush rising up my face. *Don't get attached again,* I told myself, gripping the handle of my bag so tightly that I was white-knuckling it.

"Hey, Stella," Sam said. I turned, wondering if he could hear my heart beating dully.

"Yeah?" I asked, half-turning. Why was my mouth so dry?

"Do you want to watch a movie or something together?" he asked, and he sounded a little nervous. "You've been through a lot, and I figured you might need a distraction. And it would be nice to spend time together."

Part of me wanted to say yes, if for no other reason than the fact that he was right. I needed a distraction, and a movie did sound nice. Curling up on the couch with Sam, maybe falling asleep against him and—

"No," I said before my mind could go any further down that path. "No. Thanks, but I'm pretty tired, and I just want to be by myself."

He blinked, then nodded. "Yeah, of course."

Was that disappointment in his voice? I didn't want to think too hard about it. So instead, I just nodded and went up the stairs to my room, closing the door behind me.

## Chapter 8 - Sam

Rand and Tannen brought back their intel, and none of it sounded particularly good.

“A couple of my old friends have heard about Akron,” Rand said. “Apparently, they thought he was dead. He’s been underground for a century at least. Or wherever demons go when they’re not terrorizing earth.”

“So, how do they know about him if he hasn’t been seen in decades?” Oliver asked. All of the Silver Wolves were sitting in the living room, listening to Rand and Tannen intently as if they were teachers giving an important lecture that was definitely going to be on the test.

“Probably because he’s really, really bad news,” said Tannen. “Based on the research I was able to find, he’s about as bad as they get. He likes terrorizing shifters, especially. He’ll target a town, and then he’ll slowly destroy it, taking out people until it’s nothing but a ghost town. Ever heard of Roanoke?”

“That’s where a bunch of early settlers went missing, right?” I asked.

“Yup. The theory is that was one of the human settlements Akron felt like targeting.” Tannen adjusted the notes in his hand as he spoke, flipping through them.

Mark let out a low whistle. “So the guy’s got some power behind him.”

“Oh, yeah. And what’s worse is that he doesn’t work alone. He’s got at least a dozen underlings who are obsessively loyal,” Rand said.

“Underlings as in other demons?” Luke asked.

“Not quite,” Tannen said. “They aren’t as powerful, and they can’t use magic like a normal demon. But they’re still bad news in big hordes.”

“How strong is their magic?” Jameson asked.

“How do you think I got this scar?” Rand said, grinning as he pointed to the thick line of jagged scar tissue running down his arm.

“I don’t know,” Alek said.

“You’ve literally never told us,” Klyte added.

Rand scowled, clearly annoyed. Klyte and Alek snickered.

“My buddies and I were going after a demon,” Rand said. “We got the jump on him, but it was still a near thing. We almost died before we killed him. At one point, the demon threw a slice of darkness at me like it was a knife. Nearly nicked an artery. I almost bled out before one of my friends got him out of there. So, they can wield darkness, are incredibly tough to the point of being nearly immortal, and this one in particular has a nasty reputation and is known for wiping out entire communities in the blink of an eye.”

“And we’re supposed to kill this guy?” Alek asked.

“Sounds like a piece of cake,” Klyte said dryly. “None of us are going to die or get seriously injured. I don’t see any problem with any of this.”

“Doesn’t matter how hard he is to fight,” I said. “We’re still going to go after him.”

None of them argued with me, and I was pretty sure they knew that I would fight back if any of them did. But I could still feel everyone’s eyes on me. It wasn’t hard for them to have guessed I knew Stella from before, and Mark had never been good at keeping things quiet. I was certain that he had probably told everyone what he remembered about our original fling.

I didn’t have to explain any of that, which, honestly, was a bit of a relief. I wasn’t sure I knew how to articulate it all. And right now, I was too fixated on making sure Stella was protected to really care to try in the first place.

“So how do we beat this guy?” Mark asked. “Because right now, it’s sounding like there’s no real way to beat him.”

“Mark’s becoming a mind reader,” Klyte said, “because I was wondering the same thing.”

“They’re not impossible to beat.” Rand stood and stretched. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. Cold, pure iron is the best way to weaken them. It hurts them pretty badly if they’re touched by it. A couple of iron spears and other weapons tended to do the trick.”

“There’s also finding their true Name,” Tannen mentioned.

Rand started laughing, earning a scowl from Tannen.

“Good luck with that,” he said. “Do you realize how hard it is to find a demon’s Name?”

“Akron,” Klyte said. “Found it. You’re welcome.”

“*True Name*,” Tannen said. “Have you really never heard of Naming?”

“Nope,” Klyte responded happily. “Enlighten me, oh wise ones.”

“It’s an old-school form of magic,” I said, startling everyone. “Names are powerful things. Everyone and everything has a true Name—not the one they go by, but something deeper, linked to the soul—but not a lot of people know what theirs is anymore. If you can learn the Name of a being, which is incredibly hard to do, especially now, then you’re able to exert some control over them.”

Klyte stared open-mouthed at me. “Has anyone else noticed how chatty Sam’s been since Stella showed up? This has to be more words than he normally says in a month.”

“Knock it off,” Evelyn snapped at him, then turned back to Tannen and Rand. “So, we can learn Akron’s true Name and kill him?”

“In the case of demons, that typically means weakening them significantly,” Tannen said. “Not necessarily killing them. But as Rand pointed out, it’s nearly impossible to learn their Names.”

“But it’s worth a shot,” Jameson said. “I don’t think we should discount it just because it’s difficult.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up,” Tannen said. “Rand’s not the only one with contacts when it comes to information on demons. The internet’s a beautiful thing.”

“Good.” Jameson nodded. “In the meantime, we can round up some iron. Sam, how is Stella settling in?”

“Fine, as far as I can tell,” I said. I didn’t want to add that I was still fairly certain she didn’t trust me. “I think she’s a bit stir-crazy, but I was going to offer to go on a hunt with her. I don’t think her going out into the woods by herself is safe.”

“Sounds like a fun time.” Mark scratched his chin and glanced in my direction. “Mind if I tag along?”

My head shot toward him, and every inch of my body tensed. My wolf growled, angry that this other shifter would dare consider joining us. He wanted it to just be Stella and myself.

Personally, I agreed. The thought of Mark being there, changing the dynamic entirely, was not an appealing one. And I tried to come up with a plausible reason why it wouldn't work.

"Nah, man," Rand said, clapping Mark on the back. "She's been through enough lately. She doesn't need you breathing down her neck, too." Rand looked over at me and shot me a wink when no one was looking. Sometimes, I forgot how perceptive Rand was. For such a big guy, you wouldn't expect his level of intelligence.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Mark agreed, glancing outside.

In my mind, though, I was wondering whether a hunt was a good idea at all. I knew Stella didn't trust me, and she had every right not to. Regaining her trust wouldn't happen overnight, if it happened at all.

It would have been easier not to worry about it with any other shifter. But Stella was different. Ever since she'd come back into my life, she was all I could think about. I wanted nothing more than to be by her side. Even now, when I knew she was hanging out with the girls and probably having a great time and was perfectly safe, I wanted to be next to her. I hadn't realized how much of a hold someone could have on me until she came along. Her claws were buried deep inside me, and she didn't even realize it.

The night I left her with that pack was a night I'd never forget, and it was one of my deepest regrets. I couldn't turn back the clock, but maybe I could change things this time.

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When I came back in, Stella was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a book.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey, yourself."

"Have you been reading all day?" I asked, trying to get her to engage

in conversation.

For a moment, I thought she was going to ignore me. But just as I was about to walk away, she said, “No. The girls came over for a bit, actually.” She glanced up, her almond-shaped eyes meeting mine. “Hope that was all right.”

“Yeah, of course. Did you have fun?” Honestly, I was glad she was getting the chance to spend time with people in town.

She nodded. “They’re hilarious, actually. They mesh well together as a group, and they’re really friendly.”

I tilted my head, catching something in her tone. “Why does that bother you?”

She put her book down and rested her head on laced fingers. “Why do you think it bothers me?”

“Because you have that tone in your voice that you only ever get when you’re annoyed.” I mimicked it in emphasis. “*Like this.*”

She snorted. “You think you still know me that well?”

My smile fell. “No,” I admitted. “But I want to.”

Color flooded her cheeks, and she looked away.

“It’s good to see you again, Stella,” I said. “Really. Even if I wish the circumstances were different.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” she muttered. “Better than I thought it would be.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

She muttered irritably to herself, and I could sense the anxiety emanating from her. “I should be furious with you,” she said. “After the way things ended. And I want to be. But for some stupid reason, I’m not as mad at you as I thought I would be. I’ve imagined running into you a thousand times in a hundred different ways, and none of them ended up with me talking calmly to you in your house.”

I winced, but she kept going.

“And instead of being angry with you, all I want to do is...” She cut herself off, turning a brilliant red and looking away.

I wanted her to keep going, but I knew she wasn't going to, and I didn't want to press her. So instead, I focused on the first part of her rant.

"I'm sorry," I said. "About leaving the way I did."

"You should be," she said bluntly, and I winced again. "Why did you?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I wanted to tell her, but the words stuck in my throat. And I wasn't sure if telling her would change anything.

"It's...complicated," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "Very explicit. It all makes sense now."

"I'm sorry."

She groaned and rubbed her temples. "No, I'm sorry. I'm just getting irritable. I haven't been cooped up for this long in years. I hate it."

I grimaced again, knowing I'd feel just as stir-crazy in her position. I didn't blame her.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go on a hunt tomorrow," I said.

Her head shot up, eyes lighting up. "Really?" Her eyes darted out the window, staring longingly at the leaves rustling in the wind.

"I've got some business I need to take care of in the morning, but after that, I should be free."

She chewed the inside of her lip, still looking outside. Some of the tension I'd seen in her shoulders since she'd first come back to the mansion released, and when she looked over at me, the expression in her eyes had softened a bit.

"I'd like that," she said. "Thanks."

"Great." I pushed myself away from the island. "It's a plan."

I wanted to say more, but I'd never been great at talking. Hell, I'd spoken more since Stella had gotten here than I had in months. When I tried to say more, the words stuck in my throat like a bone.

I just nodded and walked away, feeling her watching me as I did.

## Chapter 9 - Stella

I paced back and forth irritably in the house, looking outside with longing. I was beginning to get a little stir-crazy. My wolf was flexing her claws, aching to be set free. She wanted to go running through the woods, to smell the prey and hunt it down.

Sam had promised to go hunting with me at some point today, but he hadn't said when. He'd been in a meeting for most of the morning and still hadn't come back.

What bothered me more than being stir-crazy was that I was equally frustrated by Sam not being here. I wanted him here. I couldn't believe I was saying it, but not having him here made me feel weirdly empty. And my wolf wasn't helping matters, pining over Sam and his wolf. Being in his house, surrounded by his scent, just made her worse. It was hard to keep myself in check when his scent made me want to jump his bones every time I saw him.

I should be furious with him, not infuriatingly attracted to him.

The door opened, and my head spun around. Sam's scent immediately grew stronger, and my wolf growled contentedly, happy that he was back, her excitement flooding into me. Or maybe we were just in agreement, and I didn't want to admit it.

"Sorry I'm later than I expected," Sam said. "The meeting ran long, and Alek and Klyte kept derailing it, even when Oliver, Luke, and Evelyn were all telling them to knock it off."

"I get it," I said. "Well, sort of, but are you still up for the hunt?"

"I promised, didn't I?" When I nodded, he said, "In that case, I'm ready when you are."

"Brilliant," I said, grinning broadly.

"Can I ask something, though?" When I nodded, Sam continued. "Why didn't you just go on your own? Don't get me wrong; I'm glad you didn't because I would have been worried sick. But I also kind of expected that you would. So...what changed?"

I hesitated, color rising to my cheeks. I knew the answer, but I didn't want to admit it.



“Stella?” he asked.

“I don’t want them to find me,” I finally said, talking to my feet. “And if I go out, then they might.”

I hated admitting it. I didn’t want to be frightened. I was supposed to be handling this on my own. But I was terrified of what would happen if I managed to mess up. If something went wrong, and I ended up right back where I’d started.

Strong arms enveloped me, and I was soon wrapped in Sam’s warmth.

“I get it,” he said into my hair. “But it’s going to be all right. I promise.”

I wanted to believe him, I really did. But that kernel of fear refused to budge, no matter how hard I tried.

“What if it happens again?” I asked, finally voicing a fear I’d been holding in. “What if they catch me and bring me back to Akron? Next time, getting out isn’t going to be so easy. I don’t know if I’ll be able to escape.”

“You don’t know there’s going to be a next time,” Sam said, squeezing my arm reassuringly. “You can’t let that fear take over everything, or he’s won.”

“But what if it does happen?”

“I’m not going to let it,” he snarled. The anger and fierceness in his eyes told me just how much he meant it. The look was reassuring, but only a little. Because it still felt like there was too much that could go wrong.

“But what if it does?” I said. “I’m completely unprepared. I’ll be stuck with no way out, and all of this will have been for nothing.”

The pained, tender look in his eyes hit me harder than it should have, momentarily freezing my panic as our gazes locked. When had he gotten so close to me? I could feel the heat radiating off him now, could see every individual eyelash.

“Do you want me to help prepare you?” he asked.

The offer took me aback. It was so out of left field that I nearly started laughing. He had to be joking.

But the look in his eyes told me he was serious.

“Really?” I asked.

“If that’s going to make you feel safe, then absolutely.” The intensity in his gaze made me feel like he was burning a hole through me. “I want to make sure you never feel like things are beyond your control. And if it turns out to be useful to you down the road, then yes. I want you safe, and I want you to be able to defend yourself. If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” I said. “Can you show me now?”

He nodded and walked out, returning a little later with rope and a pair of handcuffs.

“You have those on hand, do you?” I asked, my tone playful but also genuinely curious.

Sam gave me a wicked smirk that heated my insides, and I blushed. “Not for the reason you think,” he said. “I haven’t since...” He coughed, as if stopping himself from saying something. “We’ll start with these. Because unless the rope is magic, it’s fairly easy for any shifter to break out of it.”

I held out my hands, but instead, he cuffed one of his own wrists. “You might not be able to do this one,” he cautioned. “It’s easier when you’ve done it a few times.” He grabbed his thumb and tugged. There was a sickening pop, and his thumb hung loosely. He slipped out of the cuff easily and popped his dislocated thumb in place. “I wouldn’t recommend it, though. It hurts like hell.”

“Well, what’s a trick I can do?” I asked.

“If something’s nearby, then pick the lock.” He held up a paperclip, inserted it into the keyhole of the still-locked cuff, and poked around a bit. A minute later, the cuff sprang open. “You can do that with anything small, pointy, and rigid enough.”

He showed me a few different tricks, going over each one and explaining it before giving me the chance to try. I wasn’t great at a lot of them, but even then, just learning how to do these things helped put my mind at ease.

“How many times have you had to use these tricks?” I finally asked, unable to hold back my curiosity any longer.

“More times than most people,” he said. Then, without elaborating, he continued his training. “There are also pressure points on cuffs that you can

use to your advantage.”

“Like what?”

He gave me a shrewd look. “To show you properly, I’m going to have to put them on you. Are you all right with that?”

“Oh.” My breath caught in my throat as I looked at the handcuffs. Something stirred inside me that I tried to push down. “All right.” I held out my hands.

The handcuffs went on with a loud click that made my heart lurch and my stomach clench. It felt strange, being this vulnerable in front of someone while also feeling completely safe.

And the cuffs were...exciting, almost.

He stood right in front of me and took my hands in his. I stared down at our hands, not sure what would happen if I looked up. Not sure I wanted to know, but also desperate to find out.

“So, what you’re going to want to do here, is feel for gaps in the links.” He gently took my fingers and bent them toward the links. “They won’t always be there, in which case your best option is to hit the edges of the cuffs right where the link begins.”

It was hard to pay attention to what he was saying when my heart was thundering so loudly.

“But if there are gaps, like here.” He moved my finger so the nail caught on the edge of the gap. “Then that’s the weak point. What you do, though, is hit the chain from the side opposite the gap against something.” He took my hands, and the sensation electrified my entire body.

“Something like this,” he said, and pulled me into a crouch as he brought my bound wrists to the metal edge of his coffee table. “And keep doing it until it breaks.”

His entire side was pressed up against mine, and I could feel his breath caressing my skin. All I had to do was turn, and his mouth would be right there.

“Do you want to give it a try?” he asked.

“I...think I’m good.” If I stayed this close to him for too long, I didn’t think I would be able to control myself. Already, I was struggling to focus.

I stood, and Sam followed suit.

“Did that make you feel better at all?” he asked.

“A bit,” I said, though I still wasn’t sure I would be able to do any of this for real. And my mind and my wolf were preoccupied with the shifter standing inches in front of me rather than methods of escape.

He took my hand in his far larger one and held it tightly. My breath caught in my throat as shivers ran through me at the touch. I stared down at our conjoined hands, afraid of what might happen if I looked at his face.

“Stella,” Sam said, “I will always be here for you. I left once, and it was the biggest mistake of my life. But I also want you to feel like you can do things on your own. And I’ll do anything I can to facilitate that.”

I knew what looking up would do. I knew it by the way my heart was thudding, and the way I couldn’t breathe properly. I knew it was probably a mistake, but I couldn’t hide it anymore.

I looked up, and that intensity in his eyes, that determination, undid me.

I pulled him toward me and pressed my lips against his.

