

PREDATOR

WOLVES OF  WINTER CREEK

BOOK THREE

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH SPADE

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FOREWORD

Thanks for checking out *Predator*!

This is the final of three books that feature Fallon Witt as the POV character. An unsuspecting ‘human’ woman navigating her way through the secretive world of supes, she arrived in the hidden supernatural town of Winter Creek for a supposed week-long vacation with her estranged grandmother, only to learn the truth: Marie Bordeaux is the head of a witch coven, and she had her own reasons for inviting Fallon to Winter Creek.

Of course, by the end of the first book, Fallon learns that witches aren’t the only supes ruling the small town. A pack of wolf shifters have named themselves the protectors, standing up to the witch coven—and saving Fallon when her grandmother tries to sacrifice her to the beast in the woods.

This book picks up right after the cliffhanger ending of *Pack*. When we last left Fallon, she had just mated and bonded with Alpha Lucas beneath the full moon. They’re mates—and the curse should be broken... except a scent she can’t quite place and the memories of another woman’s life slamming into her led to Fallon unexpectedly shifting to a wolf.

But wolves are born not made, so Lucas's bite couldn't have caused her to shift unless she was always a wolf shifter... or Jolie was.

CWs: mentions of a parent's death due to illness (five years prior to the start of the book) as well as being an adoptee, bloodshed & hemophobia, an open door sex scene, even more cursing, and some on-page murder because I wasn't kidding when I said that not everyone gets their HEA (though Lucas and Fallon definitely do).

Enjoy!

xoxo,

Sarah

PROLOGUE



Jolie...

It's the rage at hearing her name that triggers the change in me.

I don't really understand it. One second, I was curled up next to my mate, enjoying the mingled scents of our bodies, our sex, and the woods that surrounded us, slicking my skin and filling my nostrils.

Content and boneless, with Lucas's bite on my lower neck and his hand laying possessively on me beneath the tree where we first met... I was half asleep when the new scent filtered in past my consciousness.

A little bit sweet, more than a little peppery, and with a woody accent that seemed to stand out among the earth and the trees and the forest around me, it *called* to me. Like I knew it. Like it meant something to me.

I was still Fallon then. But hearing her name—my name—*her name* did something to me. It brought the rage, the fury, the pain that came with the last moments before I died. Or she did. I don't know. My memory is so hazy now, and I don't know if that scent out there is someone I'm acquainted with—or Jolie was.

We both know the male crouched behind us. A magnificent male, with his amber-colored eyes and his dark, tousled curls, he's tanned, his body sculpted, his expression hesitant.

He smells like me. Of course. I fucked him—*no*. I *mated* him. I tied him to a tree... like I was tied to a tree once before... and then I climbed on top of him so that I could take his cock inside of my pussy, and his fangs in my neck.

He bit me. He made me his mate, beneath the Luna's watchful gaze, fucking me and biting me and promising me forever... something Jolie wanted, but never had.

I want it.

I wanted it.

But who am I? I was Fallon... but Fallon is a human. Blonde hair. Strange gold eyes. My opal.

Where is my opal?

I have paws. Stamping them in panic, I have *four* paws. My fur is the same shade as my hair, though shorter and more bristly. It's standing on end, nothing like the sleek wolves of the pack—

I'm pack. They accepted me. But I shouldn't be a wolf.

Why am I a wolf?

An animalistic whine escapes my throat.

I'm a *wolf*...

"Fallon?"

No, Lucas. I'm not Fallon. I can't be. Fallon isn't a wolf shifter. Eleanor told me... she *told* me that shifters aren't made. A bite might finalize the mate bond between Lucas and me, but it could never turn me into a wolf if I wasn't one already. She said I'd have perks. *Perks*. Not this...

What happened to me?

Where did that scent go?

Why is Lucas creeping up on me?

I swivel my head, yelping when I see my tail. Because I... I have a *tail*.

Because I'm a wolf.

I'm also his mate.

The peppery scent is fading. Chuffing again and again, I breathe because even wolves have to breathe, and now all I can smell is blood. *My* blood. Lucas bit me. He fucked me, and he bit me because that's what the wolves of Winter Creek do.

I'm supposed to bite *him*.

He's my mate. I need to mark him. Claim him. I need for him to understand that, whoever I am, I'm still his mate.

I'm just his mate who's lost her fucking mind.

Blood is bad. The last time I smelled my blood like this, I was dying. The rain was falling. I was running... to Lucas, from the wolf on my heels... I was *running*. I was *falling*.

I was being mauled by a wolf, my blood perfuming the air so that my last memory in another life was pain and grief, the stink of my life's blood being erased by the rain, the heat of it mingling with the icy drops as I lay broken in the woods.

He's a wolf. He bit me. I was bleeding...

And I attack.

Lost in another life, trapped in someone else's body, confused and frightened and *angry*, I give in to a set of instincts that should never have been mine. Rearing back on two of my four paws, swishing my tail as though it's a part of me—because it *is* a part of me—I launch myself at Lucas.

Wolf shifters use their fangs to mark their mates. That's all I wanted to do, but that's not *what* I do. I don't bite him on the meaty part of his muscular shoulder. Oh, no. As though I'm back in the woods, feeling the rain pelting my skin, knowing that death is at hand because I made the wrong choices... I snap my jaws at him, catching him right in the middle of his throat.

And then I *bite*.

His arms wrap around me, pinning me in place. But that's just my forelegs, my back legs, my middle. He doesn't try to prevent me from biting, and when I rip through the flesh,

tasting his blood for the first time, I know then that I can't be Fallon.

Fallon hates blood. Of course she does. She's terrified of it... but that doesn't stop me from doing this to my Lucas.

The last thought I have before I completely lose myself is that he's *letting* me do this. He's letting me attack him. As strong as he is, he could rip me off of him, throw me away from him, snap my neck before I could dig my fangs deeper into his skin... but he's not doing that. He's holding me tightly, murmuring my name, choking my name—*Fallon, Fallon, Fallon*—until he can no longer speak at all, and that's it.

And with his hot blood pouring into my mouth, my already shaky hold on my sanity shatters completely as everything grows dark.

Even then my wolfish jaws don't release my lover.

My mate.

Mon chiot...

CHAPTER 1

WHO



I don't know who I am. I don't know what's happened to me.

All I know is the cage.

It's about three times the length of my from tip to tail, and wide enough that I can curl up inside of it. I'm trapped, and no matter how much I throw my furry body up against the four sides of it, it doesn't break. It's perfectly designed for a wolf, and that makes sense.

I *am* a wolf.

It takes me a while to remember that. To understand that the four paws are mine, the tails is mine, that when I whimper, it's a sound I've made on my own. Even more importantly is the fact that I haven't always *been* a wolf.

I was human. I walked on two legs, and I spoke, and then something happened and I *changed*.

I want to change back. As soon as I realized that I'm a wolf, but I'm also a person, I'm determined to figure out how to go back. Only one problem. Since I don't remember what happened to make me like this, it's impossible for me to fix it.

I *died*—

No. I didn't. Not me. Not the human I was. The human I used to be... the one who never got to be a wolf... she *died*.

But she's still here. She's a part of me. And when being the wolf becomes too much, she returns.

I don't know who I am. I don't know what's happened to me.

I only know that sometimes I'm Fallon, sometimes I'm Jolie, sometimes I'm neither...

...and I'm not sure what to do except bare my teeth, snarl, and wait for any of this to make sense.

I AM FALLON.

Fallon Witt.

I'm twenty-five-years-old.

I was born and raised in New Jersey, went to school there, went to college there, but I live in New York now.

Or, I *did*.

But sometimes... sometimes I am Jolie.

Jolie Bordeaux.

I'm twenty-five-years-old.

I was born and raised in Louisiana, and only moved to Winter Creek when my father's mother, my estranged Grand-mère, called for me to join her at the coven. Because of her, I have witch blood.

Because of my mother, I am descended from wolves.

But because I'm both, I am neither—until mon chiot showed me that love is not dependent on being a supe, though Fate surely guided me right into his arms... until a wolf chased me right out of them.

Now I'm a wolf. Afraid. Cowering. Feral.

Lost.

Trapped.

But I'm not alone.

Even when all I know is the cage, *he's* here. He smells of the woods and cinnamon, dominance, and despair. His

presence has my hackles rising, the instinct to charge, to leap, to bite almost overwhelming. I'm supposed to bite him. It's imperative that I do.

Even when I know nothing else, the need to mark this male, to claim him in any way I can makes me crazed.

He murmurs softly. Crouching down outside of my cage, saying words that mean nothing to the beast that I've become, he whispers and he cajoles, and sometimes he pleads.

What does he want from me? What do I want from him?

The answer to that is simple.

Everything.

CHAPTER 2

THE CAGE



Once upon a time I thought that I was tiptoeing up to the edge of the point of no return. That there would be a moment when I wouldn't be able to shrug a situation off and easily move on.

I think I've found it.

I woke up this morning on a metal floor, confused for a moment until I remembered where I was. I'm in a cage, and that scares me because humans... we're only put in cages when we do something bad and get tossed in jail.

But I did. I did do something bad.

I shifted. That much is obvious. Like the paws attached to my wolfish body didn't give it away, somehow Lucas's bite triggered something inside of me that had me going from Fallon to a blonde wolf full of so much rage, I terrified myself.

That's not the bad thing. Oh, no. If only it was, I wouldn't be in a cage. But since the first thing I did after I shifted was launch myself at the Alpha at my back, digging my paws into his chest before attempting to bite out his throat?

I have no memory of what happened after he refused to force me to submit. I must have lost consciousness as my mind broke—and, this time, it seemed as if I'd finally hit my limit after all.

I could deal with being trapped in a secluded small town with no television, no phones, and no internet.

Witches are real? Cool.

Witches are murderous? *Not* cool.

Beasts want to either eat me—or fuck me? Yeah, that was really not cool... until I realized that the feral beast in the woods was really the glowering, dark-haired huntsman who saved my ass in the first place. Then, yup, I *did* fuck him.

And now I'm... what?

I don't know, but whatever happened after I bonded myself to Lucas in the woods, it finally broke me.

The pack knows it, too. They must because my cage... I know this place. I know this *room*. I didn't recognize it at first. No one warns you that, going feral, isn't just turning into the beast like Lucas did. I never twisted into some half-form creature with a mouthful of fangs and patchy fur. Nope. I've been a wolf for days upon days now, but it wasn't my body that broke.

It was my brain.

Something is different about today. Instead of alternating between dreams where I was sitting at a keyboard, mindlessly clicking away at the keys, or talking on the phone with Lorelei Lipton and wearing a peach chiffon dress, no shoes, sliding in the rain before the wolf attacked... instead of going back and forth between wondering if I really am Fallon or simply Jolie reborn, I fluttered my eyes open with the certainty that my name is Fallon Witt, I'm in a cage, and though I try to make him understand how sorry I am, Lucas won't let me out.

He's here. He's always been here. From the moment I first discovered I was a caged wolf, Lucas has prowled the room, talking to me when the quiet got too much though I couldn't understand him.

I *know* him, though. In his two-legged form, wearing a black shirt, black jeans, and an uncharacteristic black scarf wrapped around his thick throat, today I don't see him and think of him as a threat I need to bite.

I've had moments of clarity before. Moments of lucidity when I remember exactly who I am and what I've done. I even can understand it when he calls me by one name, then another,

hoping for any kind of reaction. Then, when he gets them, he pleads with me, only to look sad when I lost my grip on my sanity and growl at him some more.

But today. Today he is my mate, and I wait for him to approach the cage as he's insistently done every time he notices I wake up from another nightmare.

Crouching low, he puts his fingers through the holes in the cage, offering them to me.

A rush of shame runs through me. I have a memory of my jaws snapping, trying to bite them off because he got too close. And though I'm sure I must've done that once—if not plenty of times—since he's brought me here with him, there's no fear or trepidation in his scent as he gives me his fingers again.

I have no desire to bite him. Instead, I let out a whine in the back of my throat as I tiptoe toward his outstretched fingers.

I prod them with my snout, taking in Lucas's scent as my wet nose bumps against his warm fingertips. The first time he touched my fur, I growled at him. The second, I drew blood. Somewhere around the fifth time is when I snapped... but now? I preen as Lucas rubs my muzzle before dipping beneath my chin, giving it a comforting scratch.

I want to touch him. I want to hold him. He's my mate—no matter who I am, I know that Lucas Guidry is mine—and I want to launch myself at this male, wrap my human arms around him, and never let him go.

But I *can't*. I'm a wolf, and no matter how he cajoles, begs, and even uses his alpha nature against me, I haven't figured out how to go back to being a human woman again.

Is it a mental block? It has to be. How the hell can I go back to being twenty-five-year-old *human* Fallon when every time I look down, I see golden paws and remember that I'm *not*?

He takes heart in the fact that I'm nuzzling his palm. But when he tries again to explain how exactly I'm supposed to

switch shapes once more and I all I can do is whimper softly, he takes a deep breath.

His features sharpen as his cheeks hollow. Frustration roils off of him, but he pulls it back easily.

The Alpha is in full control, and I swivel my head, showing my throat, submitting to him.

Lucas blows a rush of air through his nose. “Fallon?”

My ears twitch in response. I’m Fallon, but I’m broken, and all I need right now is *him*.