There was no hesitation on his part. His arms wrapped around me and pressed me close to him. I could feel every muscle rippling in his body, trace the scars running along his skin. Already, I could feel that burning need—that craving I’d been fighting against since I saw him again, taking over me—temporarily rendering my mind blank. Nothing mattered but his lips and his touch.

Almost instantly, I could feel him stiffening, his cock pressing against me as it hardened. I wanted to unfasten his jeans, but my hands were still cuffed together, making it hard to do much of anything.

As if reading my thoughts, Sam grabbed my bound hands, holding them high overhead as he slammed me against the wall, pinning my arms in place as his free hand roamed my body, caressing my breasts through the fabric of my shirt as his fingers moved slowly downward. Every brush of his fingers sent new sensations through my body as his lips moved down my neck, lingering on my collarbone and nipping gently in a way that made me jerk in excitement.

I squirmed beneath him. I wanted my hands all over his body, but

with my hands cuffed and pinned above me, all I could do was stay in place as his fingers unzipped my jeans and yanked them down. The jeans pooled around my ankles as his hand moved between my legs, feeling the wetness there.

One finger circled my clit teasingly before sliding down my slit. Moments later, my eyes flew open as his finger thrust inside me. I gasped, writhing as I stayed pinned against the wall, relishing the way his finger glided in and out of me.

Soon—too soon—he moved back, panting slightly as he eyed me hungrily. Pulling out the same paperclip as before, he unlatched the cuffs. I wanted to scream at him to keep them on, but before I could say anything, he was tugging his shirt off, revealing perfectly toned, rippling muscles. I let my own shirt and bra fall to the floor, standing naked in front of him. He growled in approval as I yanked him forward and unfastened his pants. They fell to the floor along with his boxers, and his cock stood erect in front of me.

I hadn't been with anyone since him, and his cock was as large as I remembered. I eyed it hungrily, remembering what it had felt like inside me all those years ago.

He pulled me back toward him, our bare bodies pressing against one another as our lips collided again. My fingers ran along his shaft teasingly, and Sam moaned against my lips as I did. That sound made me jerk as another spasm of excitement filled my body.

He slammed me against the wall, his lips still locked against mine. One hand cupped my breast, the thumbs flicking my nipple teasingly as his other hand moved down my stomach. His fingers stopped just short of my clit, as if he was enjoying drawing out my pleasure. I growled, and he laughed before bringing his hand an inch lower, getting enticingly nearer, making me need him even more.

Because right then, the only thing that mattered was him, and the way our bodies felt against one another.

## Chapter 10 - Sam

The smell of Stella's arousal mixed with her normal scent was sending my wolf into a frenzy. All I wanted was her. All I needed was her.

My hand slid between her legs where she was already wet. I let my fingers run between her slit, brushing against her clit. Her body jerked, and she growled in annoyance.

"Stop drawing it out," she hissed.

"I'll do what I want," I said, moving my hand away from the inside of her thigh. "And right now, this is what I want to do."

Gripping her hips, I went to my knees, my face level with her pussy. Still holding her in place, I moved so my face was practically pressed against her, and my tongue lashed out, running against her slit and inside her. She squirmed, her hands gripping my shoulders tightly.

She tasted incredible. I couldn't get enough as I lapped greedily at her juices, savoring her taste, and the way she moaned made my cock twitch and throb with even more need.

"God, just fuck me already," she moaned as my tongue darted in and out of her.

My wolf growled his agreement, wanting more of the shifter whose scent was so appealing to him. That urge kept building, and I was more than happy to satiate it.

I stood, licking my lips as I drank her in, looking down at her perfect body. Her nipples were fully erect, and I could tell by the look on her face just how much she wanted me. I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her toward me, kissing every inch of her that I could as I moved her toward the couch and lay her down, crawling on top of her.

Unable to wait any longer, I thrust into her. Her hips bucked as she moaned softly. She was wet, and sliding in and out of her was almost as sweet as the noises she was making. The groans and writhing beneath my touch were as much a rush as seeing her gorgeous body.

I kept thrusting, going faster and faster as her panting grew more ragged and rapid. Her hips began to buck in time with my thrusts, and I could

tell by the way her toes curled and her back arched and her fingers dug that she was close.

I slowed down, edging her. Her eyes flew open, and she glowered at me.

“I swear to God, if you—” she cut herself off as I increased my speed again, her moans growing more high-pitched with every pump. Then she cried out, her back arching and her head moving back in ecstasy as she came.

Her muscles clenched around my dick as I continued riding her. The sensation was enough to send me over the edge, and a couple minutes after her pants had subsided, my own pressure released. I groaned, slumping against her, loving the way she felt beneath me and the way my softening cock felt while it was still inside her. Slowly, I slid out of her, though I hovered over her, our faces inches apart as I gently brushed hair from her face.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She nodded. “I think so. Are you?”

I was more than okay. What had happened was incredible, and I was ecstatic. I’d wanted her the moment I’d seen her again, but I’d been trying to hold back the urges out of respect for her, though it hadn’t been easy. Still, I was worried that she might have thought this was a mistake, so hearing she was okay set my mind at ease.

“I’m fine,” I said. I tried to figure out how to fully express how I was feeling, only I was coming up blank. “This was nice. Unexpected, but nice.”

She nodded, her breasts still heaving as she looked up at me. She gave a breathless smile that made my stomach lurch. Then she started giggling.

“What was that about a hunt?” she asked, eyes dancing with amusement.

I blinked. “Oh, yeah,” I said. “I kinda forgot.”

We stared at one another, then we laughed together.

“Still want to go?” I asked, tilting my head.

She smirked. “Maybe later.”

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“Sam? Earth to Sam.” Mark waved his hand in front of my face, and I blinked.

“Sorry,” I said. “Bit distracted.”

“You don’t say,” Klyte remarked.

“You’ve been distracted for days now,” Alek said.

“And smiling more,” Tannen added. “A lot more.”

“Couldn’t have something to do with a certain shifter currently living at your place?” Mark asked, nudging me with his elbow.

I shot him a look. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m just in a better mood?”

“Oh no. Trust us,” Tannen said. “We can definitely tell you’re happier.”

“You’ve smiled more in the past week than I think I’ve seen you smile in two months,” Klyte stated. “And that’s nothing on the fact that you’ve said more words since Stella got here than I think I’ve ever heard you say. *Ever.*”

“She seems good for you,” Evelyn chimed in, beaming at me. “And I like her. Which, considering all you told me about her before this, I’m not surprised.” She nudged me playfully. “It is nice to see my best friend happy.”

“I think she’s still planning on leaving,” I said, trying to keep my voice and expression neutral. I didn’t want Stella to leave, but I didn’t want everyone else realizing how badly I wanted her to stay.

Based on the looks the others were exchanging, it didn’t seem as though I was particularly convincing.

“Well, for our sakes, I hope she stays,” Klyte said. “I much prefer ‘mildly more talkative and happier Sam.’”

Evelyn shot him a look, but I was still smiling. Klyte could be a bit much sometimes, but I couldn’t deny there were times when I appreciated his humor.

“Look, weren’t we trying to talk strategy about how to beat a



demon?” I asked.

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem there,” Rand answered. “Apparently, Akron’s moved dwellings. He hasn’t been seen in days. Neither have his underlings.”

I tensed, all my attention now on Rand. “He’s coming?”

“I don’t know.” Rand slouched forward in his chair. “For all we know, he’s gone to ground.”

“You don’t think he’s coming here, do you?” Malcolm asked.

“I don’t think we can rule anything out,” Jameson said. “But I think it’s unlikely. Based on everything Rand and Tannen have found out, it seems like he takes things slowly. But we’re stockpiling iron just in case.”

“Do we need to tell Stella?” Evelyn asked.

Jameson shook his head. “I don’t think we need to worry her yet. The minute we know more, we’ll tell her.”

The meeting went on for a bit longer. We talked about tracking Akron and contingency plans, but even the looming threat of a demon couldn’t dampen my mood. Everything seemed brighter now. Just having Stella nearby was enough to make things better. We hadn’t spoken about what would happen next, or if the fact that we’d slept together had changed anything. But that our relationship might be evolving into more now made everything seem brighter. I would have been happy just having her near me, but if it became something else, I would probably look like a smiling idiot for the next year.

But all that good will and cheer evaporated when I came home and saw Stella curled up on the couch. She was deep in thought, biting her thumbnail as she stared into the empty fireplace. The uneasy, haunted look on her face was enough to make me stop dead in my tracks.

She glanced up when she heard me, alarm and hesitation crossing her face for a fraction of a second. Then she took a deep breath, as if steeling herself for something.

“Hey, can we talk?” she asked. The tone in her voice made me uneasy, and I paused for a moment.

“Sure,” I finally said. “What’s up?”

“It’s about what happened the other day.” The way she said it was enough to send a knife straight through me. I knew where this was going, and there was no way for me to avoid it. But I kept myself stoic.

“What about it?”

She took a deep breath, then spoke all in a rush. “I think it was a mistake. I had a great time with it and everything, but I just...I don’t think we should do that to ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” That euphoria I’d been experiencing, that hope that something might be able to happen between the two of us again, evaporated instantly. I tried to keep my expression impassive, but I could feel my shoulders sagging, and I doubted I was able to hide the hurt in my eyes.

“I mean I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to get too close.” She was talking to the floor instead of me, which somehow made the whole thing worse. “I’m leaving soon. Once this demon stuff gets taken care of, I’m not planning on staying. I want to explore the world and be my own person.”

My stomach sank with every word. It was hard to hear. I’d been hoping that somehow I could convince her to stick around after everything was done. Brixton was a good place, and it would be better with her here. And I wanted her close. I had thought about her nearly every day since I’d left her, and having her here again felt like fate giving me a second chance.

But if she wanted to leave and see the world, I couldn’t stop her from doing that. I wasn’t going to keep her caged if it was going to make her miserable. More than anything, I just wanted her to be happy.

Still, the idea of not being with her was almost too much.

“I could come with you,” I offered, not aware I was going to say it until the words were out of my mouth. But the instant I said it, I realized I meant it. I would follow her to the ends of the earth if she let me. I had lost her once. I didn’t want to lose her again.

Her mouth fell open in surprise, which was understandable. I’d just dropped a bombshell. But beyond that, I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. All I could do was wait to see if she said yes. I knew if she said no, I would respect that decision.

She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. But I want to do this on my own. I don’t...” She trailed off as if trying to gather her thoughts. “It’s not a good

idea.”

I nodded, feeling something had lanced me through the heart. But what else was there to do? I wasn't going to force her to stay. And if she didn't want me to come with her, then I wasn't going to force the issue.

But I was still frustrated. I didn't want to lose her again. I *couldn't*. Not after all this time. I tried desperately to think of some way to convince her to stay, despite knowing that I had to accept the fact that I might not be able to.

Stella still looked surprised. “Why aren't you trying to convince me otherwise?”

I raised my eyebrows, taking a step closer. “Do you want me to?”

She shook her head. “No, but I expected you to argue. I just want to know why not.”

“Because you're your own person, and I want you to feel that way,” I said truthfully. “I may want one outcome, but it's not fair to you for me to push it on you.”

That wasn't all of it, but I wasn't sure how to say the next part. Or if what would happen if I did.

“Do you believe in fate?” I asked suddenly, throwing caution to the wind. She deserved to know everything.

Once again, I seemed to take her off-guard. She blinked in confusion, then nodded, almost suspiciously.

“I don't think it was chance that you came here of all places,” I said. “I don't think it's a coincidence that we've run into each other again. There were too many variables.”

“Sam, that's just—”

“Can I ask one question?” I interjected. When she nodded, I continued. If I didn't say this now, I didn't think I could say it later. “When you ran away, how did you decide which direction to go?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, studying me uneasily. But I could tell she was giving her answer legitimate thought. “I just sort of picked,” she said. “I was just letting my wolf decide and went from there.” She frowned, then realization flashed across her features. “You're thinking

fated mates,” she said.

“I think there’s a chance,” I said.

“Sam, if you think saying that is going to convince me to stay, or convince me to let you go with me—”

“I don’t,” I said hurriedly. “I’m don’t. I’m not going to control what you do next. But if we are fated mates, then I think we’ll come back to one another.”

“That’s incredibly far-fetched. You know that, right?” Stella was trying to sound lighthearted, but there was an edge of doubt to her voice. “The odds—”

“Are less than us coming back into each other’s lives purely by coincidence,” I said. “And even if we aren’t, then when you leave, I can at least hope that our paths will cross again someday.” I took a deep breath and kept my eyes on hers. “And I’ll wait for you until that happens.”

## Chapter 11 -Stella

I lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling as I replayed my conversation with Sam from earlier in the day.

It had been the right decision. At least that's what I kept telling myself. I couldn't get my hopes up with Sam, not after last time. And if we kept going the way we were going, I knew that was what was going to happen. I could already feel myself beginning to fall for him again, and that terrified me. I didn't know what I would do if I fell for him, and he left me again. I didn't think I could handle it.

And if I let myself fall for him, what then? I would be losing my independence all over again, after everything I'd done to gain it. He had offered to come with me when I left Brixton, but I'd seen the life he has here, and I couldn't take that away from him. I didn't think he would be happy leaving it.

Telling Sam we couldn't be together again was the right decision. I knew that. So why did I feel so terrible about it? Why was my wolf unhappy, growling and sulking inside me? And she was angry at me, not at anyone or anything else. I could sense it. Guilt kept creeping up through me.

I snarled, frustrated with myself. What was it that I wanted, exactly? Why did my wolf and I have to be at odds with each other?

And what if fate was actually coming into play like Sam had said? The fact that I had come here of all places...didn't that suggest that maybe there was more going on than what it seemed? But what would that mean for me? If Sam and I were fated to be together...

A ringing doorbell interrupted my thoughts, and I was surprised at how relieved I was at the fact that there was a distraction. I didn't have to think about Sam or what would happen next for a little while.

I could have just stayed in my room. But the need for a distraction was too much, and I was curious.

I walked down the stairs just in time to see Jameson stepping into the entryway. The dark and somber expression on his face made me stop halfway. He looked angry, and he looked like he was about to deliver some really bad news. My stomach tightened as he looked directly at me. From the

first time I'd met him, the alpha had seemed sweet, even a little laid-back. This was an entirely different side of him.

Sam noticed it immediately, too. He straightened, almost like a soldier standing to attention.

"What?" he asked. "What happened?"

"We have a visitor," Jameson said. "Luke found him on patrol and brought him to the mansion."

"Who?" My voice cracked, but I had to know. I forced my hands to stop trembling.

Jameson looked directly at me. "His name is Farrow. He says he's your alpha."

*No.*

*No, no, no.*

He had found me.

My legs decided to stop working, and I collapsed on the stairs, one hand still gripping the banister. Blood pulsed in my ears, and my mind went numb.

"Stella?" Sam was next to me in an instant. His scent enveloped me, and I inhaled deeply. Musk and leather. I focused on that instead of the fear creeping through my body, threatening to consume me.

"I'm fine," I managed to say, though it was fairly obvious I was anything but. I took another long breath. "What does he want?"

"He says he just wants to talk," Jameson said. "He also tried to imply that we were holding you here and away from your own pack, which none of us took kindly to. He retracted that one pretty quickly, but he still says he's your alpha and his responsibility. When I told him to leave, he said he was prepared to fight unless the two of you spoke."

"She's not going to," Sam snarled. He had wrapped his arms around me, and I was leaning against him, listening to his heartbeat. "That asshole's done enough."

"It's up to her," Jameson agreed, nodding. "And you don't have to talk to him if you don't want to. We can run him off. I don't think he's as strong as he thinks he is."

I shook my head. “No, he meant it when he said he would fight. That’s not happening on my account. I’ll talk to him.”

“Stella—” Sam began, but I held up my hand.

“I’ve made up my mind,” I said.

“I’m coming with you,” Sam insisted.

I nodded. I wasn’t going to admit it, but I wanted him there. Something about his comforting presence gave me a strength I didn’t otherwise have. Having him there would make the situation easier to handle.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said, getting to my feet and walking down the steps, not giving myself the time to talk myself out of it.

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My entire body was shaking as I walked up to the mansion. Sam was on my right, so close that he was nearly brushing against me. Jameson was on my other side. Despite their presence, I couldn’t quell the surging fear threatening to consume me. Even with the shifters around us, I wouldn’t put it past Farrow to try and grab me. What would happen then? Would Jameson be willing to attack another alpha over something as trivial as me? Would Sam lash out and either kill Farrow or die himself?

“Relax,” Jameson said to me, as if sensing my unease. “I told Farrow you were under the protection of both the pack and the Silver Wolves. He’s not going to try anything. He’ll be breaking pack treaties if he did, and he also knows he would lose if he went against us. From what I can tell, he’s a whole lot of bluster.”

That calmed some of my nerves, but not all of them. Still, I nodded jerkily and continued walking.

Farrow was sitting in Jameson’s office. Two of his guards—Oscar and Weston—flanked either side of him, but Luke, Mark, and Rand were facing them, arms folded as they stared down the other guards.

All fears about Farrow trying to grab me vanished. The Silver Wolves made Farrow and his guards look like cubs. Farrow and the guards seemed to notice this, too. They were far more nervous and on edge than I’d ever seen them before.

Farrow turned to look at us as we walked into the office, his eyes narrowing in dislike and anger as they homed in on me. Right then, I realized how much he hated me. If it hadn't been for the Silver Wolves, I wouldn't have put it past Farrow to make a grab for me.