I don’t know how he can tell that it’s me again. That I yearn for my mate, no matter what shape I’m in, and that I’d do anything for him—if I could.

He nods. “Very well. If you can’t change back for me, then I’ll shift for you.”

I scrabble against the floor of my cage, watching him closely as he rises to his feet.

My mate strips off his shirt, careful to leave the black scarf tied around his thick throat. He doesn’t have any shoes on since we’re at the pack house, the two of us together in the fancy piano room that means so much to us both. He makes quick work of his jeans, though, the material landing with a *thump* on the floor beside his shirt.

The moment he’s naked, he bows his back, bracing his hands in front of him as he drops to the floor. The shift takes over mid-fall, the scarf he wore when he was still human fluttering beneath his oversized paw as the massive black wolf hits the ground.

Lucas gives his body a shake, fluffing out his fur before padding over to my cage.

Even during my coherent moments, I’ve never been able to unlock the cage. There are strange pads near that side—pee pads, I think with a horrified human thought, that I’ve been *using*—that I avoid. When Lucas feeds me, he slips it through the bars, but I don’t remember leaving this cage since I’ve been in it.

He does something. Going up on his back legs, he slaps at the cage door with his paws. Next thing I know, the door to my cage is open.

Lucas yips encouragingly at me.

I want to go to him. I want to prove to my mate that I'm all right now, that he made the right choice to trust me enough to let me join him outside of these metal bars.

But what if I snap again? What if I attack Lucas? I swore I killed him until I was lucid enough to be grateful that I *didn't*. I love him. My bite... I never meant to hurt him. In the aftermath of mating him—of bonding myself to him—I found myself shifting, and with my new wolfish instincts, I had the overwhelming urge to bite.

I regret it now. I can't tell Lucas with words, though I try with my body language. Lowering my muzzle, tucking my tail between my legs, I move slowly toward him, showing him deference while using my wolf to beg forgiveness from his.

Lucas opens his muzzle, his long pink tongue swiping along the edge of mine. A wolfy kiss, I think, and something shattered inside of me starts to heal. It's like using super glue to put a plate back together. It's holding, but it takes a little time, care, and patience before it can be used again.

That's why, after I ease my way out of the cage and past Lucas's wolf, I walk gingerly around the room. I want to scent everything, see it all with my new eyes. And if I'm also keeping my distance from him while stretching out my legs... just knowing he's in the room with me is enough.

Just not for my mate.

I'm tired. I've been so, so tired for days. I don't even know how many it's been, but I'll do anything to keep from being put back in the cage. Wolf or not, I strive to be on my best behavior, and that leads to me searching for a spot to rest and recover.

I lay down beneath the Grand piano, sprawled out on my belly.

Lucas waits a few moments until I'm settled, then ducks his head, maneuvering his bulk so that he can join me.

I stop breathing as the Alpha lowers himself at my side, but when Lucas curls up around me?

The glue hardening up the broken pieces inside of me seems to work a little faster.

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, MY MATE DOESN'T LEAVE MY SIDE.

I get the feeling that he's afraid that, if he does, any progress I've made will disappear as easily as it does when I close my eyes.

I'm not so sure it won't.

So, despite being the Alpha, Lucas stays with me in the piano room around the clock. Before he would leave when I got too agitated, returning with food he made and a calmer attitude. Not anymore. Except for when he needs to use the bathroom, the only other time he opens the door is when one of the pack knocks at it.

Except for when I'm visibly exhausted again, he also spends most of his time back in his human form. I get why. Now that I've shown signs that I can understand him even though I'm a lost cause, he does more talking now than he has in all the time I've known him.

Lucas plays the piano, too. He constantly feeds me. He talks to me about everything and anything, and though I can't speak while I'm trapped as a wolf, so long as he plays for me whenever I show signs of losing control of myself, I can understand what he's saying. I remember who I am. Who he *is*.

There's only one thing I can't do: return to being human myself.

That makes for some awkwardness that would probably bother me more if I wasn't a wolf. Take the bathroom, for example. He can easily step out to do his business. Not me. And while I did my best to use those damn pee pee pads he put

out for me, the more I remember that I'm really a people, not a wolf, I just... fuck. I can't bring myself to do it.

It's so damn *embarrassing*.

So what do I do? I hide out in the corner and go.

Lucas cleans up any of my messes without a complaint. One of the best things about giving yourself over to your animalistic side is how easy it is to give up human concepts like pride and shame when the wolf is in control. If I have to pee, I pee, and though part of me is so horrified the first time I tinkled in the corner, he takes care of it.

He's doing everything for me, and the most I can do to thank him is curl up at his side and allow him to stroke the space between my ears.

I don't know how long it's been since the full moon. Falling asleep means more dreams I can't avoid, so I push myself to stay awake as long as I can before I give in. Usually that's when Lucas shifts back to his wolf, and the security I feel, having his big wolf next to mine, is enough to lull me into unconsciousness.

The dreams aren't as bad when he's near.

One night, I forget when, I woke up whimpering, the memory of being torn apart by another wolf so fresh, I expect to be a bloody mess when I come to.

I don't know where he was, but the sounds of my claws against the hardwood floor was enough to catch his attention because I fucking lost it and he had to put me in the cage again.

It kills him every time he has to. I try to keep control of myself as best as I can, but when the dreams screw me up, my only instinct is to bite him again. For the sake of not shedding any blood—because, yup, even wolf Fallon freaks out when he starts bleeding—he grips my muzzle, hefting me up, then slides me back into my cage until I'm good again.

The ache inside of him echoes down our bond. When I experience emotions that aren't mine, I realize that that's what's happening. It's my turn to take care of him.

I just hope it's not too late.

Lucas is doing everything he can, but once he catches on that I'm responding to his emotions, he caps them. He pulls them back. Part of me feel like I've lost him, while I wonder if I really ever had him.

When I'm not lost to my wolf, I remember his sigh. When he saw me curled up in the cage, tail wrapped around me, ears arrowed back, Lucas sighed, then scrubbed his hand over his face.

I miss his glower. What I wouldn't give to say something snarky to him, or maybe ask him one of my hundred questions, and get that old familiar glower in return.

I'm sorry, Lucas. I'm so fucking sorry...

But being sorry isn't enough to help me find my way back to him, and I only hope that—when I finally *do*—he'll still be there waiting for me.

That's what he said, right? To me... to *her*... to us... that's what Lucas promised.

Hold on a little longer, Luc. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 3

QUICKSILVER



I'm in the cage again.

When it's just Lucas and me, he lets me roam around the piano room, stretching my legs. So long as I'm not being aggressive, he encourages me to.

But something's different—again. Because today? It's not just Lucas and me.

There are three others in the room.

Eleanor is sitting cross-legged at that backside of my cage, fingers stroking my tail fur.

I like Eleanor. She visits me sometimes, her cheery tone making me feel like this is just a tiny blip, that I can fix this. Once I could understand what she was saying, it was almost exactly like that.

“Come back to Lucas. The Alpha needs you. C'mon, sweetie. You're really going to go all wolf on me, leaving me to be the only human in the pack? No, no... let's see you in your skin again, yeah? You've got this.”

I don't got this.

Lucas has told me so many times before that all I have to do is reach down deep, tell my wolf to back off and let Fallon out. If only I had any freaking clue how to do that.

Eleanor's mate is here, too. Kirk. I remember Kirk. He's a delta, so his wolf seems to be as powerful as mine, only he's been a wolf a lot longer than I have. When his dark eyes land

on me, I want to challenge him to take his place in the pack, but I don't.

Eleanor wouldn't like it. Neither would Lucas. He gets so disappointed when I growl, so though I want to know, I force it back.

Progress.

Kirk's not the only reason I want to bare my fangs. It's the other wolf in the room. The other female.

I don't like her.

At first, I think it's *because* she's a she-wolf. I've picked up notes in her scent that match mine now, that I find in Lucas, and know it's because she's like me: masquerading as a human while, really, she's got a wolf inside of her just waiting to break free.

But something about her rubs my fur the wrong way, and it takes me longer than it should to remember who she is.

Jade.

The she-wolf who lusts for my mate. Who challenged me before I know I was a wolf, too, and who has done nothing but fuck with me since we met.

I snarl at her. Eleanor stops stroking my tail, but I can't help it. Curling my lips over my muzzle, baring my fangs at the she-wolf, I snarl because it just seems like the right thing to do.

The conversation between the three other wolves—Lucas, Kirk, and Jade—was too low for me to follow. I caught a few words, so I know they're talking about something happening tonight. The Luna taking control though she won't be rising... the new moon. That's right. They mentioned it's the new moon.

How? It seems like the moon was only just full...

Lucas's gaze darkens as he turns his attention on Jade. Not what I wanted at all, and the pitch of my snarl only grows louder.

He curses under his breath. And then, gaze darting my way, he says to Jade, “Look what you’ve done. Are you happy?”

She throws her hands up in the air. “I didn’t do a thing! I was just standing here, offering to help you get her to the cabin. That’s it!”

The cabin? What about the cabin?

“You made her snarl. She’s been calm all afternoon... maybe you should go.”

“What’s the matter, Luc? You don’t want any witnesses when your precious mate attacks you again?”

Kirk steps between Lucas and Jade. “Jade. You heard the Alpha. He’s right. We can handle this without you.”

The blonde she-wolf huffs angrily. “This isn’t fair. I know you don’t believe me, but everything I did... it was for the pack. You can’t continue to blame me for this!”

“I’m not.” Lucas’s jaw goes tight. “But you’re also right. I don’t believe you.”

At a nod from his Alpha, Kirk steps back where he was.

Jade doesn’t go anywhere.

She hesitates a moment before she says in an unusually soft tone, “An Alpha can sense when one of his packmates is lying to him. I’ve never been anything but loyal—”

“To who, Jade?”

“To you. To the pack. She’s an echo, Luc. She’s not Jolie—”

She’s wrong there. Sometimes, I think I might be.

Lucas disagrees. “Two for two. I know she’s not Jolie. She’s Fallon, and she’s *mine*. My mate. She was pack the moment I took her under my protection. That means you owe her your loyalty, too, Jade. After all these years... I thought you would back me up on this.”

“I didn’t want to see you hurt again!”

“I’m the Alpha. It’s my responsibility to keep the rest of the pack safe.

“You’re the Alpha, but I—” Her green eyes glitter as she cuts herself short. “I don’t have a mate. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I saw what you had with Jolie before she was gone. I saw what it did to you. Spending seventy years with Kirk and Ellie being all lovey-dovey has only made it worse. Sometimes I want that. Other times I wish it would go back to the days when it was just the four of us wolves, no outsiders allowed. But that’s my problem. I tried to make up for it. I *did*. I thought... if she knew that she can’t beat fate, you’d get her back. No secrets, Luc. You told me that once when you wanted to introduce Jolie to the pack. No secrets between mates.”

“It’s not the same—”

“Don’t you think I could see that? You did Jolie from us. But this one... she was there from the beginning. But even if you didn’t realize you were heading down the same path, we did. Me. Tristan. He wanted her for himself so he stepped back. Not me.

“So I told her we were wolves. She didn’t care. I left her the photos of Jolie. She still chose you, Luc. I did it because waiting around too long is how you lost your last mate. Did you really want to lose this one?”

“You never liked Fallon,” Eleanor says.

Fallon. That’s me. I’m Fallon.

I’m *Fallon*—

“Of course not. I didn’t like her for the same reason I didn’t like you in the beginning, Ellie.” Jade shrugs. “I thought she was human.”

Kirk snorts, gesturing at me and my cage.

“She was before. She’s not now.”

“Then apologize to her.”

Jade’s head whips around. Smart she-wolf. She’s careful not to look Lucas in the eye, though she’s more snappish than she should be as she asks, “What did you say?”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Fallon.”

“She’s locked in her first shift. *Feral*. Even if I did, she wouldn’t have any idea what I was saying.”

“You don’t know that,” Eleanor says from her spot near me. “Maybe not that first week when she was frightened. I would be frightened, too. I spent my whole life believing I was human and if I suddenly shifted... she’s doing better than I would, I assure you.”

Lucas looks at Jade, but he says nothing else. He just waits.

She sucks in a breath. Holds it. Exhales.

And then, in a tone that I almost actually believe, she directs a quick, “I’m sorry,” to my cage before spinning on her heels, storming out through the open door to the piano room.

I watch her go. Even in this state, I’m so shocked that Jade actually apologized, I don’t notice it when Lucas nods his head or Eleanor—reacting as though that’s some signal she’s been waiting for—reaches past the bars of the cage again until she pins my shoulders this time.

The human woman is so much stronger than you would imagine. My muzzle hits the bottom of the cage with a *thunk*, a whine begins in my throat, and Eleanor looks imploringly over at my mate as he hitches up his jeans before crouching down to the floor.

He has something in his hand. I don’t know what it is, though my nose catches a faint metallic stink similar to blood that I scrabble with my back paws trying to escape him.

I never had a chance.

Not when the human half of me wants nothing more than to enjoy Lucas’s touch, even if he does pinch my skin before jabbing me with something sharp.

I trust him. Instinctively, I trust this male. He wouldn’t hurt me. So even as the edge of my vision goes black, my heart rate slowing down, the connection between my human half and the wolf I currently am growing hazy and intangible... even as

whatever he injected me with takes me under, I shutter as I close my eyes, but I don't fight him.

Because I trust him.

Because I love him.

Because he's *mine*.

I COULD'VE BEEN ASLEEP FOR TEN MINUTES OR THREE HOURS, but I wake up again as suddenly as I passed out.

It's weird. My head is fuzzy. My limbs feel heavy. A peek down my muzzle reveals that I'm still a wolf, but if I had kept my eyes closed, I would've thought I was Fallon. I *feel* like Fallon. Maybe Fallon after a bit of a bender, sure, but whatever he did to me, I feel more like myself than I have since I went wolfy.

Lucas's scent filters in through my snout. It's not as potent as it was when we were back in the piano room, and I expect that that means he was with me, but he isn't anymore. However, when I look around, I let out a yip of surprise when I see him sitting only a few inches behind me.

I jump, only because I wasn't expecting him to be there. But since I also didn't notice that I was laid out on that old brown couch in his hunting cabin, gravity takes over and I—along with the ugly afghan that was tucked beneath my furry body—and I land in a pile of tangled limbs and scratchy yarn on the floor.

Lucas leaps gracefully to his bare feet. He's wearing his usual clothes: tight black shirt, black jeans, and the black scarf still tied around his throat. The tail of it flutters behind him as he bends low, scooping me and the blanket up.

Have you ever heard a wolf squeal? I didn't even know I could, but when Lucas hugs me to his chest, then deposits me back on the couch after untangling my paws from the loops in the afghan, I made a sound that is suspiciously a squeal, only rougher because it's not designed to come from a wolf's throat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

He didn’t frighten me. I just... he caught me off-guard, that’s all. I bump his forearm, letting him know that all is forgiven.

Even if I have no idea why he obviously *drugged* me to bring me to his cabin.

It’s just the two of us. Even with my suddenly weaker nose, I don’t catch any other scents except for him and mine.

I lay my paws in front of me, sprawled out on my bell, waiting for him to give me some kind of explanation.

Lucas lowers himself back to the couch, taking the small amount of cushion that I’m not covering already.

“Fallon... *sucre*. Are you with me?” He runs his fingers over the top of my paw. “Give me some sign that you’re okay.”

Lowering my muzzle, I lick the top of his hand. It’s salty, and it’s Lucas, and I chuff deep in my chest.

Taking that as the sign I meant it as, Lucas grabs the scruff of fur around my face. He nuzzles the edge of my jaw, sighing softly before he releases me. “I’m sorry that I had to do that. It’s the only thing I could think to do.”

I cock my head, questioningly.

“The injection,” he clarifies. “The quicksilver.”

What the fuck is quicksilver?

He must sense that I’m clueless because he explains a little further.

“It’s not as harmful to wolf shifters as actual silver. It just—”

I’m barely listening.

Holy shit. He shot me up full of mercury? Lucas and the others were born way before my time, but did they still think mercury wasn’t a poison back then? Because *I* know that mercury is a poison.

I yelp.

He makes a soothing sound. “It’s not what you think. For a shifter”—and, yeah, there’s no denying I’m a shifter—“it’s nothing more than a sedative that calms the wolf and puts the human in charge. It does have the effect of putting you to sleep for a few hours. I used that to move you to the cabin in case you wanted privacy, but now that you’re here... it’s the new moon. I thought... between the Luna having some control and weakening your wolf during your first shift, it should bring you back.”

Lucas huffs. “It should’ve. The quicksilver... you should’ve changed back while you were asleep. I don’t know why you haven’t. I know you’re still in there, sucre. Please. For whatever reason you’re clinging to your fur, if you care for me at all... please. Come back to me.”

He’s pleaded with me before. He’s asked me to shift back, begged me to shift back, even promised me the world if I would just return to him.

I couldn’t do it. I still don’t know why. Suddenly, it seems so fucking *simple*. Like there’s a light switch tucked somewhere beneath my rib cage, the it flicked ‘on’ so that I’m stuck in my fur, all I have to do is instinctively flip it to ‘off’ and—

Why did I think it would hurt? It doesn’t. More like scratching an itch, there’s a moment of tiny discomfort, but instead of digging my nails into my skin, I stretch my back and, an instant later, I’m on all fours.

But I don’t mean four paws.

Two hands. Two knees.

My fingers are bumping against Lucas’s muscular thigh. I draw them back, scooting away from him if only because a part of me realizes that my ass is hanging out, stuck up in the air.

The other part could care less because I have a naked ass to show off—and a mate who is trembling relief as he reaches out, stroking a lock of my hair.

Not fur.

Hair.

“I... I’m back.” A giddy laugh rips out of me. “I’m *me* again.”

CHAPTER 4

NEW MOON



For the moment, I couldn't care less which *me* I am.

I have ten fingers, ten toes, two legs, and no more fur. So I'm naked. That was bound to happen. Wolves don't wear clothes, but he's my mate, and he's already murmuring my name—Fallon, he's calling me *Fallon*—as he shifts to one knee, towering over me, taking my cheek in his hand.

My laugh dies the instant I see the look of hunger replacing the one of hope on his face. His lips part, his amber-colored eyes flash, and his mouth is dipping lower, lower...

Lucas kisses me. Slanting his open mouth over mine, his slips his tongue into my mouth, groaning as though he's hungered these last two weeks—because, if it's the new moon, it's been at least two weeks—and the only taste that would satisfy him was mine.

I respond as enthusiastically as I can, just about climbing into his lap to get as close as possible to this man.

My mate.

Moving his lips just enough that he could speak against my cheek, he wraps his arms around my middle as he rasps, "I missed you. Luna, I missed you so damn much." He squeezes me tightly, all of his worry that he'd never get a chance to do this again obvious in the gesture. "I don't know where you went. I don't know why you did. But, please, don't ever go where I can't follow again. *Please.*"

I throw my arms around his neck. "I promise."

That's all he needs to hear. And though I know that moving on from what the last few weeks were like for the both of us isn't going to be as simple as making a vow I'm not so sure I can uphold, for the moment, it *is*.

I understand his 'privacy' comment now. He's still fully dressed, and though he murmurs that he brought a change of clothes for me because he was so determined to find a way to bring me back, I don't bother getting dressed. Not when I lost out on the rest of my bonding night, and something inside of me is telling me that I still need to claim him.

When I was a feral wolf, I interpreted it as the need to bite him. In my skin, that urge to mark him with claws or my teeth is gone. I mean, the longer he holds me on his lap, the more I want to initiate mating with him if only to remind him that we *are* mates... but I almost *sense* that he has a mark as prominent as the slightly raised scar I'm probing near the base of my throat.

And when I follow that strange instinct and it draws my attention to the scarf he still has on, my stomach goes tight.

I lick my bottom lip, pulling enough away from him that our eyes meet.

After laying my palms against his t-shirt, I ask. "Can I?"

"You can do anything you want to me, Fallon."

He might come to regret telling me that, but I don't give him a second to change his mind. With slightly shaky fingers, I reach for the knot in the scarf.

Lucas flares his nostrils, a muscle ticking in his cheek, but he doesn't stop me.

Determined, I remove the scarf—and when I see what Lucas has been hiding from me, I gasp.

His throat is covered in so many pale thin silver lines, it takes me a second to make sense of what they could be. They almost look like a shimmering tattoo of some kind of abstract design, but the closer I study it, the more I see that the darker parts create an outline about three inches apart.

It's slightly raised, with a few points that look like he's been bitten by fangs—

—*because he has been bitten by fangs.*

This isn't a tattoo. This is a reminder of what I did to him with my teeth.

My fingers wrapped around his throat, I rub my fingers along the silver scars that cover most of the front. It feels just like the mark on my skin, only there are so many different ones.

Of course. Lucas bit me just once. But me? I kept chomping until he somehow got me to stop.

“I did this.”

“Fallon—”

No.

Scurrying away from him, I quickly climb off of his lap, and take a few frantic steps away from him. My opal bounces between my tits with how fast I try to put a little space between us, but no matter how fast I go, Lucas is faster.

“No. Fallon.” Is it my imagination or is he purposely using my name more than usual, just to make sure that I remember who I am and *stay* here? “It's not what you think—”

“It isn't?” My voice sounds slightly hysterical, probably because I *am*. “Those scars you have aren't from where I tore my fangs through your throat, trying to *kill* you.”

Most of my time as a wolf is hazy. But if there's one thing I remembered and just really, really hoped was another bad dream, it's how I definitely ripped out a chunk of Lucas's throat with my fangs after I first shifted.

“You weren't trying to kill me,” he begins.

I wave my hand at his throat. “Could've fooled me. How did you even survive that? Oh my God, Luc. I... I can't believe. I'm so fucking sorry. I just—”

His hands land on my shoulders, keeping me in place so that I can't escape him.

“You forget that I was feral, too, sucre. I had seventy years to learn control and there were times I still couldn’t. That was your first shift. An *unexpected* shift. I bit you. Don’t ever blame yourself for biting me.”

Is that what he calls it? “But your throat—”

“These are my mating marks. I won’t lie and say you weren’t a little... enthusiastic—”

Oh my God.

“—but that makes them even more special. You marked me so hard, no one will ever doubt that I have a mate who didn’t want to bond herself to me. Because that?” He taps the scars. “That’s what these mean to me. Proof that I’m yours. So don’t fret, my mate. I’m proud to wear your bite on my skin.”

I.. I don’t know what to say to that.

Lucas’s thumb ghosts over the point where my shoulder meets my neck. “Besides, it’s only fair. You wear mine.”

I haven’t seen the bite there just yet. Well, *obviously*. But I’ve seen Eleanor’s so I have an idea what to expect. And, yes, Lucas’s are so much more obvious... but he’s not lying to me. When he said he was proud... through the bond tying us together, I can tell just how much he meant that.

My panic ebbs, hysteria stepping aside as he lowers his finger to caress the mark on my skin.

I shudder, and a part of me blazes when Lucas’s amber-colored eyes burn like lava as they dip down to watch my tits shake with the motion.

His hand drops, settling along the curve of my bare boob. He squeezes it gently, and I gasp, arching my back so that I’m pressing it even more against his hold.

Is he distracting me? Probably.

Am I going to let him?

Nothing is going to stop me.

He’s holding my boob, waiting to see how I’m going to react. Will I jerk out of his hold, moving further away from

him? Will I crumple to the floor, dissolving into sobs after he already told me that he's happy I savaged him? I know he's a shifter and he looks at things differently, but will he expect me to shove him away, ignore the need to mate him, and suddenly develop some kind of faux sense of modesty?

If so, he hasn't been paying attention.

Lucas is holding my boob. Hey. Fallon is back. If anything, I want to prove to myself that being a shifter hasn't changed me all that much. Turnabout's fair play, babe. It's only right that I get to reach down, cupping his cock.

"Oh." I trail my fingers along the erection I find pushing against his jeans. "*Oh.*"

Why am I surprised? I shouldn't be. Not only has Lucas confessed that he wanted to mate me from the first moment he had me laid out on the couch in this very same cabin, but I'm naked. I've been naked since I shifted back. I guess I'm more shifter than I thought, because it didn't bother me one bit... but once he saw that I was okay, I think I'd be insulted if my naked body didn't turn my mate on.

Nudity isn't a big deal to shifters—unless there's a sexual attraction between them.

For all the issues we've had and overcome in our relationship, that's never been one of them.

We're mates. Sex comes with the territory.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that I've fucked a guy or two just to make the loneliness go away for the night. I wasn't picky. I was rarely choosy. If I needed to forget myself for the moment, why not get some pleasure out of it?

That's not what I want from Lucas. Sure, I'd be full of shit if I acted like I wasn't about to bang him to stop dealing with the reality of our situation for the moment. I'm human again, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm a shifter, and I'll have to confront that.

Later. I'll do that later.

For now...

“I need you,” I tell him. Snapping the button on his jeans with my thumb in between tilting my chin back, waiting for Lucas to kiss me, I shudder out a breath. “I *need* you, babe.”

“I’m right here—”

I dip my hand beneath his waistband, enjoying the way he jolts when my fingers find his heated flesh. “I need you now.”

Lucas was the one distracting me before, but he seems to have second thoughts now. “How are you feeling? Maybe you should lay down. Are you hungry?”

Smiling up at him, going up on my tiptoes so he can’t miss my meaning when I say, “*Starving.*”

His cock is in my hand. I’ve taken it out, running my thumb over the head. There’s already some moisture there, but I release him, bringing my hand to my mouth. I give my hand a leisurely lick, then return it to his dick, stroking him.

Lucas went still the moment I slipped my tongue out between my lips. Throwing his head back, he closes his eyes, the cords in his neck standing out on his neck as he groans.

I see the scars again and stutter, his cock falling out of my click hand before I can recover it, and I thought I did without him noticing—but when I look up again, his eyes are watching me closely.

I see lust there. Desire. Need.

Want.

But there’s also worry... and that’s just not going to work for me right now.

So I stroke him again, squeezing the tip in a mockery of what it’ll be like once he shoves his way inside of my achy pussy, and peek up at him. His gaze has gone heavy-lidded.

I can do better than that.

Burying my face against his shirt, I bite through the material.

I have human teeth again. I could barely get through the fabric, let alone any skin.