"Stella," he said. "Good to see you."

He looked like he would rather swallow a swarm of bees than see me.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

His lips curled upward in an expression that could have curdled milk. "We have our ways."

Meaning, Akron had his ways. Somehow, the demon had known exactly where to find me, even if it had taken some time. The thought sent a chill through my body.

"What do you want?" Sam growled.

Farrow's head jerked toward Sam. His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed even further. He turned back to me.

"Is this why you ran away?" Farrow sneered. "So you could fuck this outsider instead of doing your duty for the pack?"

"Watch it," Rand snarled.

"He's one of us," Mark said casually. "If you insult him, you're insulting all of us. And none of us take kindly to insult."

Farrow's jaw twitched, but he stayed silent.

"What do you want?" I asked. I tried to keep my voice calm and collected, but it was hard to keep the tremors at bay. I knew if I showed any weakness, Farrow would pounce on it and twist it so he could use it against me.

"I wanted to give you the option to come back to the pack of your own free will," Farrow said simply.

"And by 'the pack,' I'm assuming you mean the demon you sold me off to?"

"We all have sacrifices we have to make for the good of the pack," Farrow said almost indifferently. "And you ran away from yours."

"I don't think that promising her to a demon falls within 'sacrifices



for the good of the pack,” Sam said. I could hear the barely contained rage in his voice. He was livid. “I’m pretty sure that just means you’re an asshole.”

“Watch it, outsider,” Farrow said coolly. There was nothing but contempt in his eyes. “Just remember our last discussion.”

*Last discussion?*

Before I could figure out what that meant, Sam was snarling and stalking forward. His fingers had lengthened and sharpened to claws, and his teeth were turning to fangs.

Jameson shot a hand out, grasping Sam at the very last minute. Sam paused, then looked down at Jameson’s hand as if surprised to find it on his shoulder.

“Not right now, Sam,” Jameson said. Sam snarled but didn’t move.

Farrow smirked. “That’s right, listen to your alpha,” he mocked, giving a wolfish grin. “Shame you’ll end up losing the same shifter twice. But that’s what comes with fraternizing someone who isn’t in your pack.”

“Keep up that tone, and I’ll stop restraining him,” Jameson warned.

Farrow’s eyes narrowed, but they didn’t back down from the other alpha’s gaze. “I’ll make this perfectly clear,” he said to Jameson. “Hand her over now, or you’ll become the enemy of the entire Full Moon Pack and a very powerful demon. I don’t think you want either of those things, do you?”

Jameson’s eyes flashed angrily at the condescension dripping from Farrow’s tone. He released Sam and moved to stand directly in front of Farrow.

“Fuck off,” Jameson growled.

Farrow looked startled. “You’re going to let a demon burn down your entire town and kill every last pack member instead of handing over a single female you barely know?”

He was talking about me like I was an object, like I wasn’t even in the same room. That was enough to push me over the edge myself, and I marched forward to stand next to Jameson. As I passed Sam, I saw him twitch, as if he was about to pull me back. He stayed where he was, though I could feel his intense gaze on me as I stalked forward.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Jameson said, baring his teeth in a feral

grin. “So now that that’s settled, you and your goons can piss off before we run you out of town.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” I demanded. “Why do all of this?”

His eyes narrowed at me. “There are rules about fraternizing with outsiders. You broke it. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“No,” I said.

He kept his gaze locked on me. “You’re as insolent as your parents, you know.”

What was that supposed to mean? My parents had been nothing but loyal to the pack my entire life. I shook my head. It didn’t matter. There were more pressing things to handle.

“I’m not going back,” I said, letting every ounce of hatred and anger I had ever felt toward Farrow and the rest of the pack bleed into the words. “Even if Jameson turned me out right now, I would just run. You can threaten me all you want, but the only way I’m going back with you and marrying Akron is if you drag me there, kicking and screaming.”

Farrow eyed me levelly. Every instinct in me was screaming to back down, to walk away with my tail between my legs, but I held firm, taking strength from my wolf, who was just as furious as I was.

“That can be arranged quite easily,” he said, his voice as cold as ice.

I realized the Silver Wolves weren’t going to deter him from his goal, after all, and that I’d made a huge mistake in standing this close to him.

He lunged a split second before I realized what he was about to do, and I wasn’t able to dodge him in time. His hand wrapped around my wrist, squeezing so tight that he nearly shattered my bones as he yanked me toward him.

I screamed, ready to fight with everything I had. But a moment later, a large hand was wrapped around Farrow’s neck, squeezing. Farrow’s eyes bulged.

“Let her go. Now.” Sam snarled, his face inches from the alpha’s. “Before I crush your windpipe.”

Farrow’s mouth gaped open and closed like a fish, and he released me, his fingers darting to his neck to pry Sam’s hand away. His two guards

moved to jump on Sam, but Rand and Mark growled at them the instant they moved a muscle, and the two men froze.

“That’s enough, Sam,” Jameson said. “I’m pretty sure he gets the point.”

Reluctantly, Sam released Farrow, who hacked and coughed as he stumbled backward.

“Lay another hand on her, and it’ll be the last thing you do,” Sam growled. “I should have killed you the last time I saw you.”

“You’ll pay for that,” Farrow wheezed. “You just attacked an alpha unprovoked—”

“Like hell it was unprovoked,” Luke growled. “You just tried to kidnap someone right in front of us.”

“She’s a member of our pack. I have a right to—”

“I’m not a member anymore,” I snapped. My wrist throbbed dully, and I rubbed it with my other hand. “We both know it.”

“You—” Farrow began.

“Stella is under our protection,” Jameson interrupted. “And she’s made it pretty clear she’s left your pack, meaning you have no authority over her. So the next time you threaten her or anyone else in my pack, we aren’t going to be as courteous. Do you understand?”

Farrow scowled, but he started backing toward the door.

“You’ll regret this,” he said. “This entire town is going to burn.”

“I’ll let Rand and Mark see you out,” Jameson said pleasantly, ignoring the threat.

Farrow gave Jameson and then me a look of pure, unadulterated loathing, then spun on his heels and marched out with his two men, Rand and Mark close behind them.

## Chapter 12 - Sam

The minute the door closed, I ran over to Stella.

“Are you all right?” I asked. Inside, I was seething, my wolf enraged. He wanted that fucker to pay for what he’d done. He’d tried to take Stella. If Jameson hadn’t stopped me in time, I doubted I would have been able to stop.

My hands went to Stella’s shoulders. I needed to touch her, to know that she was still here. I glanced down at her, my eyes locking on her wrist, where red fingerprints were already blooming. The anger resurged as I took in the sight, and my wolf bristled. That asshole had hurt Stella. He had tried to kidnap her, and he’d nearly succeeded. If I had been a second or two later, he would’ve pulled her against him and been able to use her as a hostage to ensure his safe escape.

The thought made my heart race and my wolf snarled, begging to be released so he could hunt down the other shifter and tear him to shreds.

“I’m fine,” she said, giving me a shaky smile. Her entire body was trembling.

“I’m going to kill him,” I said. I stood, fully intending to go after him. My wolf was almost entirely in control of my emotions now. The thought of nearly losing Stella again was maddening, and I wanted to teach that asshole a lesson.

He would never put a hand on Stella again.

Luke grabbed my shoulder before I could reach the door.

“Easy there,” Luke said. “I know you’re pissed, but this isn’t the time.”

“When is the time, then?” I hissed. “When he goes after her again?”

“We gave him a truce under a pack treaty,” Jameson reminded me.

“He broke that treaty when he tried to kidnap Stella,” I snarled. But I knew it was a hollow threat. Attacking Farrow would be a death sentence right now. It was our word against theirs.

“We’ll find a way to make him pay,” Jameson promised. “But we would risk an all-out war over this, with the only evidence being that we saw him nearly take someone.”

I didn't want to listen. I just wanted to protect Stella at all costs. But that sense of obedience and putting others before myself was still there. And I knew my alpha was right.

Still, it was a close call. I probably would have said fuck it and left, anyway, but then Stella spoke, driving everything else out of my head.

"I'm all right, Sam," she said, getting to her feet. She gave me a self-deprecatory smile. "Please don't start a war over a hurt wrist."

*You're worth starting a war for*, I thought, but all I could get out was, "I'm sorry I let him grab you."

"It's not your fault," she said. "Really, I think that was probably his plan the whole time. And it probably would have worked if he hadn't tried it in a room filled with ex spec-ops shifters."

I growled. My emotions were spiraling. But through it all, I couldn't help but admire just how well Stella was handling it all. I could tell that she'd been terrified, and I could have killed Farrow for that alone, but she was putting on a good face. And she hadn't broken down or collapsed. She was staying strong. And that alone made me remember why I'd fallen for her in the first place, and how certain I was that she was perfect for me.

But all of that felt impossible to articulate. Instead, all I could do was wrap my arms around her and hold her close. I didn't want to let her further than five steps from me.

"You were so brave," I muttered into her ear. She stiffened momentarily, then relaxed into my arms.

"That wasn't exactly how I was expecting it to go," she said. "I should have seen it coming, though. I was an idiot for thinking Farrow would hold off."

I snarled. "It's not your fault. I shouldn't have let you in the same room as him in the first place."

She snorted, leaning against my chest. Just touching her, reassuring myself that she was here, started soothing my wolf.

"Trust me. He wouldn't have left until he'd seen me," she said. "You weren't going to be able to stop him from trying."

"And now he knows who he's messing with," Jameson said.

Normally, there was at least some good cheer in his face, but he looked livid. “He’s not getting anywhere near you again.”

Based on Stella’s expression, she didn’t believe him. I couldn’t blame her. Though the startled doe-eyed look hadn’t left her face, she wasn’t trembling anymore. I wasn’t going to ask if she was all right again; it was obvious she wasn’t. But I wanted her to know that I was here for her.

“I’m here if you need to talk,” I said, my hand on her arm.

“Honestly? Right now, I just want to clear my head,” she said, giving an uneasy smile. “I don’t really want to admit it, but that shook me up quite a bit. It was just...” She trailed off, making an inarticulate gesture that I still somehow understood.

“You weren’t expecting it, but you’re not surprised at the same time?” I suggested.

She laughed and nodded.

I pulled her in close. “It’s all right,” I muttered.

But I could smell the anxiety and fear radiating off her. No matter how hard she tried to appear calm and collected, that scent was a giveaway.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I suggested, taking a step back and looking at her. “There’s a place I like to go when I need to think. We can go there.”

“Is that safe?” Jameson asked.

“She’ll be with me,” I growled. “If Farrow or any unfamiliar shifter comes anywhere near us, I’m going to teach them a lesson they’re not going to forget. And if you need us, Evelyn and Oliver both know where it is.”

Jameson nodded, knowing better than to question me. “Just be safe,” he cautioned.

I turned back to Stella. “It’s up to you.”

She licked her lips, and her eyes darted to the door as if imagining Farrow on the other side, waiting to grab her. I wouldn’t have blamed her if she said she wanted to stay inside for a week.

But she took a deep breath and nodded. “That sounds nice,” she said.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s get going.”

Jameson muttered something under his breath, but I ignored him.

“Let’s go,” she said, taking a deep breath. We moved toward the door.

I took Stella’s hand, and I smirked. “Got anything that would work for a bathing suit?”

## Chapter 13 - Stella

It was a waterfall. An absolutely gorgeous waterfall deep in the woods. Water cascaded down the stone into a crystal-clear pool. The trees all around it were various hues of orange, red, and yellow, though was still warm enough that the water was flowing freely. There was something serene about the area, and just being there made me feel calmer.

“I can see why you come here,” I said. “And why you asked about the bathing suit.”

Sam grinned mischievously. “I’m always up for a little skinny dipping if you’d prefer. But I figured I would give you the option.”

“How did you find this place, anyway?” I asked, looking around. It wasn’t necessarily far from Brixton, but it wasn’t easy to get to, either, as it was nestled up in the woods. But Sam hadn’t struggled to get there at all. He clearly came here often.

“I found it a couple of years ago, not long after we moved here,” he said, stretching and looking out at the view. There was a soft smile on his face. “I like coming here when I need to think. I figured you could probably use that right now.”

He wasn’t wrong, and there was something touching about the fact that he’d brought me here. He hadn’t always been great at opening up to people, me included. So the fact that he was sharing this private space with me was sweet.

“Yeah,” I said. “I do. That whole thing with Farrow...it...” I trailed off, unsure how to articulate how much the incident with my old alpha had gotten to me. The thought that I’d nearly been dragged off against my will was enough to shake anyone, I knew. But something about it hit deeper with me.

Sam wrapped a comforting arm around me and pulled me close. “I know,” he said. His voice was low and soothing, but also filled with undisguised anger. “I completely understand.” He glanced up at the waterfall. “Want to jump down?”

He was trying to get my mind off things, and I appreciated it. I nodded.



We climbed up to the top, both in swimwear we'd carried with us. The rocks were cool and slippery against my soles, but somehow soothing, like a balm.

We got to the top and looked down. It looked higher from up here, but in a way that instilled adrenaline rather than fear. My pulse quickened with excitement.

"Ladies first," Sam said, the sound muffled by the roar of the water.

Looking at his mostly bare body, I felt my wolf stir with interest. I thought about how his body had felt against mine, and my mind went back to the way his hands had moved against my skin and the way he'd felt inside me.

No. I wasn't going to think that way.

I closed my eyes and ran, jumping over the edge of the waterfall. The wind whipped my hair above me as I soared through the air. A split second later, there was a crash of water as I was submerged.

The cold water cleared my head, and by the time I emerged, worries about Farrow and thoughts about Sam were no worse than a dull prod at the back of my head.

A moment later, Sam followed. The resulting splash hit me in the face, and I laughed as his head popped out of the water. He grinned, wiping the water from his eyes as we bobbed in the water.

We stayed like that for a long time, swimming and floating in the water, jumping from the waterfall and splashing one another when we thought we could get away with it. As time passed, the more the anxiety and frustration over what had happened back in Jameson's office slid off me like the water I was now wiping from my face.

"How are you feeling now?" Sam asked as we lay on a large rock, letting the sun dry us off.

"Better," I admitted. I glanced over at him, unable not to notice how absurdly attractive he was in just swim shorts. And how much my wolf wanted to take off that final bit of clothing.

I tried to drag myself away from that train of thought. Getting involved again, especially after I'd ended things, would be too messy.

And yet, I desperately wanted to.

“Good. I’m glad.” He stared into the running water speculatively, and I wondered exactly what he was thinking. Even now, he felt like an enigma that was impossible to read. My eyes traveled down his body again.

“Can I ask you something?” Sam asked.

I pulled my attention away from the way the water beading on his skin emphasized his muscles. It shouldn’t have been possible for him to look that attractive while soaking wet.

“What’s up?” I finally asked.

“You’re so hell-bent on leaving, which is fine,” he said. “I respect that. But you’re bent on doing it alone. Why?”

“I feel like it’s pretty obvious.” I leaned back against the rock, letting the sun dry my skin. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see Sam’s expression as I spoke. “If I’m tied down to a pack or someone, then I’m not really independent anymore, am I?”

But lately, I’d been wondering if I really wanted to go at it alone. Things with Sam had been nice. And the thought of leaving him again made me and my wolf more upset than I would have expected.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Sam said. “Look at Evelyn. She’s madly in love with Oliver, and I would consider her pretty independent, wouldn’t you?”

I frowned. He wasn’t wrong. The few times I’d seen Evelyn, she’d never seemed like she was tied down or couldn’t do what she wanted. In fact, it always looked like quite the opposite.

“The same goes for all the girls, really,” Sam mused. “Evelyn still goes on missions with the Redwoods when she wants to. Jenn actually teaches self-defense classes in town, since her dad trained her from a young age. Georgia helps Jameson with some of the nitty-gritty details of running the pack that he always likes to grumble about. Luke really encouraged Andi to go out and do whatever she wanted, but she just loves being a stay-at-home parent with their kids, so she does that. But it’s not like Luke forced her to do that, and there’s nothing wrong with her wanting to do that in the first place.” He stood, stretching. “Point is, I don’t think having a mate means you have to be locked down or feel trapped.” He looked down at me, his face somber.

“And trust me when I say that if you decide to stay here, no matter what, we’re not going to force you to do anything you don’t want to. And we’re sure as hell not going to force you to marry a fucking demon.”

I nodded, not saying anything, letting my mind wander. Would it be so bad to stay here? I liked the girls, and everyone I’d met so far seemed happy and welcoming. I felt more at home here than I ever had with my old pack. And knowing that I would be welcome here, that I wouldn’t be forced to do anything I didn’t want to do, was comforting.

If I could be myself in a pack like this one, would it really be so bad to stay?

A large, smooth hand appeared in front of me, and I looked up. Sam was hovering above me, backlit by the setting sun in a way that made him look like he was glowing. He smiled down at me, hand still extended.

“And whatever you decide to do, Stella,” he said, “know that I’m there for you, and I’ll do everything I can in my power to make sure you’re happy and safe.”

The words were sweet, but they struck a discordant note. He could say that all he wanted, and I could try to believe him. But the truth was that he had still left me once before. He’d left me alone to a pack that despised me when he’d promised he would take me away.

It was hard to trust anything he said when that knowledge was screaming at me from the back of my mind.

His warm smile slipped slightly as he searched my face, concern growing more and more evident across his features the longer we sat there. But he seemed to understand exactly what I was thinking without my having to say anything.