It doesn't matter. Just the fact that his mate bit him again has my Alpha going fucking *wild*.

I have three seconds to think that maybe biting really is his kink when Lucas lets go of my tit, shoves his jeans and his underwear down around his thighs, freeing his cock completely.

He doesn't bother with his shirt. Taking off his jeans? Why bother? I'm naked, his cock is ready, and he's strong enough to pick me up by the waist.

This isn't the first time we've assumed a position like this. Though I would've guessed that he'd prefer doggy since he's a wolf, Lucas seems to get off on showing me how strong he is. Whether he's hoisting me up against a tree for leverage, or he just encourages me to wrap my legs around his waist so that he can hold me in the air with only his hands... whatever the fastest way for him to seat himself inside of me works for him.

Holy shit. He's so strong, he only needs *one* hand to keep me lifted. With the other, he trails his pointer finger through my slit, checking to see if I'm ready. Once he has physical proof that I'm *sopping* wet for my mate, he grabs his cock, angles his hips and pushes.

Yes.

He doesn't move straight away. Instead, keeping me pinned on his length, he buries his face against my shoulder, nuzzling his cheek against the bite mark he gave me.

"Oh, *sucre*... I've waited so long for you." He doesn't just mean the last two weeks, either. "To take you like this. To make you mean without worrying that the beast would come between us. It's just you and me. It'll always be you and me."

I wish I could believe that. The fact is that, especially *now*, it's not just the two of us. But maybe that's just me thinking like a human when I'm not. Who knows?

It doesn't matter. Nudging him in the ass with my heel, I tell him, "You're my mate."

Taking the hint, Lucas starts moving his hips. "Marked." Another thrust. "Mated." He lowers his head, waiting for me

to bounce a little closer as he fucks me. He started out slow before developing a rhythm that has me half riding him, half going for a ride as he slams into me just the way I like. When I feel something warm against my nipple, I realize he darted out his tongue, swiping at it when I got near enough. A rumble of pleasure runs through him. “*Bonded.*”

You know what the best thing about being bonded is? With the two going between us becoming stronger while our bodies are united, the pleasure is doubled. I sense mine. The way he fills me, fucks me, stretching me until I’m the perfect fit. At the same time, his echoes back around on me, doubling when I notice it, tripling when I *squeeze*.

Lucas roars. That’s the only way I can describe the noise he makes. He roars, and if I thought he was wild before, that’s nothing compared to the male who starts fucking me next.

I’ve been with Lucas before. He can be a slow and gentle lover at first, but once he accepted that he didn’t have to hide his supe side, that the first time I ever mated him, I already knew he was a wolf—and that I could take anything he wanted to dish out—he always lost control before he came.

Of course, he won’t finish until he’s sure that I’ve come first. He’s a wild lover, not a selfish one, and I’m not surprised when he spins around, laying me out on the couch.

That gives him two free hands now. One of them trails down my calf before he grabs my ankle. Never once slowing his pace, he lifts my ankle high, spreading me even wider as he thrusts so quickly, it’s more like he’s trying to see how much of him I can take.

Give it all to me, babe. That’s just how I like it.

One hand is on my ankle. The other? He starts rubbing my clit, giving me the stimulation I need to start climaxing around him.

I was already close. Something about the way he fucks me like a desperate man, like I’m the only one he wants, the only one he trusts to be this open and vulnerable and *wild* with... it doesn’t take much before I’m squealing out his name.

A real honest-to-God human squeal, too.

Lucas is ready to follow right behind me. He's breathing heavily, though he's barely broken a sweat. Not from lifting me up, carrying me around, fucking like a damn machine... oh, no. He's panting because... because...

Because my stoic, grumpy shifter mate is showing me just how afraid he was that I was lost to him again—and as he thrusts into me again, bucking up so insistently, I don't know where his cock ends and my pussy begins, I don't see seat.

I see *tears*.

“I thought I lost you.” His big body shudders as he allows his climax to overtake him. He keeps up connected as he finishes, gasping out his release before he bows his body over mine, taking another kiss.

I dig my nails into his back again, clutching him to me.

Not gonna lie.

I thought I lost him, too.

CHAPTER 5

THE WOLF'S HEAD



What does it say about me that I don't feel completely back to myself until I've been banged boneless?

That my lover is Lucas probably has a lot to do with it. As much as I've loved the connection you get with another person when you're having sex, having this tie stretching between us turning into an undeniable bond leading from his soul to mine makes it a thousand times better.

All that hokey BS about two becoming one that my first ever boyfriend spouted to get me to give up my virginity to him senior year... I thought he was full of it, even though he did manage to talk me into fucking him in the backseat of his mom's old car when we were hanging out one night. Now I almost feel like Kev deserves an apology. Because after last night, I finally know what he means.

This morning, I ache in all the right places. The cabin is small with shitty ventilation. Add that to my new super sniffer and I wake up to our lingering sex in the air, Lucas's musk, and his scent marking every single inch of my skin.

I needed that. In a way, we truly claimed each other last night. And, yeah, I know that's what we did out in the woods during the full moon. We finalized our bond and broke the curse when I fucked the beast, but though we knew that's what we were doing, it wasn't sex just because I loved Lucas and he's the only guy I want to fuck for the rest of my life. Not like when I confronted him in the piano room, or the time he tried to do his wolfy proposal by making me a special dinner—that I naively refused because I didn't really know better. I

definitely made it up to him that night, inviting him into my bed where he stayed before slipping away.

He hasn't gone anywhere now. In fact, the only way the two of us can get any closer is if he angled his hips just right, feed his cock back inside of me instead of leaving it nestled between my thighs.

We're both naked, curled up on the couch. His body is a comforting weight pinning me in place, burning me up from the inside out. He was snoring earlier—big rasping snores that are probably what woke me up in the first place—but he's settled into a steady breathing as though he's finally found a little peace.

Ah, babe. Luc deserves it. If my wolf going the a little lost, a little feral the way I have was hell on me, it was murder on my poor mate. I can't even imagine how hard it must've been for him, sensing my panic, trying to work me through something that should've been impossible while also dealing with seeing his mate slip through his grasp so soon after he finally claimed her.

What if I hadn't come back? What if the shock of my first shift and the realization that I really *am* Jolie broke my brain so badly, I could never be *Fallon* again? To break Lucas Guidry's heart twice... I don't want to think about it.

So I don't.

Instead, I shimmy out from under Lucas's arm. Even in his sleep, he's possessive, holding me so tightly that it takes a few seconds to escape him without waking him up.

He needs his rest. Even if it wasn't for how I kept him up for most of the new moon, he barely slept the last two weeks. He's an overprotective Alpha who is used to giving his packmates orders and having them jump to obey. It must have killed him to lose me so soon after we mated; worse because I was right there, but no matter what, he couldn't get me to come back to him.

But he did. Whether it's because he brought me to the alpha cabin, or my newfound shifter side isn't as strong when

the moon is gone, or my one-sided rivalry with Jade was just enough to bring me back around... it doesn't matter. I'm not a wolf anymore.

Something's different. Something's changed. It's not just the sensation that I'm two souls in one body. It's like I'm *three*: Fallon, Jolie, and the blonde wolf. All of them belong to Lucas, though, and if only for this moment, that's enough for me.

I'll have to shift again, but on my own terms this time. Now that I know I can, it would be ridiculous to refuse to just because the full moon fucked me up so bad. As for Jolie... I'm not so sure how I'm going to deal with that. Ignoring it seems like my MO, and I managed to take control as *me*, but I can still sense her there, buried deep inside of me.

The dreams... the *memories*. Before I came out of the haze I was in as a wolf, I struggled to figure out what belonged to me, and what belonged to her.

As I climb to my feet, bending low to grab the afghan on the floor, I have the same sensation now as I look around the cabin.

When Lucas brought me here during the new moon, hoping that Luna and the cabin would be enough to trigger the change in me, I saw the cabin with two sets of eyes: mine and Jolie's. We'd both been here before, we both had vivid memories of our time with Lucas here.

Jolie's were more x-rated, and it doesn't matter that Lucas is *my* mate and that I'm technically *her*. Call me a fucking hypocrite if you want, but it bothered the crap out of me, seeing Lucas with anyone else.

My memories revolved around the time Lucas rescued me from the witches, then both times I found the broken, twisted beast inside of these four walls. He told me to 'run' once, but my favorite memory is waking up on that same couch again, seeing the beast, knowing that Lucas saved me from Remy... and then convincing him that I was ready to make him *mine*.

I did that again last night, and though I'm still feeling a little ginger as I wrap the afghan around me, I'm a-OK with that.

What I'm not a-OK with? Is the lifeless black eyes of the wolf head mounted on Lucas's wall.

Weird, huh? I knew it was there. He has a deer head mounted, plus the wolf, and a collection of weapons... but it's the wolf that catches my attention this morning.

Weeks ago, I stared up at the ax over there. I'd jokingly thought of Lucas as the huntsman who rescued me in the twisted version of Red Riding Hood I was living in at the time, and part of the reason I did was because of his wall of weapons—and the mounted animal heads he had up on the wall. The wolf just added to the story, especially since I had no idea that Lucas himself was a shifter at the time.

But it gets weirder. During the night of the full moon—when I first learned Lucas was the feral beast my grandmother tried to sacrifice me to—I followed Jade's advice and tracked him down to the alpha cabin. Before he told me to 'run', I got a peek at what he did to the place when he battled his feral side.

He *destroyed* it.

The couch was knocked over. The afghan tossed in a corner. There was wood and fluff and debris everywhere, but the biggest mess came from that wolf.

The taxidermied wolf head was on the floor, slashed apart as sand poured out of it. The next time I visited him in the cabin, it was either repaired or replaced. Everything was cleaned up, like his fit of rage didn't happen, and if I hadn't seen the mess myself, I never would've known.

Later, Lucas admitted it was because his 'human' side was preventing the beast from going after the one thing it wanted: *me*. The curse made it so that Lucas was forced into becoming the broken version of himself—part man, part wolf—twice a month. On the full moon and the new moon, he turned into the

beast all because he lost his fated mate before he could bond her to him.

I returned to him. The beast wanted to rut, but Lucas refused to let it take control. So he locked himself up in the cabin like he'd done twice a month for the past seventy years, only it was so much worse because both he and the beast knew I was within running distance—and that was before Jade conned me into almost serving myself up to the beast on a silver platter.

Something about the wolf head snags my attention. Is it because it doesn't make sense that a shifter would put of the head of one of his kind? Or because I don't understand why he'd rip into it with his claws, then *fix* it?

That's not all I don't get, either.

If I'm being honest, I don't really understand the curse. I know what it did, and how I was expected to break it, but nearly two months after living in Winter Creek, no one's ever told me how exactly the curse came about after Jolie died.

The witches blamed the wolves for her death. The wolves blamed the witches.

Lucas blamed himself.

And, somehow, the entire town got cursed because of it... until my grandmother finally tracked me down, sent me a telegram, and invited me here to break it.

I did, right? When I asked Lucas about that earlier, he confirmed that he was in complete control during the new moon for the first time since they were cursed. That means it has to broken...

Right?

I really freaking hope so.

As I continue to look up at the wall, my gaze darts from the wolf to the deer head.

Now, to me, the deer makes sense. Wolves in the wild eat deer, and I've sat through enough meals at the pack house to know that the wolves of Winter Creek love their meat. Venison

hasn't been on the menu yet, but that's probably because of me. I've never had it, and so many of the meals I shared with the pack were coincidentally my favorites.

Yeah. I snort under my breath. Coincidentally my furry ass. How much do I want to bet that the meals I like just so happen to be some of Jolie's favorites, too?

Whatever. That's not the point. It's the wolf head that's making me uneasy this morning.

I look at it this way: Lucas is a werewolf. A wolf shifter. How is this any different from putting a human's head on the wall?

I don't know, but I don't think I like it. And, yet, I can't look away—

“What are you thinking there, sucre?”

Holy shit. Lucas's sleep-roughened voice has my eyes just about rolling in the back of my head. It's so goddamn sexy, and the first time that I'm hearing it.

Isn't that weird? I've never fucked him, then slept beside him. The first few times we were intimate, Lucas made his excuses to leave after we were finished. Of course, that set of my 'rejection' radar big time, making things even more shaky between us, but I still slept with him—and he still slipped away.

Then there was the night we formally bonded. Considering I shifted into a wolf, then went for his throat before ending up in a cage, it's pretty obvious that cozying up to him didn't happen.

As wolves, we slept together—but no fucking happened. I didn't expect it to. During one of my hours-long chats with Eleanor, before I accepted that I *was* Lucas's fated mate, I was curious. Obviously, it would've been really fucking weird if Kirk turned into his wolf to be intimate with Ellie as a human, but what if, like, Tristan and Jade got together? Both shifters... would they be into having sex in their beast form?

After Eleanor got the color back in her face, the answer was a firm 'no'. Though they call it mating, sex is purely for

their human sides.

That's why it seemed so important to Lucas—and to me—to consummate our new mating again last night. And while it took a little more prodding on my part to make sure he understood I wanted him desperately, something about this morning after is even more amazing to me.

Or it would be if I wasn't so freaked out by this wolf head all of a sudden.

"It's that," I admit, pointing at the head while still meeting the curious look in Lucas's eyes. "It's weirding me out. Like, it's a wolf. We're wolves. It doesn't seem right to have it up there."

A muscle tics in Lucas's cheek. "You don't recognize it?"

Uh-oh. I don't like the way he said that.

You don't recognize it... that means he thinks I should. Or that Jolie would.

Change the subject, Fallon. You don't want to know—

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I don't think I do."

"That's the wolf that killed you."

Goddamn it. I knew I shouldn't have asked.

"What?" The wolf that— "*What?*"

The afghan slips from my fingers, landing in a pile on the floor as I left my hand, cradling it against my palm.

I lost my pump. Fleeing like Cinderella through the woods, I kick off the other, only regretting it when the wolf at my heels grows closer. It's not a shifter. I know that much. It's smaller, fiercer, and single-mindedly determined to hunt me down...

I shake my head, knocking the flash of a memory out of it as I purposely let my hand fall back to my side.

Lucas frowns. "Fallon?"

If he had called me 'Jolie' just then, I think I might've lost it.

“Sorry. This is still so crazy to me. Like, I know you want me to believe that I used to be someone else.” And, considering the flashes of memory I keep getting, and the woman’s voice popping into my brain, I can’t pretend that I *wasn’t*. “But then I look at that thing and I... *fuck*.”

He’s at my side, taking my elbow. “Are you okay? You’ve gone so pale.”

“There was so much blood,” I whisper.

Because that’s what is running through my mind right now. The chill of the rain, the heat of the excruciating pain as the wild wolf’s claws and fangs tear into my flesh, blood spraying everywhere...

I see it now, and though I don’t snap or hurl like I want to, I tremble.

Blood...

It’s always bothered me. For as long as I could remember, it’s been my one phobia. It was so bad when I was younger, I would pass out whenever I saw the stuff. If it was my own? It was even *worse*.

Makes sense, though? I get ripped apart by a rabid wolf in a past life... why wouldn’t the sight of blood bother me in the next one?

I have half a mind to knock the stuffed head to the floor.

I don’t. Instead, I turn away from it, look at Lucas. “What happened to it?”

“I avenged you.”

Something in his voice has me turning into him. Rather than let him think that I’m *rejecting* him this time, I purposely bump my belly against his, wrapped my arms around the small of his back so that we’re touching. Call it instinctive if you want, but it seems suddenly important to make sure he’s with me—and not in the past—as I murmur his name. “Luc?”

He shakes his head, a single curl falling forward, curving near his amber-colored eye. “I couldn’t save you. Jolie... she was *gone*. I begged the Luna, pleaded, offered her anything so

that you'd return to me. I thought she might intervene, and she did. I became the beast the first time that night, and after I tucked my mate's broken body away, I hunted down the wolf. I tore the fucker's head right off, keeping it so that I knew that I at least avenged you. I needed that because, when I went back to bury the body, you were *gone*."

Well, that's good to know. I mean, it would've been kind of creepy if my old body was burning somewhere nearby, but if I was reborn... brought back to life... whatever the moon goddess did, that just helps me lean toward accepting that this was Fate's plan all along—and that I'm not simply a replacement for another woman, but an extension of her.

At least, I hope I've gotten it right...

Even as Lucas speaks, I get the vibe that that's how he sees it.

"You were supposed to meet me at the cabin," he goes on to add. "It was the full moon. We were going to mate." Lucas reaches out, lifting my opal with his pointer finger. "I gave you this when I first asked you to choose me. A mating gift to show you how serious I was. You put it on right away... and were wearing it when I stumbled upon your body in the rain."

I was...

Lucas lets the opal slip off of his fingertip, lowering his hand so he can cup my boob instead. His thumb caresses my nipple, but instead of turning that into a precursor to mating, he holds onto me as he finishes his confession.

"And then," he says softly, "seventy years later, Tristan came back to the pack house and told us that a pretty blonde called Fallon stepped off the train. He didn't notice the opal... he did know that I gave one to Jolie that night... but when I saw you in the window at Marie's manor... I saw it. I knew then, even if you didn't have the same features as Jolie, you were still mine. The Luna finally brought you back to me, and I'm going to do everything I can to prove that I'm worthy of her gift—and *you*."

I swallow roughly under the weight of his emotions. “I never take it off.”

He presses his forehead against mine. “You promised you wouldn’t.”

No. Jolie did.

I remember that. Her joy at being given a gift from her lover, how she vowed she’d wear it forever, and how she still had the chain on her neck, the opal slick with blood when Lucas found her broken body in the rain, howling his grief to the goddess above as he bartered for the life of his intended mate.

I got my opal from my Mom. A gift for my birthday one year, unexpected since most of our funds were going to the treatment that thankfully kept her alive until I was twenty, and my prized possession.

She told me that she got it for a steal, that someone saw my photo on her lock screen and insisted that I have it. Looking back, that’s just another weird thing in a long line of really fucking weird things to happen to me that I just look past, but there you have it. Mom gave me the opal... but Lucas gave it to me first.

I just... when he looks down at me like that, full of hope and love and a hint of fear that he wants me more than I could him... I can’t help but wonder if it’s *me* he sees—or his past.

This is the worst time to bring it up. I know that. The last time I confronted him about Jolie, when Jade—because it had to be Jade—slipped the photos of her under my door, it was the full moon and Lucas was too close to the edge of becoming the beast to really explain.

Now the curse has, I know even more about what happened between him and his first mate, his bite is on *my* neck... and I still can’t get past my feelings of rejection.

I know he never meant to hurt me. He’s a shifter, we both treated me like I was human—since Lucas didn’t even know I could shift until I did—and that meant there were bound to be a couple of miscommunications.

I don't want this to be one of them.

I hesitate a moment, then lower my hands, gripping his naked waist. "Even if I am her, I'm still me. You... you know that, right?"

"Jolie died seventy years ago. The Lucas I was then died with her. When you opened yourself up to me... when you told me you were mine... you brought me back to life, too. You're Fallon. I'm Lucas. And, together, we are forever, *sucre*. I know *that*."

I go up on my tiptoes, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Over the years, I've had plenty of guys and girls coming up with the right thing to get me to join them in bed. It didn't take much, I'll admit, but when Lucas murmurs those words to me, then shifts his head so that I'm kissing him on the mouth instead of just the corner... well, we're both naked, we're mates, and we're alone in the cabin.

Why not take advantage of that?

And that's exactly what we do.

CHAPTER 6

FOLLOW



As much as I want to stay with Lucas in the cabin forever, that's impossible.

I already stole so much of his time. He's the Alpha. He has his responsibilities, and though I might be his mate, both the pack and Winter Creek are counting on him.

When I point that out to him mid-afternoon, he reluctantly agrees. However, instead of reaching for his clothes—and my spare change he brought me in case I came back as a human—he digs inside of a wooden chest on the far corner of the room.

I don't know where that came from. If it was already there and I never noticed it, or the wood blended in so well with the aesthetic of the hunting cabin that the more shocking items in here—the deer! the wolf! the ax!—that it just slipped my eye. Either way, I'm delighted when he pulls out *snacks*.

I could kiss him for that alone. I'm starving, and though the box of cookies and the bag of chips aren't any brand I'm familiar with, they're delicious.

Though they do sit a little heavy in my belly when I realize that my devious mate has an ulterior motive.

We're sitting on the floor together, backs up against the couch, hips touching as we finish our impromptu lunch. I keep thinking I should throw my clothes back on, but then I'll catch the heated look in Lucas's eyes and, well, sue me for enjoying the attention.

Too bad his expression turns from lust-filled to speculative in a heartbeat as he says, “Now that we’re both relaxed and fed, I was wondering something.”

“Shoot.”

“Why don’t you see if you can shift on your own, sucre.”

What? No. “Pass.”

“Fallon—”

I shake my head, wiping the crumbs from my hands on the couch behind me. “I’m gonna, Luc. Promise. It’s just... later, okay?”

So I might be more than a little traumatized after the first one. I can sense my wolf prowling around inside of me, so I know she’s still there, but what if I let her out and get stuck again?

It’s a valid concern. No way I’ll get out of never shifting again, but does it have to be so soon?

I don’t think so. Lucas obviously does, but if there’s one thing my new mate will need to learn and quick, it’s that he might be the Alpha, but that doesn’t mean I’ll always jump to obey.

So, instead, I do a very Fallon thing: I change the subject.

“Let me tell you something. Looks like you guys were right, after all. Jade’s bark really is worse than her bite.” I laugh, bumping my shoulder against his. “She apologized to me. Me! Man, I can’t wait to rub it in when we get back.”

Lucas’s smile turns smug, though the furrows in his brow tells me he knows exactly what I’m doing, and he’s going to let me. “I knew you could understand us.”

Was I not supposed to? Those first few days were rough as my ‘human’ brain retreated to let the wolf in front, but after that... “Is that weird? The way you said that makes me think it’s weird.”

“Not weird,” he assures me. “Just... unusual.”

“‘Unusual’s another way of saying ‘weird’.”

“Nah.” Lucas lifts his arm, settling it over his shoulder. I scoot into his side. “It’s just unusual for a new wolf to understand it when a human talks around them. But that’s because most new wolves are pups. Children. You’re unique.”

“Oh, great,” I tease. “I’m *unique*.”

He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “You are in many, many ways, my mate, but especially because of what you are.”

Lay it on me, Lucas. “And what’s that?”

“A hybrid.”

Oh. That wasn’t what I was expecting him to say. I would’ve put money down it had to do with me being the new Jolie—and, in a way, I guess it is since *she* was two different types of supes, just no benefits from it—but now he has my attention.

“What do you mean?”

“I the supe world, you’re either born a wolf or you’re not. Hybrids aren’t really that common. When a shifter has a human mate, their offspring are shifters. Bloodsuckers”—vampires—“can’t have kids ‘cause they’re dead, so there’s no hybrids if a shifter gets stuck with one of those corpses. And witches... they don’t mate out of their coven so I’ve never known a part witch, part shifter... until you.”

And because Jolie had no powers at all, that probably explains just why witches don’t usually shack up with other supes. It reminds me of the Royal Family of yore. Gotta keep those bloodlines pure, huh?

Only... me shifting into a wolf just goes to show that her powers weren’t missing so much as they were latent. If Jolie had lived long enough to be mated, maybe she would’ve been the wolf instead of me.

Food for thought, I guess.

And that’s not all.

“I guess that’s why my grandmother really thought handing me over to you as the beast was a sacrifice.” I say it

light-hearted, but I kind of mean it. “Not because I could’ve died—”

“I never would’ve harmed you,” vows Lucas.

I pat his naked thigh. “I know, babe. Well, not *then*, but I know now. Still, if Marie really hated the idea of her granddaughter being with the Alpha of the pack, that explains a lot of things.”

Just not the coincidence that Jolie was hunted down the night she was meant to bond with Lucas.

Unless—

“Remy was like that, too,” I remember. “He seemed so insistent that he get a shot with me. Never gonna happen, trust me, but that would explain why he went after Tristan the other night.”

The moment his name is out of my mouth, Lucas goes still. The hum of the bond stretching between us quiets, too, as though he’s purposely concealing his emotions from me.

No need, babe. The way his features sharpen when I glance over at him gives him away.

My mate is *jealous* of his Beta.

I shouldn’t push it. I really shouldn’t, but just mentioning him reminds me of our last meeting.

The last time I saw Tristan, he was his wolf. He had been set upon by Remy, and while he gave as good as he got, Tristan had his fangs to protect him against a silver blade and that was all. Remy stabbed him, he went down, and I could’ve sworn he was dead before he vanished, leaving me alone with the witch before he turned on me instead.

“How is he?” I bite down on my bottom lip. “He never came to visit me when I was...” What’s the best way to describe these last two weeks? I gulp. “You know.”

A shadow covers Lucas’s expression; it’s not his glower, but it’s close enough. “That was on my orders. He needed to heal.”

“Heal?” “From the fight.”

“He ran on an injured leg,” Lucas explains. “As shifters, we can heal a lot.” He taps his throat, drawing my attention to my bite. I still flinch when I see it—and hope that I’ll get over that eventually if only because I know it bothers Lucas—before he reaches out, taking my arm in his hand. With his other, he runs his pointer finger down my inner forearm. “This should’ve been our first clue you were more than you seemed.”

I don’t get it. “There’s nothing there.”

“Exactly. But two full moons ago, Marie cut you with a silver blade. If you were fully human, you’d have a scar. If it wasn’t silver, the wound would’ve gone by morning. Since it was... you had a mark for a week or so, then it was gone.”

And I never even paid attention to that.

“Remy stabbed Tristan with a silver knife. That was two weeks ago. Isn’t he better now?”

Lucas is quiet for a moment. “He’s... better.”

I don’t like the way he says that. “But not completely? Is that why I haven’t seen him since their fight?”

“For the most part.” I wait, and he huffs out a breath. “I told him to heal, and he did. But once he felt he had, he’s been combing the woods.”

“For what?”

His look tells me I should know.

“Remy?” I guess.

“Yes,” confirms Lucas. “I couldn’t go after the witch again, but he’s my Beta. He insisted. He refuses to stop searching for the witch until he can find him, but it seems as though he’s up and disappeared.”

Good riddance. Though that does make me ask, “So that’s it? The curse is over, but the wolves and witches are still at war?”