“I’ve made mistakes in the past,” he acknowledged. “And I have to live with those for the rest of my life. They aren’t something I can undo, no matter how hard I want to. But that doesn’t mean I’ll make the same stupid mistake again.”

After another long moment, I reached out and took his hand. He pulled me to my feet but didn’t let go. His hand held mine gently, his thumb rubbing back and forth across the back of my hand as he looked at me.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” he said, and he sighed. “I was an

idiot to let you go the first time.”

This time, the words struck a different note, one I couldn't quite identify. But I didn't feel quite as sad.

I tilted my head, letting a small smile come to my mouth. “Well, it's at least nice to hear you admit that,” I said.

His eyes sparked with something that was either amusement or hope.

“You should reconsider leaving,” he said. “I think you could make a good life here in Brixton.”

I chewed on the inside of my lip, glancing down at the stone beneath us for a moment. Our shadows had merged into one below us.

Staying wouldn't be so bad, would it? I could see myself becoming friends with the girls, finding some sort of job in town. And Sam would be here. Even if things didn't work out between us, he was still here, and that idea was more appealing to me than I wanted to admit.

“I'll think about it,” I finally said.

His hand squeezed mine. “That's really all I can ask,” he said.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling us close. I could see every individual droplet of water on him. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against mine, and I melted in his arms. My wolf growled her approval, needing more of the male shifter currently holding me. I let out an unconscious moan, and his grip on my hand tightened. That fire I'd been holding back ignited entirely, and my mind went blank with hunger.

Suddenly, there was a snapping sound nearby. Sam's head shot up and spun around, his entire body tense as he tried to push me behind him.

Then he paused, frowning, as the intruder got close enough for us to smell. It wasn't Farrow or any of my old pack, but one of the Silver Wolves.

“Something's wrong,” Sam said, his voice taut.

An ash-brown wolf broke through the trees. He saw the two of us and growled before shifting back into Oliver. His face was grave, his eyes filled with worry.

“Oliver?” Sam asked.

“You guys need to come back,” he said. “Farrow and a group of

underlings are attacking the town.”

## Chapter 14 - Sam

Stella paled, her eyes wide as she looked from Oliver to me and back again. “What?” she said.

“They tried to ambush us,” Oliver said to me. “We need all hands on deck. Jameson thinks we can push them back, but we need to get Stella to safety, and we need you to help protect the town.”

I turned to Stella. It seemed impossible that moments ago, everything had seemed like they were looking up. All of that good mood had evaporated with the news, and we didn’t have much time to act.

“Let’s get going,” I said, then shifted without a moment’s hesitation, letting my wolf take over and speed us back to town.

My wolf stretched, relishing the feeling of being set loose while bristling with rage that another pack would dare attack our town, let alone in order to abduct a shifter we cared about. He wanted to make them pay, and I was inclined to agree with him.

Next to me, Oliver and Stella had already shifted. The smaller, dark-furred wolf nuzzled against me, and the scent of raspberries and sugar was even stronger when Stella was a wolf. But there was no time to stall. We had to go.

We raced back to the town. The closer we got, the louder the sounds of chaos grew. Even worse was the growing smell of smoke, burning our eyes and noses as we approached. Farrow hadn’t been bluffing. The entire town was really in danger.

As we got closer to town, we came across Mark, leading a group of younger shifters out of town. He saw us and shifted back to human form as we did the same.

“We’re getting some of the more vulnerable shifters out of town,” he said. “Kids and teens and pregnant women. Basically, everyone else insisted on fighting.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked this town,” Oliver said with a small grin. “Good people.”

Mark nodded. “This is the last of them. Jameson is fighting a group of

underlings in the center of town. I think you should go help him, then see where the line's the weakest. We're holding our own at the moment, but they're stubborn, and the fire isn't helping."

"We'll head that way," I said.

Stella nodded, and my eyes narrowed as panic briefly washed over me. "Not you, Stella," I said. "Mark, could you take her to the bunker and keep her safe?"

"I'm not going to a bunker," Stella protested. "This whole thing is my fault. I'm going to help fight."

Frustration washed over me. I couldn't stand the thought of her being in danger. The idea that she wanted to fight was admirable, but I wasn't about to let her put herself in danger like that. But I didn't want to argue with her about it, either. Based on the stubborn set of her chin, which was far more attractive than it had any right to be, I was about to have to come up with a very convincing argument that didn't amount to "it's dangerous."

"It's not a good idea," I insisted. "They're here for one reason. And if you go into the fight, you're serving yourself up on a silver platter for those assholes."

"You don't know that," she countered.

I would have expected her to be at least a little afraid, but there was no fear mixed in her scent. Just pure rage. I would have been impressed if it wasn't for the fact that it was about to make our ensuing argument a lot more difficult.

"Stella—" I began.

"I can help," she said. "I'm stronger than you think, Sam."

"I know you're strong," I said, gripping her arms and looking into her face. "Anyone who's been through what you have and still standing has to be. And I know you can take care of yourself; I'm not trying to say you can't. But I'm not going to be able to focus on the fight if I'm worried about you. And Akron and Farrow and all their people are going to be hunting for you. The moment they get the chance, they're going to grab you and haul you away. If you fight, that's going to make it infinitely easier for them to get to you. The bunker is magic-proof. They won't be able to find you there. Do it for me. Please."

Stella hesitated. I could tell by the expression in her eyes that she wasn't happy. She wanted to fight.

I bent so that we were face-to-face and tilted her chin so she was looking at me. Her brown eyes were wide and sparkling with determination.

"This isn't your fault," I said. "And if they take you, then all of this will have been pointless. Just do this for me this once. Please."

She hesitated, then nodded. I let out a long, relieved breath.

"Thank you," I said. Then, before I could think better about what I was doing, I pulled her into my arms and pressed her lips to mine. Her fingers gripped my arms, holding me in place as she reciprocated. Finally, we broke apart, and I think my surprise was evident on my face.

"Be safe," I said.

"You too," she said, her voice tight. And she followed Mark back into the woods and toward the bunker.

I breathed easier, seeing her retreating back. That was one worry off my back. In silent agreement, Oliver and I shifted and raced into the fight.

I had never seen underlings before. They looked like grotesque cherubs, their faces mangled and their wings leathery, and their skin blacker than shadow rather than pale as cream. They soared overhead, dive-bombing us periodically as we raced through the streets, yanking at our fur and tails and ears as if trying to tear them off with their bare hands.

All around us, pack members fought against unfamiliar shifters. It looked like all-out war. I couldn't tell who was winning. Both sides had losses that littered the street. I kept running to the center of town, trying not to get distracted.

One underling swooped down. My wolf leaped, grabbing its wing in his teeth and tearing it to shreds before biting down on its throat even as we ran. I dropped the corpse without breaking stride.

We were nearing the center of town when I glanced down a side street and came to a screeching halt. A tall, pale man with ink-black hair was hurling shadows down the street, pushing shifters out of his way as he wreaked even more havoc.

I snarled. It was obvious who this was. Akron was laughing as he



threw a wolf high into the air with a tendril of darkness.

Oliver appeared beside me, and I snarled, gesturing with my muzzle. My meaning was clear: *go to Jameson. I'm handling this one myself.* Oliver whined briefly in protest, but when I growled again, he acquiesced and ran toward the center of town.

My wolf turned and charged toward the demon. A small, rational, human part of me tried to point out that this was tantamount to suicide. We didn't know this demon's Name; we didn't have a way to weaken him. But the wolf part of me, the part that was in control, didn't particularly care. This creature was a threat to Stella, and that was enough to make me charge into the fray with abandon, despite the danger it posed.

Then our eyes landed on something that was a saving grace: a thick rod of iron, one side sharpened to a deadly point. It had come from a fence that had been destroyed during the mayhem. Rand had told us that iron worked against demons. This would have to do for now.

Shifting back to human, I grabbed the iron rod, hefting it in one hand. The demon still hadn't noticed me. I could throw the iron rod, but that felt like too much of a risk. If I could sneak up behind him, I could stab him in the back. That was the best idea, most likely.

I crept forward, barely daring to breathe in case he heard me. But he was too busy casting shadows everywhere and damaging the buildings to notice. He thought he was completely alone—

A tentacle of shadow lashed out at me, throwing me into the side of the building, nearly making me drop the iron. I gasped, the wind knocked out of me.

Akron was staring at me with full black eyes. He was smiling in a way that would have made children cry as he looked me up and down. His eyes landed on the piece of iron, and that smile turned infinitesimally downward for the briefest of moments.

“You at least seem to know what might work against a demon,” he said almost conversationally as he walked toward me. The shadow that was still pressing me against the wall crushed my chest, making it hard to breathe. Another coil of darkness snaked out, wrenched the iron post from my hand, and tossed it. The clatter it made as it hit the ground was quiet and distant.

He came to stand in front of me, head tilted. “Maybe you can help me, then,” he mused. “Do you know what I’m doing here?”

When I didn’t answer, he laughed. If I’d thought his smile was bad, it was nothing compared to the sounds that came out of his mouth.

“You do,” he said. “Good. In that case, where is she?”

There was no real point in pretending I didn’t know who he was talking about. But I also knew the instant I told him anything, he would snap my neck unless I did something.

“Let me down, and I’ll tell you,” I said.

He considered me, then shrugged. The shadow pinning me to the wall vanished, and I collapsed onto the ground.

“Where is she?” he repeated as I got back to my feet.

“Not here,” I said. “Sorry. You lost.”

Akron snarled, the tendrils of darkness coiling around him, threatening to strike at any moment. “Tell me where she is before I burn this entire town to the ground,” he said.

“Somewhere you’ll never find her,” I said. “Leave now and take your goons with you, and we can be done with this whole thing.”

“Leave? I’m not leaving without my prize.”

The shadows snaked toward me along the ground. I kept an eye on them, tracking their movement. But even as I did, I met Akron’s gaze, and said coolly, “She’s not your prize. She never was. Get the fuck out of this town.”

Akron sneered, and as he did, the shadows lashed out, racing toward me. I shifted, dodging the coils of darkness as my wolf charged, fangs bared as he prepared to sink his teeth into this asshole’s throat.

As if I were moving at the speed of molasses, Akron stepped aside, and my wolf barreled past him. He kicked out, his foot slamming into me as we passed.

“Keep trying, wolf,” Akron mocked. “It’s not going to do you any good.”

I lunged for him again, but this time, a searing pain lanced down my

front leg as a shadow carved into it. I kept trying, attempting to get as close to him as possible, but the shadows kept blocking us, protecting him and lashing out at me. At some point, I and my wolf realized that we were going to lose the battle. The demon was too strong, and we didn't have a way of crippling him. We were beginning to tire, and we didn't have much time left.

However, there was at least one more chance to do something stupid that might at least hurt him, if not kill him.

We jumped forward, leaping high into the air, barely dodging the shadows as we lunged for Akron, our mouth open wide as it aimed directly at his throat.

The demon caught me by the throat in midair, considering me as if I was nothing more than an uninteresting bug. Then he threw me like a rag doll, and I slammed into the side of a building.

I collapsed onto the ground, snarling and rounding on Akron even as my body screamed at me in pain. I was done, and we both knew it. He looked down at me, flashing a sinister smile as he strolled lazily toward me.

“Are you the one Farrow told me about?” he asked, his tone almost mocking.

I snarled, fur bristling.

“The one my betrothed used to be enamored with? You are, aren't you?” He sounded delighted about it.

I shifted back to my human form, glaring at him. Blood poured down my arm, and blood from a cut on my forehead trickled into my eye.

“Leave her alone,” I growled.

“Leave her alone?” He laughed. “She's mine. Don't you understand?”

Shadows wrapped around my throat, constricting it slowly, choking me and crushing my throat. I clawed desperately, trying to tear them away from my neck, but there was nothing to grab hold of. I could feel my fingers raking across my neck as if nothing was there, even as the shadows continued slowly killing me. My vision started going blurry as Akron looked down at me, smiling triumphantly.

There were loud cheering noises and panicked screams. Akron stiffened, standing straight and looking around, his entire body tense as he

tried to find the source of the chaos. The cords of darkness around my neck vanished, and I finally took a deep, relieved lungful of fresh air.

Underlings raced overhead away from the town, and several unfamiliar shifters raced past us. Akron snarled, his lips curling in disgust and anger.

“Looks like your crew’s already running,” I said, getting to my feet though I kept clutching my throat. “My guess is that you have about a minute to leave before the rest of the Silver Wolves get here. And I don’t think even a demon can stand up against over half a dozen angry shifters all holding iron. But if you want to test your luck, you can go ahead and kill me and find out. Because you don’t have time to kill me and get away.”

As if on cue, Jameson’s howl echoed through the air, and several responding howls and snarls followed, getting progressively closer. Akron’s eyes flashed with alarm and hatred as he realized I was right.

“You’re going to pay for this,” Akron snarled, backing up and not taking his eyes off me. “And mark my words, we’ll be back. And if you try to hide her from me again, I will burn this entire place to the ground, leaving no one alive.”

With a flick of his wrists, the shadows enveloped him, swirling as angrily as a tempest. Then they vanished, and Akron along with them, leaving me standing in the middle of the street surrounded by burning buildings.

## Chapter 15 - Stella

I paced back and forth in the safehouse, waiting for the door to open. I wasn't sure who would be the one opening it: one of the Silver Wolves, or Akron. The thought that it might be the demon or one of his underlings instead of Sam or one of the shifters was enough to drive me insane.

What if Sam was hurt? What if he'd died? It would all be my fault, and I wasn't sure I could handle that.

*This is what you get for staying*, a horrible voice whispered in my head. There was an element of truth to it that I didn't want to admit. If I'd just left instead of accepting their help, they wouldn't be in this mess.

Why had I stayed, exactly? That was a stupid question—I knew exactly why I'd stayed. Because of Sam. And now he was in danger because of my stupid decision.

I couldn't hear anything from here. The safehouse was small, with a handful of rations and a bed. It was clearly not meant for long-term stays. The silence was the absolute worst part of the whole thing. I just wanted to know what was happening. I was completely in the dark.

I also wanted to scream at Sam for forcing me to stay here. I didn't think I could take not knowing for much longer. I wanted to be out there helping, even if I knew he was right in some respects. If I'd gone out there and tried to fight, the odds that Akron and his goons would have just ambushed me and taken me was better than I wanted to admit. Staying here was the right move, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

My wolf was just as anxious, flexing her claws and snarling as she yearned to be free. She didn't like the thought of being away from Sam or his wolf, either. She wanted to be side by side with him, fighting the threat.

I wanted to tell myself to stop caring about what might happen to Sam. After all, I didn't want to get too attached. But that was impossible for me to do now that I knew he was in real danger. I didn't want him to get hurt or die on my account, and not just because I would feel responsible, but because I didn't like the thought of him getting injured, period. I wanted him safe and whole. I wanted him here with me.

I kept pacing, wishing that the damn safehouse came with a clock. It

felt like an eternity had gone by, but for all I knew, it had only been five minutes. I felt like I was losing my mind. I hated this, and I was furious with Sam for putting me here.

Finally, I heard noise from outside the bunker, muffled voices that I couldn't identify. My head spun to the door, ears pricked as I tried to make out more. Was it Sam? Another of the Silver Wolves? Had the underlings found me?

Or, worst of all, was it Akron himself?

There was nowhere for me to hide or flee. All I could do was wait to see as my heart pounded in my throat.

The door opened, and a familiar figure stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"Oh, thank God!" I cried out before running straight into Sam's open arms, nearly knocking him over. I nuzzled against him, needing to smell him to reassure myself that he was really there.

It was him. He was okay.

"If that's the reaction I get every time I come back from a fight, I think I might need to go into battle more often," he joked.

"Don't you dare," I growled, taking a step back and glaring at him. "I nearly had a heart attack waiting to see if you would be all—" I cut myself off as I finally looked at Sam properly and took in his appearance.

He was covered in bruises and cuts. A stitched-up gash that would definitely turn into a scar ran up his arm, bisecting the swirling tattoo there. He was filthy, with dirt in his hair. And the exhaustion on his face was so blatant that I was shocked he was still on his feet.

"Oh my god," I whispered.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just a few scrapes. Klyte already patched me up."

"Just a few scrapes? Look at you." I motioned up and down in emphasis.

He tilted his head, a small smirk playing on his face. "Haven't had a chance to find a mirror. I was too busy trying to get here."

"Don't fucking joke about this," I moaned, guilt mixing with anger

and concern. Tears blurred my vision as I realized just how close he'd been to dying. And it had been my fault.

Something in my tone or demeanor must have registered because the smirk playing on Sam's lips faded away, replaced with somber appraisal. "Can you give us a few?" he asked, and for a moment, I thought he was talking to me. But then I realized that Mark was standing a few feet away. He nodded to Sam and stepped away.

Sam ushered me back into the safehouse and closed the door behind us. He crouched so that we were at eye level. "Are you all right?" he asked.

The question was so stupid, I actually laughed. "Of course I'm not all right," I said. "A hoard of demons and my old pack just attacked a village because of me. I put you and a bunch of others in danger because I'm selfish and decided to stay instead of leaving the moment I found out Farrow knew where I was."

Comprehension dawned on Sam's face, his features crumpling with concern. "This isn't your fault," he said gently.

I gave a wild laugh, and the tears that had been threatening to come since I'd first found out about the attack spilled over. "Of course it's my fault," I said. "All of this is my fault."

"Stella, it's okay." He pulled me against his chest, holding me there. My breaths were shallow, but once his scent wrapped around me, I calmed down a little. "You didn't do any of this. And you have nothing to worry about."

"They'll come back," I said, my voice choking. "They'll come back until they take me. And it's all my fault this is happening."

"If they come back, they'll have me to deal with," he growled.

I gave a strangled, bitter laugh. "You abandoned me last time," I said. "How is this any different? How am I supposed to trust you?"

I don't know what compelled me to say it. Maybe it was the heightened emotions, or maybe it was because I couldn't understand why Sam was risking his life for me after he'd just left the first time around. Regardless, the words spilled out of me as if a dam had ruptured, and there was no taking them back now.

Sam's body went rigid at the words, then went slack. He sighed as he

stepped away from me, hurt and guilt spreading across his features.

“Yeah,” he said. “I left last time. And I shouldn’t have. It’s a mistake I’ve regretted every day since.”

“Why, then? If it was such a big regret, why did you leave?”

It was the question I had been dying to ask since I saw him again but hadn’t yet dared to voice. I had been tempted to so many times, but I was afraid of what he would say. But it was out in the open now. There was no way for me to take it back.

His brown eyes were wide and sad, and he took a deep breath. “Farrow.”

I frowned. “Farrow?”

Sam nodded. His jaw was tight, but he kept his eyes on me. “The night before we were going to leave, he came to the camp. He said to leave town and leave you alone. He said if I stayed with you, or if you ran off with me, he would take it out on your entire family. I couldn’t protect them, not everyone at least. Even though I wanted to. And I realized the only way to make sure you were safe was to leave you.”

I stared, mouth open as my stomach twisted itself into knots. I suddenly remembered what Farrow had said to Sam.

*Just remember our last conversation.*

Farrow had warned Sam away from me. He had threatened my entire family. Even back then, he was controlling my life, despite that he’d always hated me.

“I should have told him to fuck off and killed him then and there,” Sam continued, rage tightening his voice. “I should have gone straight to your family and told them what happened. But I was trying to protect you, and I knew your family wouldn’t believe me. So I did the only thing I thought I could do: I left. And it’s haunted me my entire life.” He looked at me, his face full of remorse. “I am so, so sorry, Stella. I know nothing I can say or do can fix it. And if I’d known what Farrow would do to you, how he would treat you and then how he would try to sell you off to a demon, I never would have left the way I did.”

My body was trembling, and my legs felt weak. It was like someone had stuffed cotton into my brain. Farrow had bullied Sam into leaving. Sam



had never wanted to do it. He'd only done it to save my family.

I'd spent years being angry at Sam, resenting him and blaming him for leaving me. But it hadn't been his fault. I was at a loss for words as I tried to process what was happening. None of it seemed real.

"Stella?" Sam asked a little nervously.

"It's okay," I finally managed to say. I reached up and cupped his face, needing to touch him. "You did what you thought was best."

"I will never let you down like that again," he promised. "I didn't fight for you then, but I'm sure as hell going to fight for you now."

Then, as if he couldn't contain it anymore, he kissed me. His fingers tangled in my hair, gripping tight as if afraid to let go.

The suddenness and fierceness of the gesture was enough to make me melt. I pulled him closer to me, our bodies pressing against one another. I needed to touch every inch of him, to assure myself he was real. And as my hands began to roam his body, I felt that familiar urge begin to build inside me, an urge and need that only Sam had ever been able to spark in me.

His fingers traced the contours of my body, sending teasing sparks shuddering through me and making me tremble in his arms. I hadn't realized I could need someone the way I needed him right then. My wolf howled and snarled with the same insatiable lust, her primal urge feeding my own, making it intense to the point of being nearly unbearable.

My entire body heated to nearly unbearable levels in those first few seconds, and I couldn't wait for what was going to come.

Sam's hand slipped up my shirt, sending shivers through me as it trailed confidently up my stomach and to my breast. He squeezed, and I bucked at the sensation. His mouth moved from my lips and down my neck, giving gentle caresses as he held me.

"I'm never letting you go again," he murmured between kisses.

My breathing grew shallower with every brush of his lips. The fire between my legs was beginning to smolder. The adrenaline of earlier today, combined with the lust racing through me, was sending me into a frenzy. I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling at it, trying to get it off. I needed my body against his.

A ripping sound echoed through the air. I opened my eyes to see I'd torn his shirt.

"I never liked that shirt, anyway," he said, pulling it off the rest of the way, giving me a full view of his muscles.

"Well," I said, a little breathless as I drank in every inch of him, "I think it's only fair if you get to do the same."

He raised his eyebrows playfully, but when I didn't back down, he grabbed the fabric of my shirt and yanked, tearing open the front and exposing my bra. He growled in approval as I shrugged out of the shirt and took off my bra. My nipples were hard with arousal.

The instant the bra fell to the floor, Sam pushed me against the wall of the safehouse, pinning me there as his hands explored every inch of my torso. His lips started on my mouth, then slowly descended to my chin, my neck, my collarbone, sending chills of need running through me.

His mouth went to my nipple, sucking as his tongue flicked against the sensitive skin. I moaned softly at the touch, relishing the sensation. Then, my eyes flew open as his free hand went to my jeans, unfastening them with surprising ease. I was already wet, and I knew he could tell the instant he slipped my pants down. With his mouth still on my breast, I gasped in delight as his fingers plunged inside me, gliding in and out with expert precision. Every thrust sent new spasms through me, mounting in intensity.

"Don't stop," I gasped out, feeling myself nearing the breaking point.

Sam didn't, keeping that rapid but even pace that was driving me over the edge. My breaths grew more ragged with every pump, my fingers curling into fists as I gripped his shoulders.

Then he bit down gently on my nipple, and I shattered, crying out as the orgasm washed over me, my hips bucking as it did. He kept thrusting his fingers inside me, letting them prolong the ecstasy as I trembled at his touch.

Finally, when the pleasure had ebbed, my body sagged backward. Sam slid his hand from between my legs. His fingers were wet with my juices, and he licked them clean as he stared at my body hungrily, his cock fully erect beneath his pants.

He wanted more, and so did I. I still wasn't satisfied. Already, that need was growing inside me, begging for more, for that hunger to be fully

sated. I needed him. Needed every inch of his body.

Before he could protest, I pushed him onto the bed, taking off his pants with almost frantic energy. His cock sprung up, fully erect. I took it in my hand, stroking gently and savoring the lust on Sam's face.

"Fuck," he moaned. But his eyes stayed locked on me, filled with an insatiable hunger that I recognized instantly because I was feeling the same way.

Part of me wanted to draw it out, tease him just a bit. But my wolf had other plans. She needed the shifter, and I also couldn't wait. I didn't *want* to wait.

Straddling Sam's body, I impaled myself on his cock, gliding around him as he filled me. I moaned at the delectable sensation, relishing his own groans of longing and pleasure.

Strong hands went to my hips, gripping them tightly as I began to ride him, moving up and down his cock. It felt amazing, having him inside me, filling me in a way that nothing else could. Instinctively, I moved faster, my breaths growing more ragged. I could feel a second orgasm on the horizon.

Tugging on my hair, he pulled me down to him, pressing his lips against mine and holding me there by the back of my head as he continued thrusting deep inside me, every pump of his cock making that insatiable need and wave of hunger grow bigger and bigger.

Then, in between two thrusts, I broke apart again. I cried out into his mouth as my muscles clenched around his cock, my hips grinding against his body even as he refused to release my head. Just as my own climax was ebbing away, I felt him finish inside me, filling me with his cum.

Our lips finally broke apart, and I looked down at him. He was still battered from the fight, but he looked more alive now than I had ever seen him before.

"You are amazing," he murmured, still panting.

I didn't say anything. All I could bring myself to do was bend down and kiss him again. It was the only way I knew how to communicate everything I was feeling in that moment.

We stayed like that for a long moment, and I let myself savor what had just happened without guilt or worry. At that moment, nothing else

mattered beyond the fact that we were here, together.

But later, as the high of the incredible sex came down, reality smacked me in the face. No matter what Sam had said, this was still all my fault. I couldn't stay here, even if I wanted to. What had happened today would happen again.

I was a liability, and I knew it.

I had to leave. The sooner the better.

Even if it broke me.

## Chapter 16 - Sam

There was a knock on the door. I pushed myself away from the table and walked over, still gripping my cup of coffee.

The fight the day before had taken more out of me than I wanted to admit, and even if I healed faster than humans, it still took time and energy for me to heal. And Stella and I having sex about an hour after the fight was over probably hadn't helped, and definitely hadn't been the smartest move. But that was a sacrifice I was more than happy to make.

Rand and Jameson were standing in the doorway. Rand had a particularly smug grin on his face.

"How're you feeling?" Jameson asked by way of greeting.

"Considering I had my ass handed to me by a demon less than twenty-four hours ago, not terrible," I said, stepping back to let them in. I hadn't told Stella how close I had been to dying or how dangerous the battle had actually been. She already felt bad enough about the situation. "But I'm guessing you didn't come here just to check on my well-being."

"Nope," Rand said, still looking incredibly pleased with himself.

"Look, there's clearly something you're dying to tell me about," I said, rolling my eyes. "So why don't you just get it out of your system already?" I didn't have enough coffee in my system to deal with this.

"You're gonna love it," Rand said eagerly. "My hunter buddies got back to me this morning with some rather interesting information."

That made me pay more attention. I straightened, staring intently at Rand as I waited for him to continue.

"Aren't you going to ask me about it?" he asked.

"Spit it out before I lose my temper," I growled.

Rand chuckled, eyes sparkling. "All right, all right. They found Akron's Name."

My mouth dropped open as the words slammed into me. Akron's true Name. Rand's friends had found it. In just a handful of seconds, everything about our situation had morphed into something akin to hope.

Winning last night had been a near thing. Even armed with iron and surrounded by a group of shifters with a spec-ops background, I'd be dead if Jameson and the others hadn't driven off Farrow's pack and the underlings when they had. And almost certainly a large portion of the rest of us would have died as well.

The shock on my face must have been obvious because Rand chuckled. "Yeah. That was pretty much my reaction, too."

"Wish we'd had it yesterday," Jameson said. "Would have made the fight a lot easier."

"That's an understatement," Rand said.

"The fact that they got it at all is insane," I said. "And they're certain it's real?"

"They got the name out of a fae creature who owed them," Rand said. "Fae can't lie, so yeah, this is about as real as it can get."

"What is it?" I asked, looking between my friends.

"Akronachis Danien," Rand said.

"Mouthful, right?" Jameson said, grinning. "No wonder Names are so well-hidden if they all sound like that."

This was incredible. We knew Akron's Name. We actually had a chance of beating him. And if we were able to beat him, that meant Stella would finally be safe. She wouldn't have to live in fear or guilt or have to look over her shoulder for the rest of her life. She wanted to be her own person. She might actually get the chance to do so.

"Where is Stella, anyway?" Jameson asked. "I would think she'd want to hear the good news."

"That's another massive understatement," I said, my head spinning with relief. "She's asleep. She had her own kind of rough day yesterday." Still, with this news, I felt like I should wake her up.

I walked up the stairs, picturing how happy she was going to be when she heard. Everything she'd dreamed about would be possible once we killed the demon.

I went into my bedroom, where she'd spent the night. But she wasn't resting peacefully like when I'd left her.

In fact, she wasn't there at all.

There was no sound of the shower or smell of shampoo. She wasn't in the bathroom. But what really made my skin prickle with unease was the fact that her scent was stale, as if she hadn't been here for a couple of hours. Since just after I had woken up.

On her pillow was a folded piece of paper. I walked slowly to it, reaching for it tentatively as if it were a bomb or a venomous snake that needed to be handled delicately.

The paper didn't bite or explode, but it might as well have.

I unfolded it and read the short message inside, one that made my wolf howl in hurt and anger and made my own mind swim with a variety of emotions as I tried to process what I was reading.

*I'm not going to be responsible for more damage. I'm leaving. Please don't follow. – Stella*

There was a two word post-script below her name.

*I'm sorry.*

It took me a long time to accept that what I was reading was reality, even if all my senses told me it was. Stella wasn't here and hadn't been for some time. She'd snuck out while I was downstairs, probably via the balcony. But I didn't care how she'd done it. The point was that she had left.

She was deliberately putting herself in danger, knowing that I wouldn't have let her go off alone while Akron was still out there. But she was gone now. And she didn't want me following.

None of it made sense, and I didn't want to process what I was seeing. There was no way that this was reality. She couldn't be gone. She couldn't have left the way she did.

Finally, I snapped out of it. The letter fluttered to the floor as I raced out of the bedroom and back down the stairs to where Jameson and Rand were lounging. One look at my face, and they both straightened, moving from relaxed to completely alert.

"Did she come down?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. Not waiting for them to respond, I ran to the back door, shedding my clothes as I did. The back of the house opened out into the woods and the mountains

beyond. If she was really leaving, then she would have gone that way.

Racing outside, I shifted, sniffing desperately for any sign of her. But her scent was muddled and impossible to track properly. She'd hidden her trail from us—from me—the same way she had masked it from her old pack.

But I wasn't going to give up that easily. I couldn't. She couldn't have gotten far. *Not unless she left right after you woke up*, a nagging, unpleasant voice in my head pointed out. I shoved the thought away. Accepting that fact would mean that I'd accepted she was gone, and I couldn't do that yet.

I ran through the woods, trying to track the faint traces of raspberries and sugar that made up Stella's scent. My wolf took over, running faster through the woods as he tried to find her. I could sense his desperation and anger growing more and more as she continued to elude him.

Finally, reality sank in, and I was forced to accept the truth that I didn't want to admit. Stella was gone for good. She wasn't coming back, and she'd made it impossible to track her.

I'd lost her again.



## Chapter 17 - Stella

Our paws dug into the dirt below us with every leap that we took. My wolf and I were running faster than we ever had in our entire lives. There was something freeing about that, something liberating about the wind in our fur and the crisp air hitting our eyes as we sped through the woods, even as guilt still gnawed at me. Both for the attack on Brixton, and for leaving the way I did.

But there had been no other option. It was either run, or let Akron and the shifters attack the town again. I wasn't going to let that happen again, not on my account.

So I had run.

I wished I hadn't had to run off this way, but I knew it was the only option. Sam would have tried to stop me if I'd told him my plan. Or worse, he might have convinced me to stay.

Still, that stupid, infuriating guilt kept gnawing at me, digging its claws deeper into me with every stride.

But no. I was going to do this on my own. I was taking my life into my own hands. No one was going to fix this for me, and I didn't need anyone to do so, either. This was the only way.

But the further I ran, the more uneasy I grew. I could feel my wolf growing antsy as well as she sniffed the air. It wasn't just that she didn't like being away from Sam, though she had made it perfectly clear that she would rather have stayed with him. It was something else. Our fur began to rise as the prickling sensation of danger began to sweep over both of us.

Something was wrong. Only, neither of us could tell what it was.

I should have known then, but my head was swimming with too many thoughts, and I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late.

I was darting between two trees when a large wolf stepped into my path so suddenly that I nearly ran into him. I skidded to a halt just in time and snarled, fur bristling along my back. The other wolf bared his fangs in a sinister grin that made the air around me grow cold, and I knew just how much danger I was really in.

In my shock, it took a minute to recognize the great gray wolf standing in front of me. I'd seen him in wolf form often enough that I should have recognized my former alpha right away.

Farrow leered at me, snarling as he stalked toward me. I backed up, looking around wildly for the best escape. But more and more wolves emerged until I was encircled by them. The only way out was to fight.

I would lose. I knew I would lose. But I wasn't going to let them take me without a fight. Letting out a low, guttural growl, my wolf crouched, pinpointing which shifter was the weakest, which one would be most likely to break rank and give us an opening to escape.

A smaller brown wolf darted forward, nipping at my front leg, and my wolf and I used that move to our advantage. My wolf pounced, jumping on the brown wolf, our front paws landing on their back and slamming them to the ground. We bit into the scruff of the neck, but only momentarily before a red-furred wolf barreled into us, knocking us off our target and throwing us across the clearing. We scrambled to our feet, spinning to face the wolf that had just attacked us. They were standing in the middle of the clearing, watching us and snarling. But they weren't moving.

Why weren't they attacking? None of them were.

And then I realized too late that it had been a trap.

A collar slammed around my neck, followed by the sickening click of a padlock. Immediately, I shifted back to human, my wolf trapped deep inside me where I could only barely sense her. That was how these collars worked—they stifled your connection to your wolf, preventing you from shifting. I would be stuck in human form until I managed to take it off.

I grabbed at the collar, yanking desperately even though I knew it wasn't going to come off. My head darted around desperately, looking everywhere, trying to figure out who had put the collar on.

I looked upward and found my answer. Several underlings hovered in the air, waving mockingly down at me and giving grins that showed razor-sharp teeth. The wolves had meant to distract me all along.

Farrow's wolf let out a growl that might have been a laugh, and a moment later, the gray wolf was gone, replaced with my old alpha.

"That's better," he said, gloating as he stood above me. He gave me a

feral, triumphant grin. “Now, come on. There’s someone who wants to see you.”

I stayed where I was, glowering up at Farrow and unmoving. His smirk faltered a little, and he scowled down at me.

“Don’t make me drag you,” he snarled. “You know you don’t have a chance of getting away. You can’t outrun us, and the underlings will gladly bring you back kicking and screaming to their master. Come quietly, and this will be a lot less unpleasant for you.”