“He hurt my Beta. He hurt *you*. Marie didn’t step in to control her witch. She’s stayed to her coven, completely abandoning you once word spread around Winter Creek that you shifted.”

I take that as a ‘yes’, then.

I’m not too upset about that. If I knew that all I had to do to get the witches off of my back was fuck Lucas and let him bite me—and that I’d get a gorgeous, devoted mate out of it—I would’t have wasted any of my damn time.

The conversation shifts after that. We talk about everything and nothing, though Lucas steers it away from his Beta, and I throw up the brakes whenever he suggests that shifting takes practice and that he has faith in me.

For the next hour, though, I only have one thought in my mind. If the curse is broken... does that mean that the blood ward snapped, too?

I don’t know, but for my own peace of mind, I’m going to obsess over it until I find out.

I’m also prepared for Lucas to shut me down the moment I mentioned the rope bridge, and while he tries, it’s the hurt in his voice as he asks, “To the train station? What did I do wrong, *sucre*, that you’re so desperate to leave me?”

Holy shit. Is that what he thinks?

I rise up, going to my knees as I take his hand in mine. “I don’t want to leave you, babe.” I pause for a second, then blurt out: “Can I?”

That is quite possibly the worst thing I could’ve said.

“We’re bonded. There’s no taking that back—”

“I don’t want to!” I say hurriedly. Tough when I’ve got my damn foot in my mouth after that last question. “Sorry, I’m so sorry. I just thought... you’re right. We’re bonded. I don’t think that means I *can* leave you.”

Lucas swallows roughly. “Only if you want the feral to return and chase you.”

The idea of him being so desperate for me that he's become that thing again just to come after me... shit. That shouldn't be as hot to me as it is.

"Wherever you go," he adds, his voice becoming a rasped promise, "I'll go. I love you, Fallon. And I will always follow you."

That's just what I needed to hear.

"Then follow me to the train station."

DO I HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT, IF I INSISTED ON LEAVING Winter Creek, that Lucas would follow me to New York?

Actually, I do. He meant what he said. If I wanted to leave, I honestly believe that he'd be right behind me.

Just like he is now.

It did take a little more explanation before he joined me in getting dressed before guiding me through the woods and over to the train station. Once he understood it's just about seeing if the blood ward is gone—that if, worse comes to worse, I *do* need to leave the town, I could... he agrees to accompany me so long as we head home to the pack house together after we check.

And, okay, it does take me pointing out that the odds of the train miraculously rolling through to whisk me away while we're there are slim to none to get him to stop glowering into the dim light of early evening.

"You're right. The train usually rolls through during the full moon and the new moon," he says.

"I know," I tell him. "I remember you saying that."

"And that's if Marie doesn't stop it with her magic."

Ah. So that's what he meant when he said that Marie controls the train as much as she controls most of Winter Creek. At the time he told me about that, I was torn between thinking that Lucas was trying to convince me to stay and

believing my grandmother used her status as the head of Bordeaux Designs to run the town.

But of course it's magic. Of freaking course.

Whatever. Let her hole up in the coven house. So long as she doesn't bother me, I'll do the same, and since the two of us make the trip onto neutral territory without anyone catching the Lucas's wolf's attention, I forget about the witches as I take my mate by the hand and encourage him to follow me up the stairs.

He lets me, though he suddenly becomes a lot heavier as soon as we reach the rope bridge stretched over the raging Winter Creek.

I turn to look over my shoulder, not entirely surprised that his glower has faded into a blank expression that gives nothing away.

I don't need it to. His reluctance to see me set sandal on the the first wooden slat tells me all it has to.

Resting my palms on his chest, feeling the thrum of his racing heart beneath my hands, I say, "Lucas. Big guy. Baby."

He raises his eyebrows. "Baby?"

I give him a small smile. "Would you rather I call you 'puppy'?"

"*Mon chiot*," he whispers huskily.

"*Mon chiot*," I agree.

My puppy.

That was Jolie's pet name for him. It won't be mine—that just rubs me the wrong way—but if he needs the occasional reminder that I've always been meant for him, I can give him that.

Especially since, despite my best efforts to shove her out of my head, that's probably going to be impossible.

Take my opal. From the beginning, both Marie and Lucas seemed drawn to it. My first night in Winter Creek, she complimented the gemstone, while Lucas was fixated on it

both shortly after I met him that fateful night in the woods, then whenever it's bouncing between my boobs as he fucks me.

If you'd asked me a few weeks ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to explain how I got it. A gift from my mother—from Adrienne Witt—for my thirteenth birthday, I'd worn it every single day since she gave it to me.

But now... dipping my fingers beneath my tank top, I rub the polished stone and can't shake the newfound certainty that it was a mating gift that part of me has treasured for decades.

I blink.

Decades...

Not a month or two. Isn't that how long Jolie had it? But decades, because it's been hers—*ours*—for seventy years.

I take a deep breath. "I told you, babe. I just need to know. I'll walk over there and check if the blood ward's still there."

"Does it matter if it is?" he asks me. "If you promised yourself to me... if you promised to *stay*... does it matter if something else is keeping you with me?"

Not really. When I mated Lucas, I was doing just that: promising myself to him. Shit, I did that the first time we mated and he got even more wild when I told him I was his.

I'm yours...

But just because I don't plan on leaving right away, that doesn't mean that I like the idea of being under Marie Bordeaux's thumbs.

I have to know if the blood ward is still there.

He doesn't wait for my answer. He simply nods. "I understand. Go on, Fallon. I'm right behind you."

CHAPTER 7

WINTER CREEK



Taking the lead, I walk to the halfway point of the rope bridge, waiting for the telltale warning of a zap to keep me from walking into it and being blasted back.

It never happens.

At my soft murmur, Lucas hangs back a little, watching over me like the protector he is. I inch a little further, still waiting for something to stop me. When I've moved close to three-quarters of the way toward the platform in front of me, I have to admit that it's gone.

Thank fucking God.

I just needed it to be. I needed to *know* that it's my own free will that's choosing to stay with Lucas and the pack, that it isn't Marie's magic that's keeping me prisoner. And now that I have, there's no need for me to put Lucas through this anymore.

Poor guy. He's doing a good job of reining in his emotions, but I get the feeling that, if I try to step foot on the train platform, that might be too much for my wolf. I can just see him bounding behind me, scooping me up, and running back to the pack house with me in his arms.

Hmm... you know what? That's not such a bad idea...

Bad Fallon. Down, girl. You can fantasize over your mate later—and, look at me, Lucas Guidy is *mine* and I get to do that without being a perv now—when he doesn't look like he's damn near vibrating in place at the distance between you two.

Turning around, grabbing the rope bridge to steady me as I move at a quicker clip back to him, I nod. “No more blood ward. Looks like the curse really did break when we bonded.”

His features twist into a thoughtful expression. What’s that about? “Hey, Luc? Can you hear me?”

The wind’s picking up as night slowly begins to fall. The sky is a purplish-pink, though I can still see him perfectly as he nods, then moves toward me.

But he doesn’t say a word as he meets me near the midpoint, then eases past me.

“Stay here,” he says, careful not to put any sort of Alpha command in the words. “The blood ward might be gone, but there’s something I should check.”

It takes a second, but I suddenly know exactly what he means. The last time I insisted on going to get a better look at the blood ward, I brought Eleanor with me. Well, I had no choice; she was coming whether I wanted her to or not. She couldn’t sense the blood ward at all, and when it held me back, she offered to test it.

It wasn’t the blood ward that ended up knocking her out. Oh, no. It was the curse—the stasis spell snagging her—that had her crumpling on the rope bridge as they years started to catch up to her.

Thanks to the damn ward, I couldn’t save her. Reacting to my scream and a fledgling bond between us that I hadn’t known existed at the time, Lucas came to help me. He pulled her through the ward for me, and when Eleanor came to about fifteen minutes later, she had a new set of wrinkles bracketing her lovely hazel eyes.

That’s why none of the supes leave Winter Creek. They don’t need a blood ward trapping them here, not when the spell aging them again does the trick.

The same thing happened to one of Marie’s witches. Armand. She sent him out of the town to steal my blood, and by the time he returned, he’d aged almost two decades.

Lucas and the rest of the pack believe that, when the curse ends, time restarts. They get to live their lives from that point on, the age they were when the curse first affected them. I was worried about that. If I broke it and—bam—they were ninety, wouldn't it be better to let things stay the way they were?

Of course, I've never existed for seventy years with nothing changing. An existence like that... maybe it would've been better for it to be over.

Good thing that's not supposed to happen. The curse breaks, Lucas isn't a feral anymore, and the rest of the pack get their lives back. That's what was supposed to happen.

It isn't.

I know what Lucas is doing. Just like I needed to check on the blood ward, he suddenly decides to make sure that the curse really *is* broken. That, if I chose to leave and he needed to follow me, he could and the spell wouldn't try to keep him back.

If I did what I was supposed to, he should've been able to keep on walking. Like me, he probably wouldn't have gone all the way to the train platform. Just a few steps in that direction, testing the magic of Winter Creek would've been enough.

And that's all it takes before the curse *reacts*.

It happens so quickly. I can't even tell that Lucas knows he's been snared by it before he—like Eleanor had—freezes up and drops.

Drops.

Holy shit.

He *drops*.

Eleanor got lucky. When the curse stopped her from leaving, she crumpled to the rope bridge before landing on her back. She wasn't too heavy and the wind wasn't this bad so she didn't tumble and fall off the bridge. Me immediately clutching the rope, going still so that I didn't accidentally tilt her probably helped.

But whether it was the way I shouted for him, rushing forward, or his much bigger body slamming into the slats without finding any purchase on it, it doesn't matter. His eyes rolls back in his head, he topples backward like a felled tree, and when the bridge can't hold him, he disappears over the edge.

I rush to the other side of the bridge just in time to see Lucas get swallowed up by the raging Winter Creek.

My first thought is to pray to whoever's listening that he managed to avoid the rocks and boulders. But then I realize that he's *unconscious*. He didn't fall asleep where the water could wake him up before he drowns. When Eleanor knocked out, she was *out*. We couldn't wake her until the magic released her.

If I leave my mate in the water, he'll die. Full stop.

I won't let him.

Okay. I told myself when Eleanor collapsed that, if she fell, I'd dive in after her. Sure, they pack would probably end up dragging out two bodies after that, but I wouldn't.

And if I had no problem jumping in after a friend, what makes you think I won't jeopardize my life for my mate's?

He sacrificed so much for me. There's no way in hell that I'm going to let him die when I just found him. And since I'm pretty sure the Luna's not about to give me a *third* chance at a happily-ever-after with Lucas, this one's on me.

But he's too heavy. Add in dead weight and the rushing currents, I won't be able to do it. Not on my own.

Good thing I'm not on my own, then, huh?

Panic turns to perfect clarity. I need to rescue Lucas. I'm not strong enough as a human—but I'm not a human, am I?

I'm a *wolf*.

Reaching deep, as though there's a switch inside of me, I flick it. Then, hoping like hell that I haven't condemned us both to drowning, I duck under the rope bridge, aim for the spot where I saw Lucas go under, and dive.

Well, *Fallon* dives. But it's a big blonde werewolf that splashes into the raging river below, desperate to find her mate.

It isn't easy. Later, I'll downplay the terror that consumed me as I searched through the water to find Lucas. If it wasn't for the bond between us, giving me some idea where he was, I don't know if I *would've* found him. Giving control completely over to my wolf, I let my instincts guide me until my snout is bumping up against Lucas's body.

I bite him. In the shoulder, through the t-shirt, I get as good as grip as I can on him before kicking my hindlegs, propelling us both to the surface.

After that, it's a fucking struggle to swim with his body. Nothing will stop me, though. Not the water seeping past my clenched jaw that tries to choke me, or Lucas himself trying to go under when I start to flag a little.

Adrenaline is a hell of a drug. Another spurt has me doing something I never would've believed possible: I find the edge of the river and, using the last of my strength, I drag him up on the rocks and the dirt.

Only after I've assured myself that he's most definitely been knocked unconscious by the magic, but that he's still alive, do I sprawl out on my side, exhausted.

I don't even give myself the order to shift back. As though my wolf takes pity on me, knowing I wouldn't be able to handle the stress of figuring out how to go back to being human again, it just happens. One moment I'm a half-drowned wolf. The next? I'm completely naked and drenched, my hair stuck to my face as I lay on my back.

Coming back naked is a given. As soon as I instinctively shifted on the bridge, my clothes were toast.

Oh, well. If anything, I'll borrow Lucas's shirt or something. Surprisingly, though, despite it being an evening in November and the river known facetiously as the *Winter Creek*, I'm soaked, a little chilly, but it's manageable.

Or maybe that's just the last of the adrenaline warming me up so that I don't freeze to death as I wait for Lucas to wake up.

Eleanor was out for fifteen minutes. Assuming it'll be near the same amount of time for Lucas, I sit with a rock poking my ass for a few seconds before scrounging up a little more energy.

We're on neutral territory. If I can get a little closer to the trees, that's pack land. I don't know about you, but I think me and Lucas both would feel a lot better about being on wolf shifter territory instead.