Knowing there wasn’t anything I could do, I slowly, reluctantly got to my feet.

Farrow smirked. “Good,” he said. “Glad we understand one another.”

Then a wolf flanked me on either side, and I was ushered through the trees. At one point, I looked behind me, hopeful that maybe there was a way I could get away. But two more wolves walked behind me, and one of them snarled as I glanced back.

No, there was no getting out of this one. I was stuck. How could I have been so stupid? I had no idea if my old pack had somehow managed to track me, or if it had simply been bad luck that they’d come across me.

It didn’t matter. It was all over.

Panic washed over me. They were going to take me back. They were bringing me to Akron. No one knew where I was. I’d left Sam that stupid note, but the whole point of that had been “don’t follow me.” I hadn’t exactly written what direction I was going in or how he could trace me.

I was on my own. Which, ironically, was what I’d wanted.

Several of the underlings flew overhead, darting above the tree line, presumably to report my capture back to Akron. The rest of the procession moved along in silence. Farrow had been right when he’d said there was no use in trying to get away. Not when I couldn’t shift. I could barely sense my wolf at all. It was like she’d been gagged. The thought alone was enough to make me seethe with anger, but there was nothing I could do with that rage.

My thoughts went to Sam. I hoped he was all right. I hoped he wasn’t going to do something stupid like try to come after me. I didn’t want anyone hurt because of me. Especially him.

That was one positive. If Akron got me back, then he wouldn't care about the town anymore. Brixton would be safe. Sam and the rest of the Silver Wolves would be safe. I had no idea what Akron was going to do to me after everything I'd done, but at least my being gone from Brixton would do some good.

It wasn't a great consolation, but it was something. At least Sam would be safe. Just the thought of him sent an ache through me, both of longing and guilt. I never should have left. Not because I'd wanted him to protect me, but because I wanted to be with him more than I had realized when I'd run away.

But it was too late now.

We walked through a small town that was strangely deserted. No, not deserted—I could see various semi-familiar-looking shifters lounging about, and underlings seemed to hang around everywhere. And all the buildings looked well cared for, though few seemed to have people in them.

And then I realized why. Akron had taken over the town. He was using it as his home base. He'd killed or kicked out an entire town for his needs. The thought was enough to make my stomach churn.

I wasn't sure where they were going to take me, but I wasn't expecting to be led to a different giant house. I guess the demon had particular tastes when it came to where he lived. His new mansion was near the outskirts of town. Various shifters and underlings in the yard watched the procession as we moved toward the front of the house. The underlings leered at me, and the shifters sneered. I wasn't going to get any help from them.

We reached the porch, and the large oak door creaked open.

I wasn't going to bother pleading. I knew it would fall on deaf ears. But the moment the door opened on its own, I almost did, anyway. My heart began pounding in double time. Before I could get a grip on myself, Farrow grabbed my arm and dragged me inside.

The door closed after the two of us had stepped inside. Farrow dug his nails into my flesh as he dragged me down the hall.

“Do you realize how much shit you put me and the pack through, bitch?” Farrow snarled. I could feel the beginnings of claws pressing into my flesh, but not drawing blood. “I'll be glad when I don't have to deal with you

anymore. I just hope he has the common sense to teach you a lesson.”

“Do you actually think he’s going to let the town go when you hand me over?” I asked. “He’s got his tendrils wrapped tight around the pack now. Do you really think he’s just going to let go of them?”

Something like alarm or unease flashed in Farrow’s eyes, then they hardened to steel. “And whose fault is that? Me, or the girl who put herself before the good of the pack? If you’d just done what you were told, none of this would have happened.”

A month ago, I would have withered under a comment like that. But now, it barely registered. “He would have done it, anyway,” I retorted.

Farrow growled and rounded on me. He slammed me against the wall, one hand going to my neck above the collar and the other tightening on my bicep. Something warm slid down my arm as the claws dug in.

“You’re as insolent as your mother, you know that?” he growled.

Then it clicked.

“You wanted to mate Mom, didn’t you?” I asked. The look on his face was all the confirmation. I started laughing “That’s it, isn’t it? She picked someone else and you decided to take it out on me once they died. Was Dad an outsider? Is that why you banned it when you became alpha? Too late for you, though.” I laughed harder, even as his fingers began tightening on my throat. It wasn’t until he slammed my head back against the wall that I stopped.

“You listen here, you little bitch,” Farrow snarled. His face was red with fury, and his eyes had turned wolfish in anger. I watched his teeth lengthen to fangs. “I could crush your windpipe right now and tell him you tried to escape. And if you don’t shut up, I’ll do it.”

“You wouldn’t,” I said, eerily calm. Farrow’s threats seemed to wash off me at this point. “You’re too frightened.”

“Try me.”

“I believe I told you to bring her back unharmed,” an icy voice drawled from down the hall.

Farrow immediately released me and backed away several feet as if I were on fire, eyes on the ground as he refused to look at the speaker. I turned

to look at the newcomer, already knowing who I would find and dreading it.

Akron was standing directly in the middle of the hall. Last time I'd seen him, he'd been wearing an arrogant smirk. This time, however, everything about his posture told me he was furious. And his coal-black eyes were trained on Farrow.

"Sorry," Farrow said hastily, not making eye contact with the demon. "She was trying to get away."

"It certainly didn't look like it." Akron stalked forward until he was standing directly in front of Farrow.

"I'm sorry," Farrow repeated.

"You should be," Akron said. The demon turned to me and gave a proprietary smile as he stepped toward me. "I want my bride to look immaculate in her dress."

He ran the backs of his fingers down my cheek. I forced myself to meet his eyes and not shudder at his touch.

"Leave us," Akron said to Farrow, though he didn't bother looking at him.

I don't think I ever saw Farrow bolt so quickly.

We were alone in the giant hallway. Silence pressed down on me as Akron regarded me with interest, the faintest hint of a triumphant smile on his face. I waited, my breath a little more shallow than normal as I waited for him to break the silence.

"You, my dear, have been quite the willful shifter, haven't you?" he said, his voice a purr. He put one hand on either side of me and leaned in until we were inches apart. If I moved an inch, I would brush up against some part of him. "I guess Farrow was wrong about you when he said you were obedient. I don't mind. I've had fun chasing you down."

"Glad I provided you with some entertainment," I said.

"You've definitely made things interesting." He looked down at my still-naked body, and I saw unmistakable hunger and lust on his face. One of his hands moved off the wall and ran down my side, his fingers feeling ice-cold against my skin as they trailed down my waist before gripping my hip, holding me in place. His thumb ran along the skin there, making my insides

crawl. “I have to wonder, though, did you actually think it would do anything? Did you really think I would let my prize just run off and not go after it? And here I thought you were smarter than that.”

“You don’t know a thing about me,” I said.

“I know you’re brave and stupid enough to try running away from me. I know you think you should get your own way, and that you want to be independent.” The smile vanished, his expression darkening as the hand on my hip squeezed tighter. “But that’s over now. You’re mine, and you’ll do as I say when I say it.”

“Or else what? You’ll kill me?”

He laughed, and his laughter was somehow worse than the scowl. “Why would I kill my property? That doesn’t do me any good. And it would certainly defeat the purpose of marrying you. But I can do things that are much, much worse than killing you. Trust me.”

I believed him, but I was done going along with what people told me to do. I wasn’t going to lie down and roll over for him because he threatened me. Not anymore.

“You’re not going to break me,” I said. “You can do whatever you want, but I’m not going to be your obedient little plaything. You can go and fuck yourself for all I care.”

The demon’s lips curled into a sneer, and he leaned forward. Icy breath brushed against my face. His eyes were nothing more than chips of the blackest obsidian as he moved in.

“Are you sure about that?” he hissed.

I was sure he could hear my heart thundering in my chest, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear. He was nothing more than a bully. I wasn’t going to bow down to someone like him anymore.

“Yes,” I said.

The snarl on Akron’s face vanished, replaced with that disturbing smirk. “We’ll see how you feel about that in a few weeks,” he said. “My methods are very...effective.”

Without another word, he grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me

deeper into the house. I struggled and tried to pull away, but I already knew it was pointless. There was no getting out of this.

All of my attempts to get away were completely ineffectual. I might as well have been a puppy trying to seem fierce, for all the good it did. And it wasn't long before Akron flung open a door to reveal a small closet without any windows. He forced me inside and down to the floor, then produced a set of handcuffs seemingly from nowhere. He handcuffed me to a pipe at the back of the closet and stood over me.

“Modern houses never have proper dungeons anymore. But this will have to do.”

“Fuck off.”

“Make no mistake,” he said. “You are mine. And I'm going to enjoy destroying every inch of that town that was stupid enough to shelter you.”

I had been rattling the handcuffs, testing them and seeing how much give they had. But at those words, I froze, my head shooting upward. He must have seen the alarm in my eyes because his smile grew wider.

“Did you think I would let them get away with that sort of insolence?” he asked, then started to laugh. “They killed some of my demons, and they had the audacity to hide my bride from me. They clearly have a death wish, and I'm more than happy to grant them that wish.”

“Please,” I said, my voice breaking. “Please don't. I'm here already. You can just leave them alone. There's no reason to—”

“Oh, I have plenty of reasons.” Akron laughed. “And believe me when I say there won't be a single splinter left of that town by the time I'm through with it.” He tilted his head and flashed me that evil grin again. “Maybe I'll take you there afterward for our honeymoon.”

I had been angry before, but now I was terrified. An entire town was going to be destroyed because they'd been kind enough to protect me. The first pack that had ever accepted me, the first place that had felt even a little bit like home, and the place where Sam lived...Akron was going to destroy it.

All because of me.

Guilt and horror filled every bone in my body. I tried to think of something—*anything*—that might convince him to spare Brixton. I couldn't let him do this. I couldn't.



“Akron—”

“I know you’re very excited about the wedding, dear,” he said, cutting me off. “But I’m afraid I’ll have to deal with those shifters first. I don’t want them ruining our special day.”

“Please just leave them alone,” I begged. I could feel the tears forming, threatening to spill down my cheeks at any moment.

But I might as well not have said anything, for all the good it did. “In the meantime, I think it’s best if you stay here. I want to make sure you’re safe.” He began to close the door.

“I’ll do anything,” I plead, a hysterical edge in my voice. “I’ll marry you. I’ll be an obedient wife. I won’t try to run or do anything that will make you angry. I’ll do everything you say. Just please don’t kill them.”

He studied me, hand still on the door. “Everything?” he repeated.

I nodded. “Everything.”

He sighed and crouched next to me. His eyes were fully black as he reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “My dear,” he said, an almost pitying tone in his voice. “You can’t promise me something that was already going to happen.”

Then he stood and walked out, closing the door behind him and leaving me in total darkness.

## Chapter 18 - Sam

“So she just ran off?” Alek asked as I paced back and forth in the mansion’s living room.

“Yep,” I growled. “And we’re wasting time just standing here talking about it instead of going after her.”

“You’re going to wear a path in that carpet if you keep that up, Sam,” Klyte said.

I snarled, and he held up a conciliatory hand. “Just saying,” he said. “And, don’t get me wrong, but I saw the note. It doesn’t sound like she wants any of us going after her.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped. It was something I’d been agonizing over since I saw that note. I wanted to respect her wishes. If she wanted to leave, then I didn’t want to stop her. But at the same time, Akron and Farrow were still out there, and I didn’t want her out there alone.

So, respect her wishes or make sure she was safe? Right now, I couldn’t do both, and the thought was galling. I knew what she had asked me to do. But she’d deliberately put herself in danger, and I couldn’t just sit by while she did that, either.

My wolf was just as furious and concerned as I was. He wanted to be out there fighting right now, not cooped up here and indecisive.

I growled, running my fingers through my hair. I couldn’t just sit by. Not this time. She might be furious with me, but I couldn’t let her go into danger like this. She might have covered her scent, but I was certain I would be able to find her. I wasn’t sure how, but some part of me knew that if I wanted to, if I searched hard enough, I would find her.

I’d no sooner come to this decision when Luke walked into the living room. The grim expression on his face stopped me in my tracks.

“What happened?” I asked.

“We’ve got bad news,” Luke said. He was holding a crumpled piece of paper in his hand. It looked as though he’d gripped it too hard after reading it. There was legitimate fury in his eyes, and that alone made my skin grow cold with unease as my wolf snarled and paced restlessly inside.

“What is it?” Malcolm asked. I could see our old leader in him, sensing danger and calculating the best ways of solving whatever it might be.

Luke looked at me steadily, and as he spoke, I noticed he was talking to me and not the group at large. The fact made my stomach churn as I realized the implication.

“An underling came to town,” he said, holding up the piece of paper. “It was under a white flag to deliver the message. I was on patrol, so the townspeople grabbed me. He put the piece of paper in my hand and then booked it the hell out of there before I had the chance to read it. Which, considering what’s on it, I don’t blame him.”

“What’s on it?” I asked. It felt like a blanket of silence had descended on the rest of the world as I waited to hear what Luke was going to say.

“It says they have Stella,” he said. “That she’s marrying Akron in two days, and if we interfere in any way or try to stop it, he’ll kill her and everyone in our pack.”

If I had thought the silence before was loud, this was thunderous. All I could hear was a furious buzzing in my ears as I processed what Luke had just said.

They had Stella, and they were threatening her life if we tried to get her back.

I sat down on the couch, letting the knowledge wash over me as I tried to come to grips with what I’d just heard. All around me, I could hear conversations starting up, but they didn’t seem to matter at the moment. I was trapped in my own head.

“It could be a bluff,” Rand said. “Demons aren’t exactly known for being truthful. What if this is just a ploy to get us to back off?”

“And saying they have Stella?” Evelyn asked. “They would’ve had to know she’d left for something like that to work out. And odds are, the only way they would know she’d left would be if they’d found her and kidnapped her. No, they definitely have her.”

“But we can’t take them at their word, either,” Rand argued. “They might say they’re going to back off, but have no intention of doing it. If they’re trying to make us back down or lower our defenses to swoop in, we’re leaving ourselves as sitting ducks in order to *maybe* protect this one

woman. We can't trust them."

"So you're saying arm up?" Jameson asked. "Even if that means risking war if they're being honest?"

"I'm saying I would rather us be prepared."

"It doesn't matter," I said. Everyone fell silent as heads spun to look at me. "It doesn't matter if they're bluffing or not, because I'm going after her."

No one said anything at first. Heads turned from me to Jameson, who was still staring at me speculatively. I met his gaze, unwilling to back down.

"Sam," Jameson began, "I know you want to help her, but—"

"But nothing." I stood, still keeping my eyes on my alpha. "I'm not letting her marry a fucking demon."

"You're willing to risk the entire pack?" Jameson asked. There wasn't any aggression or threat in the words; it was a genuine question. He wanted to know how serious I was. "You know what Akron's like, and you're willing to let him carry out what I see as a very real threat that he will almost certainly act on?"

"He can't act on it if I kill him," I said.

"Sam," Jameson said. The infuriatingly calm tone grated on my ears. "This is a huge risk. There's a chance Stella's going to get caught in the crossfire—"

"And the other option is a demon forcing her to marry him," I spat. "I'm not letting her sit around for that to happen, either."

"You're also risking your pack," Jameson pointed out, not unkindly.

"And you wouldn't do the same thing for Georgia?" I asked, eyebrows raised.

"I would in a heartbeat," Jameson said. "And you know that. It's why I'm not shutting this down immediately. But I wouldn't be doing my job as your alpha or your friend if I didn't make sure you were fully aware of everything your decision might cause." His eyes stared me down. "As your alpha, though, I *am* ordering you to think about it."

I gritted my teeth. This was stupid. I was wasting time. I needed to get to Stella *now*. Inside, my wolf was snarling and pacing, flexing his claws as

he itched to get going, to find the demon who had kidnapped Stella and tear him to oblivion. But I forced myself to think about it. Because if the note had been in good faith, then I would be risking the entire pack if I interfered.

On paper, the choice was obvious. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. The noble, selfless decision would be to let Stella go and protect the pack. But I'd done that once before.

Last time, I hadn't fought for her but lost her, and I'd regretted it every day since. Now she'd come back into my life. I couldn't make the same mistake twice. I wasn't going to just leave her to her fate, even if it put others at risk.

My entire life, I'd been putting other people and the military before what I really wanted. I hadn't fought for what I wanted. But I couldn't do it, not this time. I was going to be selfish. I was going to fight for her.

Because I loved her. I'd always loved her. I couldn't let history repeat itself.

I looked Jameson straight in the eye. "I'm going," I said. "And I'm going now. If you don't like it, then we can talk about it after I get back."

Jameson nodded, as if that was what he'd expected to hear the entire time. "If that's your decision, then I'll shore up defenses here," he said. "But I'm not going to be able to give you any backup in case they come here after."

"That's all right," I said, already heading toward the door. "I know the demon's name now. I'm not going to lose to him again."

I couldn't. Because losing would mean Stella's death, and mine, and my entire pack's. There was too much on the line for me to fail.

The instant I was outside, I shifted, trusting my wolf to track Stella wherever she was. We would find her or die trying.

## Chapter 19 - Stella

For the first bit, all I could do was panic. My mind was spinning as my heart raced.

Brixton was in trouble. Sam was in trouble. And I was the only person who knew. Everyone else probably assumed the danger was over now that I had left. Just like I had.

I had to get out. It was no longer just about me. I couldn't let people die because of what I'd done.