I can't lift him. Now that I'm a wolf shifter, I'm stronger than I was, though my wolf's definitely got me beat. I can't carry a grown-ass *unconscious* man, but by grabbing one of his arms and dragging him as gingerly as I can, I do manage to get him just past the edge of the trees.

He's probably gonna have a couple of scrapes and bruises from the fall and me lugging him over the ground, but it's better than being dead.

Though, after the scare he gave me, my mate is lucky I don't freaking kill him.

I DON'T HAVE A CLOCK OR WATCH OF ANY KIND, BUT BY THE time Lucas is rolling over, spitting up some of the water he must've swallowed, it seems like it's been a lot longer than fifteen minutes.

I spent the time watching him so obsessively, I don't even think I blinked at all. I'm watching the slight rise and fall of his chest in between searching his face for some sign of the curse affecting him. From his habitual scowl and the fact that he was a good seven years older than Eleanor when time stopped, he already had a few more lines than she does.

Are there more? How did the Luna punish him for trying to leave before the entire curse was broken?

I wait. I wait, and I hope that the swan dive into the river was the worst of it...

When Lucas finally begins to stir, I'm at his side, on my knees. I start to tremble, a lump lodged in my throat as he slowly pulls himself into a sitting position.

He's an Alpha. Before he says anything, his nostrils flare, relying on his senses: his eyes, his ears, his nose. He takes it all in within seconds, then his head snaps toward me.

"Fallon... what happened?"

What happened? I force myself to sound peppy instead of like I'm a heartbeat away from sobbing in relief. "Do you want the bad news or the good news?"

His bewildered expression tells me he can't imagine how there's *good* news. However, this is Lucas. Of course he tightens his jaw, then says, "The bad news first."

I take a deep breath, bracing my hands on my thighs where I'm kneeling next to him. "The curse is only kind of broken. When you tested it, the same thing that happened to Ellie, happened to you. You fell, but the rope didn't catch you, Luc. You kept falling until you hit the creek."

"That would explain why I'm wet. And you're wet because..."

"Welp. That's the good news. When you fell, I jumped in after you and saved your ass."

"You did."

It's not a question. It's a statement.

I *did* save him.

I give him a shaky smile. "Hey. I owed you."

Lucas suddenly looks confused. "For what?"

"You know. When the blood ward zapped me and I went flying? You saved me."

"Of course. I would do anything for you, my mate."

"You're my mate, too, Luc. Don't you think the feeling is mutual?"

His gaze darts away.

I blink.

Holy shit.

He *doesn't*.

Well, that won't do. That just won't fucking do at *all*.

He's sitting up, legs stretched out in front of him. Rising up from my kneel, I brace myself on his shoulders before lifting one leg up and over, straddling him. Once I have, I drop my weight down onto his front.

And if I innocently drag my pussy over the ridges in his jeans, scooting closer and closer until my tits are pressed against his still-soaked t-shirt? Ah, well. That can't be helped, I'm sure.

Lucas stares at my chest for a beat. First, my opal, then my boobs. His tongue darts out, licking the corner of his mouth. Beneath me, I feel him starting to stir, though he keeps his hands perched on the ground instead of reaching for me like he so desperately wants to.

That's okay. I'll give him a hand.

Circling his wrist, I tug, wordlessly telling Lucas what I want. He only hesitates for a split second before he gives me control.

I used it to place his palm against my right tit, letting him curve his fingers around it, taking the weight of his in his hold.

There. Better.

He gulps. "Fallon." *Fallon*. "You're naked."

I am. "What's the problem, Luc? I thought nudity wasn't a big deal with supes."

"Nudity isn't. The two of us mating this close to neutral territory when any supe or non-supe could see us might be."

I can see where he'd get that idea. I'm on top, he's growing harder and harder under my ass, and he woke up to find me naked.

"That's not why I'm naked."

“Oh?” He raises his eyebrows. “Then why are you?”

I shrug. “I needed my wolf to save you. So I shifted, then dove right in before I lost you.”

I swear to God, his cock twitches when he hears that. “You shifted to save me? And then back? No problems?”

“None. And I had to. It was the only way I could think to drag you out.” I moved my hand, rubbing his shoulder apologetically.. “You might have a bite here. I used my fangs to keep you with me.”

“Then those will be more scars that prove how wonderful my mate is.”

“You mean, how much she loves you?”

He sucks in a breath. “*Fallon.*” This time, my name is a groan.

Huh. I guess he didn’t know that, either.

“I love you,” I tell him, peppering kisses across his forehead, his cheeks, his jaw. “I love you so fucking much. And you tried to die on me? You know what I should do to right now?”

Lucas lifts his hips. “I think I do.”

I guess he doesn’t really care that anyone might stumble upon us, after all.

I laugh. “You think I want to reward you for scaring the shit out of me? What makes you think you’re about to get lucky, hmm?”

He buries his face against my throat, nuzzling his bite mark. “Sucre... I can scent your body readying itself for me. Your heat is scalding me through my clothes. All I have to do is shuck off my wet jeans and I’d be inside of you in a second if I thought I could get away with it.”

Ah, but he *can*.

“You’re my mate,” I tell him, deciding to take pity on him—and me. I never would’ve thought a near-death experience

could make me so fucking horny, but now that Lucas is okay... I need this. I need that connection.

I need to know that he's mine.

"Come on, babe. I won't tell if you don't."

Lucas groans. "Fallon..."

God, I love the sound of my name in his voice.

"I know, I know. I'm being forward again, aren't I?"

"Yes." Lucas palms my ass, tugging me closer. "But I like this side of you."

I thought he just wanted to hold me close. And maybe he does, but with me spread out across his lower belly, that allows Lucas to flip open the button on his jeans, then tug the zipper down enough.

He doesn't waste any time removing his jeans entirely. Instead, dipping his hand inside of them, I watch over my shoulder as he pulls out his erection, gripping it by the base before he uses his other hand to nudge me back again.

Lifting up just enough to line him up with the entrance to my pussy, I sink down again. From a distance, we probably look exactly the same as we did: a naked blonde chick straddling her fully-dressed mate as he lays sprawled out on the grass.

Only we know that I've taken every thick inch Lucas has inside of me as I bow my body down, kissing him at the same time.

"You almost drowned," I whisper against his lips. "What would I do without you?"

"I will always return for you," he promises. "In this life and any others, it will always be you and me."

I want to believe that, and because I'm the queen of deflecting, I decide that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Especially since Lucas starts rocking his hips just enough to shift his cock, dragging his shaft along my nerves, making me quiver around his length.

I dig my nails into his shirt, clutching him tightly as I swivel my hips, riding him. This is one of my favorite positions, and not one I would've expected a dominant wolf to appreciate. After all, I'm making him my submissive, controlling his pleasure by the way I move, squeezing him, showing him that I'm in charge.

I've never been in charge when it comes to this male. But after what just happened, I *crave* it, and from the soft groans I'm tearing out of him, Lucas doesn't seem to mind, either.

At the moment, the world exists of only me and my mate, and though I know our story is far from over, as I ride him and Lucas murmurs again and again how much he loves *me*?

I finally believe there just might be a happily-ever-after in the cards for us...

CHAPTER 8

LUCAS'S DEN



Have you ever heard the phrase ‘look what the cat dragged in’?

If any of the other wolves were hanging out in the downstairs part of the house when we finally made it back, that’s exactly the kind of snotty comment I’d expect from Jade.

I wouldn’t blame her, though. My hair is still damp and scraggly. Lucas’s shirt is long enough that it hits my upper thighs, covering everything that matters, but it was soaked. Even if it wasn’t, *I* was. It clung to my skin, leaving nothing to the imagination.

And while my mate seemed to enjoy the view, that’s only because we didn’t run into anyone else on our way back.

Maybe we were being a little reckless, fucking out in the woods so close to neutral territory, but once I proved to Lucas that I didn’t mind, he was even wilder than when he was still the beast. In a way, I guess I’m rubbing off on him a bit, too, and I enjoyed the way his scent covered me—from our mating, from his touch, from his shirt—the entire trip back.

I did refuse his offer to track me down a pair of emergency sweatpants. It was pointless when all I want to do was take a nice hot shower and feel human again.

Well, *supe*, I guess, but the sentiment still stands.

Dirt is drying on my skin. I’m itchy, trying to scratch it off as he keeps shooting me side-long looks that are so heated, it’s

like he's imagining bending me over the kitchen table and taking me again so soon.

I know better than to push my luck. Outside is one thing. In the kitchen where the pack congregates? I'm lucky enough he steals kisses in the library. My stoic Alpha would never bring our mating into the communal area. It's the cabin, my room, or the piano room and that's all.

Until tonight, that is.

Since we enter through the back, accidentally trailing mud in through the kitchen instead of the living room that the pack rarely uses, Lucas pauses me by laying his hand on the small of his back.

I shudder at his touch, enjoying the way it sends heat blooming outward from that point.

I can hear the smile in his voice as he asks, "Hungry, sucre?"

For him, definitely. "I could eat," I answer, knowing that it's so hard-wired into an alpha wolf shifter to feed his mate, even if I'm full, I'll stomach a bite or two to please him, "but I'd really rather take a shower first."

Lucas steps into me. Even through the still-damp tee, I can feel his hard chest bumping into my back as he bows his body over mine. He wraps his arms around my waist, dropping his chin to the top of my head.

His breath is scalding on the top of my ear as he murmurs, "We can shower together if you'd like. Eat dinner after we've worked up an appetite. What do you think?"

Sounds like a perfect plan to me, and I tell him so.

Lucas presses a kiss to my messy hair before taking my hand in his. "Come on."

I follow him up the stairs, stifling my amused laugh at how quickly he tugs me behind him. Over the years, I've had a couple of guys who were eager to hop into bed with me, but they usually lost interest after the first few times. Something tells me that Lucas never will.

Sure, maybe he's making up for seventy years of celibacy, but I'm not so sure it's that. Shifters mate for life. There is no divorce, and if Kirk and Eleanor are any guide, Lucas will still be looking for reasons to get me alone and naked for the next seventy years.

Trust me. With these supe ears and my new super sniffer? I don't feel so bad that the rest of the pack must've heard it anytime Lucas and me got busy before because, whoa, even when I was stuck as my wolf, I couldn't miss the sounds and scents coming from Kirk and Eleanor's bedroom.

At least there's a small buffer with my room being on the third floor. Between the extra level and the sound of the shower going, it might be a little bit muffled for anyone hanging around the house right now.

Only... Lucas tugs on my hand, leading me down the hall once we hit the second floor.

I give him a curious look. A wicked grin is my only response, and because it makes my gorgeous mate jaw-droppingly stunning when he flashes it at me, I'm helpless but to do anything except let him take me wherever he wants to go.

We stop at the first door on the left. Based on the gaps between rooms, this one is about the same size as the library at the far end of the hall, though I've never been inside of it. The door's always been closed, and in the pack house, only an open door as an invitation to explore.

Twisting the knob with his free hand, he pushes in the door. Another tug on my hand and I'm following him inside.

I already smell like Lucas. That's nothing compared to the pure concentration of *him* that is confined in this space.

It's *delicious*.

Moving in, drifting toward the center as Lucas slips his hand out of mine, letting me go... I don't know what I expected the Alpha's room to look like. Something similar to the cabin in the woods, I guess, with the weapons and the wolf head and the couch.

This is different. Like it's a whole other side to Lucas, the walls are painted a deep gold color that is similar to the shade of my eyes. A large—and I mean *large*—bed takes up most of the space in the center, with dark blue bedding and an inviting mound of pillows. I see a door that's his closet, and another that probably leads to his attached bathroom.

His dresser is made of wood—and when I say *made*, I mean it. This is no IKEA special. Almost as tall as I am, with knotholes that serve as handles for each drawer, it looks like someone cut down a tree or two in the forest and handcrafted it.

By his window, he has a chaise lounge that I instantly claim. In my imagination, I see the big, black wolf sprawled out on it, sunbathing on days when the angle hits just right for the sun's rays to find their way inside of the big stone castle.

To my surprise, though, it hits me that that's just my imagination. Because unlike so many moments since I've learned about my previous life, I have no reference to what it's like to be inside of Lucas's bedroom.

And isn't that odd? Unless... unless this isn't his room.

"What's this?" I ask. I mean, it should be *obvious*, but why doesn't Jolie remember it at all?

Lucas confirms my suspicions when he says, "It's my bedroom." A pause as a shadow falls across his features, then, "I'd like it if it could be ours. My mate should sleep next to me, and this is my personal territory in the house. I can move it to the third floor if you'd prefer, but... this has always been my den."

And he's inviting me to share it.

Kirk and Eleanor share a room. I guess it never occurred to me that mating a wolf shifter was kind of like marrying him. Of course we'd share a bed... but we hadn't yet. Every time we were intimate, Lucas always found a reason to sneak away.

I took it as a rejection. What if... what if it was his instinctive need to return to his... what did he call it? His den?

And since I wasn't his bonded mate yet, he didn't think he could ask me to join him?

That has to be it. Why else would he look at me with such a guarded expression, almost like he expects me to reject *him*?

Always been my den...

Again. If that's the case, why doesn't Jolie remember it?

I must've frown or given something away because Lucas's eyes darken. "Is something wrong?"

"This isn't familiar."