*Breathe*, I told myself. *Breathe. Calm down.*

That was able to soften the swirling tempest screaming in my brain. Enough to gather a couple of coherent thoughts, which helped calm it even further. After what felt like hours, but may have only been minutes, I was able to think rationally again and start to come up with a plan.

I was handcuffed to a pipe in a closet. I'd heard a lock click when Akron had left, meaning he must have locked me in. I still had the collar locked on my neck, leaving me only barely able to sense my wolf. I couldn't hear anyone moving around past the door, but assuming I wasn't being guarded or watched was a luxury I couldn't afford.

My mind went back to that time when Sam had shown me different ways to get out of situations where my hands were bound. I remembered how he had shown me how he had gotten out of handcuffs when he'd been stuck behind enemy lines. I had no idea how to dislocate my thumb or any other part of my body, but I remembered the other tips he had given me. About where to find the weak points, where to apply pressure. There were things I could do to get out of here. I wasn't entirely helpless.

My eyes adjusted quickly to the dark. My wolf might have been muted, but that hadn't affected my senses. I looked around, focusing on things that were nearby, but the closet was infuriatingly empty. There was nothing I could use, no paper clip or anything else that could pick the lock. So, that idea was off the table.

I twisted my wrists, trying to run my fingers along the links to feel the metal.

But as I did, my mind kept shifting to Sam. He had been the one to

teach me these things. He had almost insisted on it.

*“I want to make sure you never feel like things are beyond your control.”*

I had appreciated it at the time, if for no other reason than I had wanted as many options to protect myself as possible. But as I started searching to see what type of cuffs these were, it suddenly hit me that it was far more than that. Sam hadn't told me I didn't need to worry about it, or that I shouldn't learn these things, or that it wasn't my place. He'd simply sat down and given me a thorough lesson. No one had ever done that for me before. No one had taken me seriously or expected me to want to do anything more than what I was told. Sam had given me exactly what I wanted.

In fact, since he had come back into my life, he'd done nothing but embrace my independence. He might have been protective and looking out for me, but that didn't mean he hadn't thought I could handle myself. He'd just wanted to be there for me. There was a difference between those things. The last time he had made a decision for me, it had been when he'd left me with that pack.

He wasn't the same man anymore. He'd shown me that time and again.

I'd just been too stupid to realize it.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Sam had meant more to me than I'd realized, or more than I'd ever wanted to admit. He was mine, and only mine. And I was his. I'd never believed in fated mates, but maybe there was more truth to the concept than I'd realized. Because the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that was what Sam was to me. But whether or not that was true did nothing to change the fact that I loved him. I'd always loved him, and I would do anything to get back to him. I wasn't going to let Akron win.

I sucked in a breath as my nail caught on the minuscule gap in the link. There it was. My way out.

It wasn't going to be easy, not with how I was sitting and the fact that I couldn't see. I readjusted myself. Then, with as much strength as I could handle, I jerked my arms forward as far as they would go.

Metal clanged against metal as the chain slammed into the pipe.

Nothing happened. I tried again, this time with more force. I paused, heart pounding, as I heard footsteps outside. I stopped moving, waiting, hoping that I wasn't making too much noise.

The footsteps stopped just outside the door, then resumed. I waited for a long moment before trying again. There was no helping the noise. I just had to go for it.

Trying to remember exactly what Sam had shown me—and sort of regretting not taking him up on the offer of actually trying to break those handcuffs because I'd been too preoccupied with other thoughts—I adjusted my position against the pipe.

I saw a bolt jutting out of the pipe. I'd use that. With as much force as I could muster, I jerked my arms forward, letting the metal clang against metal, sending an unpleasant ringing through my ears. But I couldn't care less as long as it got results.

The first time, unfortunately, didn't work. But I couldn't give up, so I tried again. And again. And again. Finally, just when I was about to give up, there was a sharp *ching*, and my arms flew out in front of me. Chains dangled from the handcuffs still attached to both wrists, but they were no longer attached to one another. I gasped in relief, and my hands began to tremble as I stared at them. I was free.

Well, sort of. I still had to get out of the closet and away from the town. And my wolf was still muted. But I had gotten past the first step, and I already knew what the next one would be. So, I focused on getting past the locked door.

The thing about this place was that it was a mansion. It wasn't a demon's stronghold or even a pack house, which would have been sturdier and designed to withstand shifters. This was just a normal house. Which meant the door was just a normal door.

I tapped on it experimentally. It was definitely wood. I couldn't sense anything inherently magical about it. If that was the case, then I could probably simply break through it. Assuming there wasn't anyone on the other side.

Pressing my ear against the door, I strained, trying to listen for anything happening outside. There was nothing—no footsteps, no voices, no breathing. Still, I waited longer than was necessary to make sure I was right.



When I was absolutely certain there was no one behind the door, I rammed my shoulder into it. The door splintered. The second time I slammed into the wood, it cracked. The third time, the door shattered entirely, and I stumbled through, my feet stepping on splinters and rough wood.

I nearly whooped in excitement but managed to keep quiet. I was out! If there were any guards in the building—or worse, Akron—they definitely would have heard it. I had to run before someone came and found me.

I started running, not daring to look behind me, certain I would see someone chasing me the moment I did. As I wandered through the unfamiliar maze of corridors, I ran through options of how I could get out of the house.

I couldn't go through the front door. I would need a window.

As I began to search, I started realizing just how stupid I was being. What was I going to do when I got out? The shifters or the underlings would be able to grab me at a moment's notice. I was not going to be able to outrun them.

But the other option was staying here and being bound to a demon.

I'd take my chances.

I darted past the kitchen. I was about to keep going when I stopped, doubling back just long enough to grab a thick knife. It wouldn't do shit against demons, but if I came across any wolves, it would provide a bit of protection.

After checking a few more rooms, I found a window that would open. A hedge was sitting below, but I would take a handful of scratches over staying here. Looking behind me, there were no signs of any pursuers, but I could hear voices from outside the room further down the hall. I didn't have much time.

As I clambered over the windowsill, my foot caught, and I went sprawling face-first into the hedge. Sharp leaves scratched at my face and arms as I tumbled down onto the ground. Tiny stinging scratches covered my skin as I scrambled to my feet, adrenaline flooding my body, enhancing all my senses.

But it was worth it. I was free.

But even as relief washed over me, there was still a prickling of unease. This felt a little too easy. Had it been too simple to break out of the

mansion? Or was I just being paranoid?

I didn't have time to wonder, and in the end, it didn't matter. I was out, and I had a chance to run. Even if it was a trap, I had to take my chances.

I darted to the woods, a plan forming in my head. I knew where I was going this time. I couldn't lie to myself anymore—I knew what I wanted. I wanted Sam. I only hoped he would forgive me after the way I'd left.

I headed straight for Brixton. But I had barely gotten into the woods when a large wolf charged in front of me, blocking my path. I stumbled to a halt as the wolf stalked toward me, snarling and baring his fangs. My back pressed into rough bark as I stumbled away from his snapping jaws. I stayed motionless, white-knuckling the dagger as the wolf in front of me transformed.

“You must have a death wish,” Farrow snarled. “Did you really think you'd be able to get away again.”

“I figured it was worth a shot,” I retorted, eyes darting around to look for an escape. I couldn't smell any other shifters. If I could just get away from Farrow...

He growled again.

“If you don't come back with me now,” he said. “I'll take you back in pieces. You're more trouble than you're worth.”

I raised an eyebrow. “My mom say that about you?” I goaded.

His expression darkened and his fingers lengthened to claws as he swiped at my face. I dodged, hearing his claws gouge the tree as flecks of bark cascaded into my hair. Heart thundering, I tried to dip beneath his arm, to try and get away. But his hand grabbed my wrist and he threw me to the ground. The knife clattered into a pile of leaves nearby.

He climbed on top of me, and I knew the only thing that was protecting my throat was the collar preventing me from shifting. If it weren't there, he'd crush my throat and be done with it.

“You're ruining the pack, you know that?” Flecks of his spittle fell on my face. “If you'd just done what you were told the first time, none of this would have happened. Everything that happens to the pack now is your fault.”

“Spare me,” I said. His claws dug into my shoulders as my fingers scrabbled for anything to protect myself. “Stop pretending any of this is because of me. I’m not buying it anymore.”

Before he could respond, I threw a fistful of leaves and dirt in his face. He spat and reared back, giving me just enough time to shimmy out from underneath him and stumble toward where the knife had fallen.

A snarl sounded behind me, and I knew without looking that Farrow had shifted. I fumbled for the knife, nearly dropping it in my frantic haste. I turned just in time to see him lunging toward me, but unable to stop his outstretched paws from landing on my shoulders and sending me to my back.

One giant paw pressed down on my chest, crushing my lungs. I gasped for air, wheezing as the edges of my vision went black.

No. I wasn’t going to die to this asshole. Not after everything he’d put me through.

With as much force as I could muster, I jammed the knife into his shoulder.

The wolf howled, staggering away. I yanked the dagger out of his shoulder and plunged it in against before he could get away, this time into his back. The wolf collapsed, panting as blood poured onto the ground.

One final plunge of the knife, and Farrow stopped moving.

I staggered back, heart thundering as I stared at the dead wolf. My former alpha. My hands shook slightly as the realization set in that I had murdered him. He was dead.

And I felt no remorse. In fact, I felt freer than I had felt in my entire life.

I didn’t have time to catch my breath or let myself process what had just happened. I was nowhere near safe. I yanked the knife from Farrow’s back and raced further into the woods, heading toward home.

As I started running, I felt a dull tug deep down inside me. At first, I wasn’t sure what it was, but then I realized it was my wolf. Without the collar, that tug would have been amplified a hundred times; it would have been unmistakable, practically impossible to ignore. But as it was, it was just enough for me to notice that my wolf wanted to go a certain way, as if something was calling to her. The tug was slightly off-course from the

direction of Brixton, though. I wasn't sure what it could be, but I knew better than to ignore her instincts. So I followed that tug, hurrying as fast as I could.

It was probably an hour of rushing through the woods before I finally realized what my wolf was leading me toward, and I nearly laughed. I should have known. She was taking me exactly where I wanted to go, where we *both* wanted to go.

To our mate.

Sam's scent kept growing stronger the further I went, and I knew it wouldn't be long before his wolf found me, too. Maybe he was doing the same thing as my wolf.

Not long after I'd first caught his scent, I heard breaking twigs and rustling bramble to my right. A moment later, I saw the familiar figure of a great dark brown wolf. His head turned toward me, and he howled, charging toward me. As he did, the wolf changed into Sam, not breaking stride as he shifted.

"Stella," he said breathlessly. His arms wrapped around me, and before I could say or do anything, his lips were on mine, giving me a deep, passionate kiss. I practically melted into his arms, relishing the feel of his skin on mine, never wanting to let go.

Finally, he broke the kiss and seemed to look at me for the first time, seeing the bruises, Farrow's claw marks on my arm, the broken handcuffs. His eyes went to the collar, and he snarled, rage filling his eyes.

"What the fuck happened?" he demanded.

"Farrow caught me when I was running," I said. "He took me back to Akron. But I'm fine. I'm free. You don't have to worry about—"

"They did this to you?" Every muscle in his body had tensed, and I could tell he was ready to murder someone for what had happened.

"Yes, but I'm fine." I reached up and cupped his face. "I got out. I'm here. Farrow's dead. And Sam, I'm so sorry for running. I should have stayed, I was just too stupid to realize it. And I lo—"

Something jerked me backward, yanking me from Sam's arms. I was so startled that I didn't immediately notice that my feet weren't touching the ground.

I soared through the air and right into Akron's waiting arms. One arm snaked around my waist, pressing my back against his chest, and the other gripped my chin, holding my head in place.

Akron tsked. "I guess it hasn't really sunk in for you yet," he said, holding me so tightly that I couldn't even struggle. "You're not going anywhere."

"Yes, she is," Sam snarled.

I wanted to tell him to run, to save himself, but the way the demon was gripping me made it hard to speak.

"Let her go," Sam said.

"I don't give away my prizes that easily," Akron sneered. When Sam didn't back down, and instead took two deliberate steps forward, the demon sighed dramatically. "Have it your way, then."

He released me, but before I could move an inch, a cage of pure darkness descended around me, blocking me from the fight and forcing me to watch the demon face off against the man I loved.

## Chapter 20 - Sam

“Get used to that, darling,” Akron said to Stella as she grasped the bars of shadow surrounding her. “If you’re going to keep running away, I’ll have to find more secure methods of keeping you with me.”

The anger that had already been surging through me at seeing the state Stella was in intensified. He was threatening to keep her in a cage like some sort of bird. I was never going to let that happen.

“This ends now,” I said.

Akron laughed, stalking toward me. “Have you already forgotten how easily I took care of you the last time you were stupid enough to challenge me?”

I gave a feral grin, baring my teeth. “I was missing some crucial information back then,” I said. “I’m better prepared now.”

Akron faltered, but only for a moment. “And what might that be, exactly?”

“Akronachis Danien.”

As I said it, I pushed my will into the words, conveying that he was weak, that he was easily defeated. Rand had explained briefly how it worked, though I still wasn’t sure I fully understood. But putting intention behind a Name gave you more power over the being, made you able to let you manipulate it at least a bit. So I was using Akron’s Name as a way to take some of his power, make him weaker.

The smirk that had been playing on Akron’s lips vanished in an instant. A look of fear, almost horror, crossed his face as the words registered. He staggered as if someone had just punched him in the stomach.

“Pretty sure I just leveled the playing field, didn’t I?” I said wryly.

Akron’s eyes flashed with fury. “I’m still stronger than you. I’m going to tear your limbs off one by one and enjoy every single moment of it.”

A spear of darkness darted toward me, aimed directly at my heart. I shifted, turning into a wolf a split-second before the javelin would have stabbed me. I raced toward him. Akron hurled more tendrils of darkness at me, threatening to trip me up with daggers being hurled directly at me. I kept

dodging them, noticing they were more sluggish than during our first encounter. But they were still deadly, and we still had to be careful.

Just as I thought this, a streak of darkness hurled toward us, slashing across our side. Agonizing pain lanced across our flank and we stumbled for the briefest of moments. But that was enough time for another coil of darkness to snake around our throats and begin constricting, closing off our airways.

“Did you think I was so weak that you would be able to beat me that easily?” Akron snarled, stalking forward as we began to falter and stagger to the ground. “Just because you learned my Name doesn’t mean you know how to wield it properly. You may have been able to slow me down, but that’s not the same as defeating me. And you don’t have a bunch of wolf friends running this way with iron to help you now. You’re going to die slowly and painfully while she watches.”

My wolf and I glanced up, looking past Akron to the cage of darkness behind him, where Stella was watching. We weren’t going to let Akron kill us in front of her.

My wolf snarled and thrashed, our claws scrabbling against the darkness. As we did, I held the demon’s Name in my mind, pushing every bit of will and power I had into shattering his magic. It was our only chance.

At first, nothing happened, and the tendril around our neck continued tightening. The edges of our vision went black as it became impossible to breathe.

I threw that tiny last effort of will into his Name, and the coil of darkness shattered.

Akron’s eyes flashed with alarm, and he took a step back. We didn’t give ourselves time to regain our breath; we jumped, claws outstretched and maw wide open as we hurled through the air toward the demon.

A coil of darkness pushed toward us, plunging into our front leg. But instead of the agonizing pain that had slashed through our side, this one felt more like a pinprick, and it did nothing to stop our trajectory.

Our paws slammed into the demon’s shoulders, knocking him to the ground. His eyes widened with alarm as he tried to shove us away, his hand grabbing my neck while the other shoved at my chest. But it wasn’t going to

be enough anymore. I bit down hard on his wrist, bone breaking beneath my jaws. He released me, and I lunged for his throat.

My jaws clamped around his neck and bit down. The demon struggled beneath us as he writhed and tried to scream. But his struggles slowly died away to nothing, and eventually stopped entirely. I waited, jaws still locked around his throat, for another long moment. Finally, when I was satisfied he wasn't going to move again, I released him.

Turning, I saw Stella hurrying toward me. The cage of darkness that had been holding her had vanished, the last proof I needed to reassure myself and my wolf that Akron was dead. I shifted and stood in front of Stella, who wrapped her arms around me, holding me tight. I pulled her in closer, wanting to touch her, to smell her scent, to reassure myself that she was safe and sound.

“Is it over?” she asked.

“Unless Farrow is somewhere around here and has a few words for me,” I said.

“I don't know where he is,” she said. “Last time I saw him was when he left me with Akron. But I don't think he's going to stick around. He'll probably just go back to the pack.”

She shivered and leaned against me, and we stood like that for a long moment, taking solace in each other. She was alive. We were both okay. The danger was over.

“Stella.” I took a deep breath, putting my forehead against hers and taking a deep breath. “I'm sorry about all those years ago—”

“You've already apologized,” she murmured. “You don't need to say it again.”

“I should have fought for you more then,” I said. “And I shouldn't have let you get away this time. I should have—”

“I was the one who ran,” she pointed out. “Which was a really stupid thing for me to do, to be fair.”

I snorted. “I'm glad we can at least agree on that, but that's not the point. The point is that I love you. I want you to stay with me in Brixton. I don't want to lose you again. Please?”



Her smile grew with every word I said, and when I had finished babbling, she pulled my head down to meet hers, pressing our lips together.

“I love you, too,” she murmured. “And I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have run.”

“It’s okay,” I said as her words washed over me. She loved me. There was a rush of endorphins I’d never experienced before as it slowly sunk in. She loved me. I could hardly believe it, but I could see by the expression in her gaze that she meant it. My wolf howled in triumph, and all I wanted to do was keep her in my arms and never let her go.

“I was just worried that being with you meant I couldn’t be myself or independent. That agreeing to be with you would tie me down the same way my loyalty to my old pack did. I was just scared.”

I took her hand in mine and kissed her gently. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do. And I would never want to take away your independence—hope you know that. But I also really hope that you want me to be with you now. Because I don’t want to let you go again.”

She hesitated, biting her lip. “Even if that means leaving Brixton?”

I pulled her close, then whispered in her ear, “I would follow you to the ends of the earth if you asked me to.” I meant it, too. I loved the Silver Wolves, had dedicated my entire life to them. But they were nothing compared to being with Stella.

She squeezed my hand. “I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said. “I think Brixton is a nice place to settle down. I could see myself making a life there. It’s a far cry from my old pack, and I should have figured that out a long time ago.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said. “But if you ever want to leave...”

“You’ll be the first to know,” she promised. “And if you don’t come with me, we’ll have some strong words.”

I laughed and brought her to me, kissing her, letting the taste of her soothe both me and my wolf.

“Trust me,” I said. “That will never be in doubt.”

## Chapter 21 - Stella

I was lounging at home, my head resting in Sam's lap as I scrolled on my phone, when a knock on the door shattered the quiet. I tensed, ears pricking as my body coiled.

Sam's hand went to my shoulder, and I forced myself to calm down.

"It's all right," he said, gently kissing my forehead. "I can smell who it is. It's just Malcolm and Rand."

My shoulders relaxed, and I sat up. Ever since the incident with Akron, I'd been particularly jumpy. Even with Farrow dead, I wasn't sure if the rest of the Full Moon Pack would seek retribution. I'd been able to settle into Brixton nicely, spending time with the girls and looking for a job. But I still kept looking over my shoulder, waiting to see someone from my old pack, ready to exact revenge.

I stayed where I was until I heard Malcolm say, "Stella here?"

I pushed myself from the couch and strolled over. "Right here," I said.

The three shifters turned to look at me, and it was impossible not to notice how satisfied both Rand and Malcolm looked. My stomach clenched slightly, wondering what it was that was making them so happy.

"Got good news," Rand said, grinning.

I straightened, fully paying attention now. "What?"

"The new alpha of the Full Moon Pack came by earlier today," Malcolm said. "Guy named Dom."

I blinked, tilting my head. "Dom? Really?"

Dom had been one of the nicer shifters when I'd been in the pack. He hadn't necessarily gone out of his way to be nice to me, but he had been civil at least. He also hadn't been Farrow's second in command or anywhere in his hierarchy.

Rand nodded. "According to him, the pack ran out most of Farrow's old cronies when they found out he was dead. Apparently, not everyone in the pack was happy with the fact that he dragged the entire pack into service for a demon, even inadvertently."

“Can’t blame them there,” Sam muttered.

“He wanted to say that there wouldn’t be any retribution for you killing their alpha,” Malcolm said. “Any ties or connections you had to your old pack are formally severed with no ill will.”

“Not exactly a polite goodbye,” Sam muttered, eyes narrowed.

“From them that’s basically throwing me a farewell party.” I was beaming. It was done. It was over. The relief and happiness flooding me was nearly overwhelming. I leaned against Sam for support, and he wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me tight. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

“Good,” I managed to say. “That’s good.”

“That’s an understatement,” Malcolm said. His features darkened. “Someone like that shouldn’t be in charge of a pack. I’m not sorry he’s gone.”

“I don’t think many people are,” I said, giving a shaky smile. Sam squeezed me tightly again.

“Would you guys be able to give us some space?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, of course,” Malcolm said. There was a knowing glint in his eyes that I couldn’t quite place or understand, but something about the way he looked at Sam made me wonder if he knew something I didn’t. But before I could think any more about it, he said, “Well, we’ll leave you to it.”

Both Malcolm and Rand strolled out, closing the door behind them.

“Thank god that’s over,” I said, rubbing my face and feeling like a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I stretched and walked toward the kitchen. “Want some tea?”

But Sam didn’t answer. Instead, a rustling sound came from behind me, like Sam had opened a drawer and was rifling around in it.

Then he said, “Stella?”

I turned back around and saw Sam shifting back and forth on his feet. His features were taut, and my stomach clenched in dread. What on earth could be making him this nervous?

“What’s wrong?” I asked, unable to conceal the panic in my voice.

He hesitated, fiddling with something in his hand I couldn't see.

"I was sort of waiting until all of this blew over," he said. "When the last of the loose threads tied up, you know? And that's happened now."

"Yes..." I said slowly. I still had no idea what he was talking about, but my heart was beating so hard, it was threatening to shatter my rib cage.

He sighed, clearly trying to find the words. "Do you still not believe in fated mates?"

I nearly laughed. That was what was worrying him? "I was able to find you in a massive forest because my wolf led me to you," I said. "I'm pretty sure denying the whole fated mates thing would be stupid at this point."

He snorted, looking a little more at ease. Then he took a deep breath. "I know you want to be independent," he said. "And I respect that. I really do. But I also want to spend the rest of my life with you. Do you think there's a chance we can figure out how to do both those things?"

"I'm sure we could make it work," I said, my brow furrowing. "Sam, I'm sorry, but could you tell me what's going on here?"

"I'm trying," he said. He scowled. "I really didn't think I would be so bad at this."

I wanted to ask *bad at what?* But something lodged in my throat, blocking the words. My body froze.

"I'm able to open up to you in a way that I haven't been able to with anyone else before," he said. "And I meant it when I said I think you came back into my life for a reason, and that it was fate. But I don't think fate has anything to do with how much I love you." He took a deep breath. "I want to be with you no matter where you decide to go. I'm not losing you again."

Hesitantly, he got down on one knee. I think I might have squeaked. He held up the object in his hand, and I saw it was a velvet black box.

I had always thought the hand-to-the-mouth gesture you always saw in cheesy romantic movies was a trope. But my hand flew to my mouth as my brain finally registered what was happening.

"Oh," I said. "*Oh.*"

"I know I fucked up the first time around," he began. "But I'm not the

same idiot I was back then, and I'm not going to make the same mistake again."

I don't think I'd ever seen him babble this much. It was kind of adorable.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

I nodded, still too stunned to trust my mouth to work properly. My head was swimming in surprise and happiness.

Grinning like a maniac, Sam stood, his hands still trembling slightly as he slipped the ring on my finger. I pulled his mouth to mine, kissing him deeply and trying to push all the love I felt for him into that simple gesture. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight, and we stayed like that for a long time.

Eventually, I broke the kiss and looked at the ring now wrapped around my finger. It was a yellow gold band, formed to look like two vines intertwining with one another, ending in two leaves that cradled the largest diamond I had ever seen. My eyes widened at just how gorgeous and perfect it was.

"I had it made just for you," Sam said, still holding me tightly. "Do you like it?"

I laughed. "I love it." I was dizzy with happiness. I was going to spend the rest of my life with the shifter I loved. My wolf howled in excitement, just as happy as I was to be with her mate forever. The wolf she had recognized as her mate all those years ago, even if I had been too stubborn or dense to realize it myself.

I kissed him again. This time, the kiss intensified. His grip around me tightened, pulling me in closer so that our bodies pressed against one another. A moan escaped my lips, and Sam's grip on me tightened even further.

His hands moved downward, toying with the hem of my shirt before slipping beneath it, sliding along my stomach. That delightful tension he always instilled in me began creeping in. Already, my wolf was hungry for him, and the lust growing inside me intensified even further.

My hands yanked desperately at his shirt, yearning for more of him. It didn't take long for him to comply. I took in the sight of his gorgeous, well-toned body, as much of a turn-on for me now as it was when I'd first met

him.

I didn't wait for him to take my own shirt off; I did it myself. The hungry way he looked me up and down sent shivers through my entire body. The bulge in his pants stiffened as my shirt fell to the floor, along with my bra a few seconds later. His eyes raked across my body in a way that made my toes curl.

He stalked toward me, none of his earlier nervousness anywhere to be seen on his face, and pulled me toward him, locking his lips against mine as his fingers gripped my hips, holding me in place.

I melted into him, letting his scent envelop me, but that wasn't enough for me. I wanted more of him. I fumbled for his jeans, wanting him to fill me, unable to handle his teasing any longer.

His hands gripped my wrists and pulled them away. I glowered at him, and he looked down at me with a confident smirk.

“Not yet,” he said. “I want to have my fun first.”

The words made my stomach clench even tighter, that fire growing, and I let him guide me by the wrist out of the entryway and back into the living room. We made our way to the couch, and he pushed me down, one strong hand gripping my breast and holding me in place as he lowered his head, nestling it in between my thighs. I was certain he would be able to smell my arousal. It was impossible not to.

He grinned up at me before bending his head. His thumb flicked across my nipple as his tongue ran along my slit, and I groaned.

“I love tasting you,” he said, licking his lips as he stared up at me from between my legs. He licked his lips before returning to the task at hand, his tongue teasing my clit with delicate flicks that made me squirm as that fire built inside me.

I pulled him up to me, kissing him as I worked at unclasping his pants. I could taste myself on him, and that alone was enough to make my wolf growl in approval. She wanted more, and so did I.

When he was naked, I took his cock in my hand, stroking teasingly.

“I'm not done down there yet,” he said with a groan.

I grinned wickedly. “Too bad,” I said, and ran my tongue up his shaft,

making him groan again.

But he wasn't going to give up. Instead, he yanked me to my feet, then lay down before pulling me on top of him. His tongue went back to my clit as I straddled him. I leaned forward, crawling down him to reach his cock. I grabbed his shaft, relishing the feel of it in my hand, and I began to stroke up and down slowly, drawing out every movement. Between my legs, his rhythm didn't stutter, but his grip on my thighs tightened, making me almost laugh.

I ran my tongue along his shaft before taking him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around his head as I heard him groan, the sound muffled by my pussy as he continued to lap at me greedily.

My head bobbed up and down in time with my hand. I could feel him responding, his tongue thrusting inside me faster and faster as the thumb on my clit sped up. The muscles in my body tightened as the sensation grew, making it nearly impossible to keep my own strokes even as his motions made my head swim with desire, the fire inside me swelling to what felt like impossible levels.

Then, just as I was about to break, he stopped. I snarled, turning to glower at him as he smirked back at me.

"I like drawing it out," he said, tugging me by the hair so my back arched.

Unable to wait any longer, I spun around so I was facing him. I tried to guide him into me, needing him inside me. He smirked, teasing me at first, rubbing his shaft along my already wet slit and pushing the head against my opening. I growled in irritation, and he laughed.

"You and your teasing," I said. "I swear to God, if you don't—"

But my snarl was cut off, replaced with a cry of ecstasy as he slammed into me, pumping back and forth, bucking into me as if he were a stallion. I writhed delightedly, my hips bucking in kind as my toes curled more and more with each thrust. He felt incredible inside me, and all that mattered in that moment was him and me and our carnal need for each other.

One hand moved to my clit as the other grabbed one of my breasts that was bouncing with each motion. The intensity of his gaze would have been enough to unravel me, but the way his thumb ran along my clit as his

other hand pinched my nipple, coupled with his thrusts into me, made the pleasure nearly unbearable. I moaned, panting, begging for that need to be satisfied while also never wanting it to end.

Eventually, it became too much, and I shattered. I screamed in delight, my hands digging into his flesh as ecstasy washed over me. I kept gliding in and out of him, letting the pleasure last as long as possible. And as I did, Sam groaned, his eyes closing as he finished inside me, filling me with his cum.

Panting, I smirked, leaning forward and kissing him, lingering there as long as I could. I wanted to stay like this forever.

*In a way, I can*, I thought, my eyes going to the gorgeous golden band now on my finger. I smiled.

Sam saw what I was looking at and smirked as well. “Guess we’ll have to tell everyone now,” he said.

“I guess so,” I agreed. “Do you want to go ahead and tell them now?”

“Hmm...” He looked me up and down, eyes drinking in my naked body, and I could feel his cock stiffening inside me again. “Not yet. I think we should do some more celebrating on our own first.”

I cocked my head, a smirk playing on my lips. “You’re not done with me yet?” I teased.

His hands went to my waist and gripped me tightly. “I don’t think I’ll ever be done with you,” he said, eyes glinting.

I leaned down and brushed my lips against his. “That’s something you’re not going to have to worry about, then. That’s the problem with fated mates. You’re stuck with me now.”

He beamed at me. “I think I can live with that,” he said.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END



## About the Author

Ruby lives on a farm with her two daughters and husband. Besides horses, chickens, and a donkey, she sometimes imagines that there are other types of animals on her farm, too... Animals that turn into Very Hot Men at night to look for their mates... Whenever that happens, she turns to her computer and writes down the paranormal love stories of these rough Wolf, Bear, and Dragon shifters who will destroy any obstacle to protect their mate. Come and enjoy the steamy, suspenseful, and slightly sweaty adventures of Ruby's shifter romance world.

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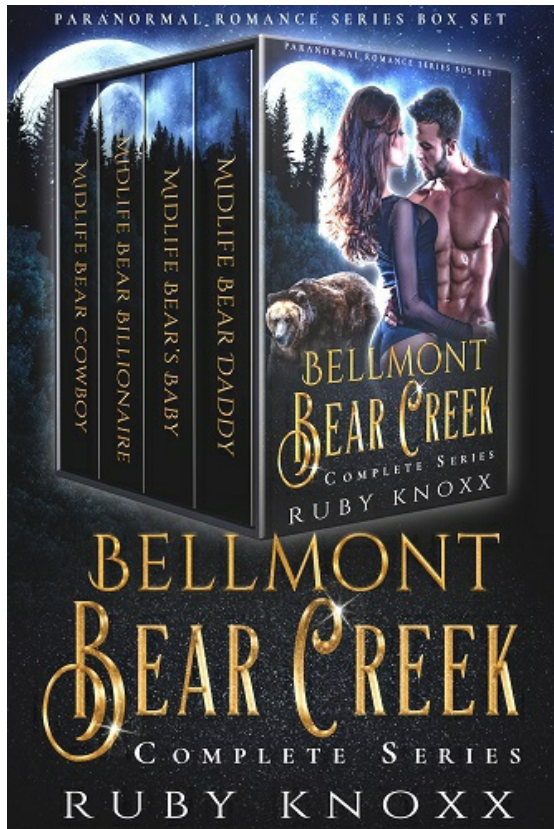
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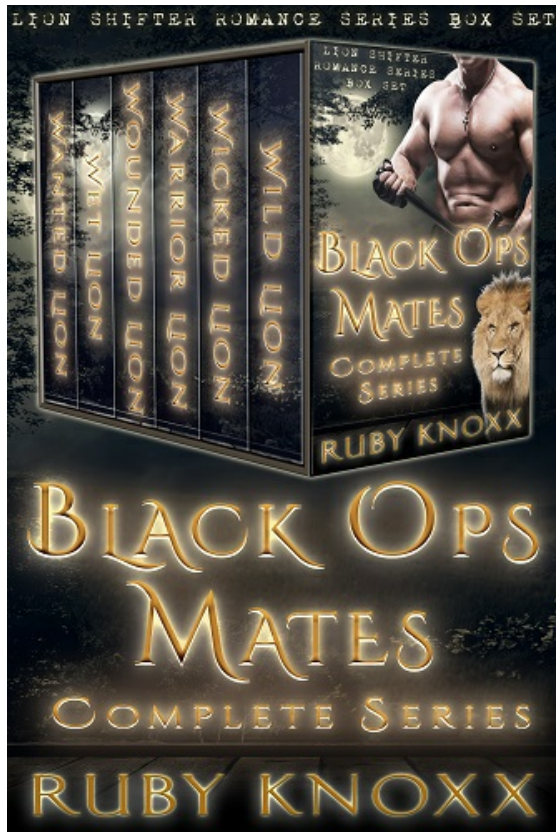
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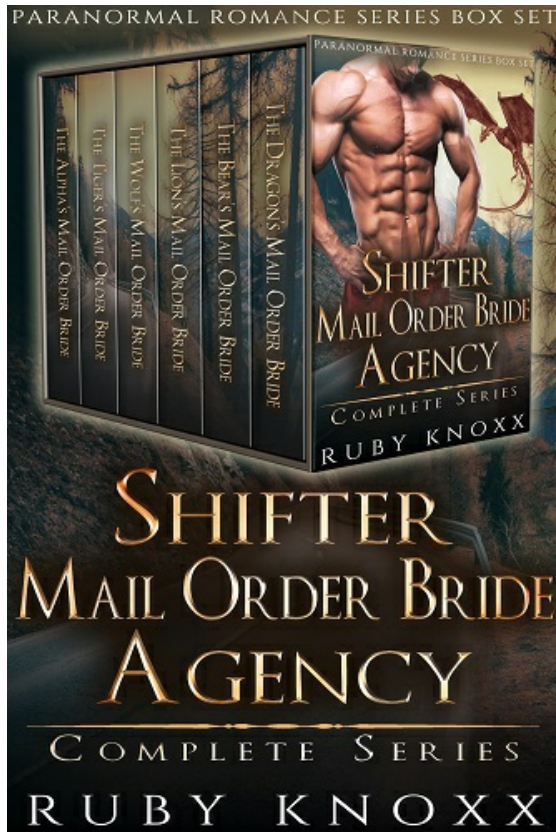
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