"Is it supposed to be?" As though that wasn't the answer he expected, his eyes flash in a hint of amusement. "I know you have a tendency to walk around the house when everyone's sleeping, but I didn't think you'd sneak into my room. I mean, I *hoped* you would... but I've never caught your sweet scent in here before, sucre."

God, I love this flirty side to the grumpy, protective Alpha. Usually, a quip like that would have me teasing right back, moving into him, tilting my head back in an open invitation to kiss me after I said something like, "What would you have done with me if I did?"

But that's *usually*. I don't give him a classic Fallon response because I'm too stunned by what he said.

I know you have a tendency to walk around the house when everyone's sleeping...

Shit.

I thought that was a dream. The one time I woke up in the middle of the night, searching for Lucas... I heard music playing. I followed it to the piano room where I saw the 1950s version of Lucas playing before I closed my eyes and he simply vanished.

I thought it was a dream—but how much do you want to bet that, as I sleepwalked around the pack house in some kind of a daze, Jolie's memories were overlaying what I saw?

It could be. I mean, whenever I caught a flash of Jolie's memories, I thought those were dreams, too...

He's waiting for my response. I wish I could tease him back, but I can't.

I'm still too confused.

"Sorry. It's this whole Jolie thing," I confess. "Ever since I found out I was her before I was me, a thing will seem familiar and I'll realize it's because it's from *her* memory, not mine. I'm trying not to let it drive me crazy, but—"

But if it stopped me from making a move on my gorgeous mate again, there's a good chance it already did.

Lucas's brow furrows, instantly concerned again. "I thought you... *she*... I thought she was gone. That it's just you and me, Fallon."

I shake my head. "It is. It's just... there's still these flashes of recognition that come from time to time. With this being your room... I don't know. I guess it surprised me that I've never seen it before."

His forehead furrows. "That's because I never brought you here when you were Jolie."

What? "Why not?"

"Because I built this den for my mate. Until the bond was finalized, she was only my intended. It's you, *sucre*. You, *Fallon*. You're the one. You're the only one I've invited into my life like this."

Oh.

Um. Wow.

I don't know what to say to that, and because I'm a little speechless, I do what I always do.

Moving away from Lucas, heading toward his dresser, I wave my hand at a row of toys he has displayed on top.

"What are these?"

It's obvious from the way his lips thin that Lucas knows I'm changing the subject. For a moment, I expect him to push the subject. I'm trying the best I can to deal with it, and I think he's disappointed that I can't just come out and tell him what my problem is.

I want to. If there's anyone who would understand what I'm struggling with, it's Lucas. For seventy years, he mourned the mate he lost. At the same time, though, the curse split him into two: himself and the beast. Talking about his feral side, Lucas made it clear it was a separate part of him, just like Jolie is different from the rest of me.

But he loved Jolie. I have no doubt in my heart that he loves me, too. And, hey, it's not like I was an untouched virgin when I met him. He'd only been with Jolie, though they hadn't bonded before she died. Me? I lost track of my lovers over the years and keep them firmly where they belong: the past.

I guess I just wanted Lucas to be able to do the same thing... but how can he when I'm his past? Not just a physical reminder of what his lost mate looked like, either, but like a modern, hopefully better version of Jolie. Jolie 2.0, new and improved.

I know what he'd say if I admitted that out loud. He's told me before that he sees Fallon and Jolie as two different females—and that I fell in love with *me* when he caught me trying to steal the ax from his wall of weapons.

Jolie didn't do that. I did.

Jolie was torn to shreds by a wolf... and maybe the reminder of her brutal death is why—in this life—the sight of blood has me going almost fucking catatonic at times, but I survived the beast.

Fuck.

I *became* the beast.

I can barely look at the scars on his neck. I know he told me they were his mating mark, and that he's proud of them, but all I see is the evidence of me completely losing my fucking mind.

And after he spent two weeks trying to bring me back around, he still wants to move forward with forever, just him and me?

Easing close to me, wordlessly making his point that I'm his mate, and while he'll let me get away with changing the subject, that amount of distance between us is unacceptable to him for the moment.

"These? They're model trains."

I can see that. "Did you make them?"

"No. Tristan did. He gave them to me."

Huh. That's... that's kind of surprising. I don't know, but fiddling with these toys doesn't seem to be something Tristan would do.

Just goes to show that I don't know my fellow packmates all that well yet. Probably because, oh, yeah, it's only been *two months*, but that's okay. When Lucas said 'forever', he meant it, and the only way I'll learn about them is by asking my infamous questions and getting to know them better.

So Tristan builds model trains.

Turning into Lucas, completely forgetting about our shower for the moment, I go up on my tiptoes, pressing a kiss to the edge of his jaw.

"What about you?" I ask. "What does the Alpha do?"

"Besides my beautiful mate?" Lucas says, his voice going husky as he wraps his arms around me again.

I grin up at him. "Yup. You're *my* mate now, Lucas. My one and only. I already love you. I like you, too. That means I want to know all about you."

He chuckles. "I guess I should prepare myself for your questions."

Probably. "Unless you have something better to do."

His lips curve upward in a small, crooked grin. "Well, someone did say something about a shower..."

“It’s a good thing I can ask questions even as I scrub up.”

In answer to my quip, Lucas tilts me back in his arms, swooping me up as though suddenly eager to prove me wrong—and I don’t even mind when he does.

I MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET A LOT OUT OF HIM during our very memorable shower—since it’s kind of hard to interrogate your mate when his dick is in your mouth—but Lucas more than makes up for it. No matter what I want to know about him and his past, present, and future, he’s willing to humor me.

So, yeah. Over the next couple of days, I learn a lot about what an Alpha does—and the rest of the pack, too.

When he’s not obsessively protecting his pack and the non-supes in Winter Creek, Lucas’s favorite pastime is playing the piano, though he also enjoys running for the sake of it, and—not surprisingly—is an amateur taxidermist. I guess, if he took his frustrations out on the wild wolf that went rabid or something and killed Jolie, having to repair it whenever the feral slashed it, he’d need to be able to repair it if he was determined to hold onto it.

And he is. I let that one go. If Lucas needs a stuffed wolf head as a reminder of what the last seventy years cost him... who am I to insist he take it down because it creeps me out? Especially when I look at it now, I see the lengths my mate went to all out love for me.

Some girls like flowers and candy? Me? I’ll stick with my opal necklace and a wolf head—and, honestly, that’s all you need to know about *me*.

Tristan obviously likes to build model trains for some reason, but he also builds larger furniture, too; he was the one who handcrafted Lucas’s dresser as a gift some sixty years ago. Kirk has a fondness for murder mysteries, plus a knack for completing any crossword puzzle he can find—in *ink*. Jade... she’s not snapping at me anymore, so I call that a win in my book.

That's about all I can say about her, but since Lucas won't even think about letting me go on patrol so soon after me kind of, sort of being feral, I spend most of my time with Eleanor when he and Kirk aren't around. It's inevitable that, after Lucas, she's the one I've gotten to know the best.

Like her mate, she loves to read. She'll call out silly answers to his crossword puzzles, then act amazed when she gets one or two right. While most of the pack's clothes are bought and traded for with the non-witch residents who live on neutral territory, she confides that she's spent the last decade and a half teaching herself to sew. She makes the never-ending supply of sweatpants that the wolves use as emergency clothes, and offers to show me how.

With a snort, I have to decline that one.

Is it because my grandmother is the head of a 1950s fashion house? No one outside of the supes in Winter Creek would have any idea that the Marie Bordeaux who ran Bordeaux Designs seventy years ago is still in charge today, but her line lives on in the outside world as much as it does inside of the stasis curse.

The idea that I can pick up a needle and thread or figure out how to use a sewing machine... yeah. No, thanks. That's not my thing for so many reasons, and I'm lucky that Eleanor seems to get that.

She was also dead-on when she explained why she and Jade rarely wore long-sleeved shirts and pants. For Jade, it's because she's a she-wolf and shifters run at a hotter temperature even when they're not in their fur. For Eleanor?

Heat is no joke, man.

Phew.

I remember reading somewhere that ovulation in a human usually lasts about a day. It must be the same for wolves because when that hit earlier this week? I was torn between wanting to drown myself in a cold shower for a little relief and banging Luc's brains out.

Luckily, Lucas could tell from the change in my scent and my temperature what I was going through. He put Tristan in charge, told him we were only to be interrupted if the witches made a move, then hustled me off to our room where he let me do both: banging him until I was too weak to do it myself, then letting him hoist me up and fuck me in the shower.

Only when I was waking up the next morning, curled up against his naked body, does it hit me that I've been having unprotected sex with Lucas.

Like, I obviously *knew* I was. I guess I figured that he's a wolf shifter, I'm a human, and he hasn't gotten laid in seventy years so odds of him having an STI were pretty low. I got tested after Danny tried to cheat on me since I didn't believe that bastard when he said he hadn't slept around on me. I got the all-clear from the clinic, and when I mentioned it to Lucas in one of those awkward conversations we had pre-bonding—the ones that made me wish the earth would open up and swallow me whole—he had no idea what I was talking about.

Right. When he met Jolie and knew she was meant to be his mate, they probably didn't have to talk test results, huh?

Pregnancy wasn't a worry for me, either, since I've been on the shot for ages. I had my last injection a couple of weeks before I ever left New York for Winter Creek so I figured I was covered until at least January. It's mid-November now... and that didn't stop me from ovulating, did it?

Another perk of Lucas's bite? That's what Eleanor said when I hunted her down for a little—and, okay, panicky—girl talk. Luckily, before I freak out too much about possibly being knocked up, Eleanor points out that she's been mated to Kirk for *seventy years* without any pups.

Not because they didn't want them, either, and used some kind of supe BC to control it. Nope. The curse kept them stuck in time—and though she went through a monthly heat because she's mated to a wolf shifter, she never got pregnant.

Is it bad that I'm relieved? I'm just getting used to the idea of having forever with Lucas. Forgive me for wanting a little

time for just the two of us before we even think about starting a family.

Lucas agrees. To him, the pack is his family. I'm his family. Whatever happens next will happen, but for now... in this strange limbo. stuck between the one part of the curse ending and another still freaking holding on, we're together and that's all that matters.

I just hope it stays that way.

CHAPTER 9

BILLIARDS



Now that I'm back to normal—or as normal as I can be—things slowly begin to return to the way they were. The main difference is how I share Lucas's room on the second floor, and that I'd have one hell of a worried mate on my ass if I try to miss a meal with the rest of the pack.

Of course, that means that part of my 'normal' is being left behind at the pack house while the rest of the wolves continue to take their patrols throughout the woods, making sure the witches are still keeping to their territory.

Lucas is home to sit with me—and, following his alpha nature, serve me—breakfast and dinner, no matter what. I fall asleep next to him, waking up every morning to his snores. The heat pouring off of him is almost as powerful as *my* heat, and I snuggle against him while marveling over how fucking lucky I am that he's my fated mate.

Snores and all.

The snores actually help me learn some control over my shifter senses. Trust me, when the male lying next to you on his back sounds like a garbage truck rumbling down the nearby alley at 2 am... you learn to dampen how much you can hear before the rumbling blows out your eardrums.

When he's not around, though, I seem to be left behind with Eleanor again. And while I don't mind that at all—and my fellow mate is more than happy to answer my questions, giving me tips and stories about what it's like to be bonded to

one of these wolves—I can't help but be frustrated that I'm back to being babysat.

Not like I have that much free time to complain about it. I'm either with Lucas or doing whatever chore is mine in the rotation. Laundry, dusting, cleaning, cooking... everything is assigned out to a different member of the pack. It's not just me and Eleanor tending to the home since the guys all are responsible for their own tasks when they finish their patrols, but when it seems like a little more for the two of us than usual, I'm a little curious.

It's been a little over a week since I moved in with Lucas. Call this the honeymoon period to our mating if you want, but we can't seem to keep our paws off of each other. I haven't really been socializing with the others as much, though that's not the only reason why.

All that time I spent trapped as my wolf... it affected them, too. Kirk eyes me a little warily lately, as though he expects to go feral again and maybe attack Eleanor. I can't tell you the last time I saw Tristan, but when I brought that up to Lucas, he explains that Tristan's wolf is searching for something.

A little pushing, and the Alpha admits that his Beta won't be satisfied until he challenges Remy again for another fight. A fair one, no silver blades allowed. He wants revenge for Remy stabbing him the way he did, and he's frustrated that he can't find the witch.

On the plus side, I'm glad to hear that the witches are still keeping their distance. Then again, I don't like the idea of Tristan spending his days hunting down his enemy. I know it's pretty damn rich, coming from me, but it seems like it's too risky.

Too bad I gave up any right to tell him to be safe when I chose Lucas over him... and though I don't doubt for a second that his wolf craves vengeance against the witch, something tells me that there's another reason he's staying away from me.

Oh, right. That something is the little bit of common sense I have left.

Like, really? Why would he want to stay in the pack house, forced to see the woman he made a play for all lovey-dovey with his best friend? Fate might have made it so that Lucas and I were meant for each other, but that doesn't change the fact that Tristan made it obvious I could've picked him instead.

Can you do that? I'm not really sure. I know that mates have to choose, but can you choose a different male than the one the Luna gave you? The way I understand it, most shifters don't. Why would you give up the one soul that was perfect for you?

But that doesn't change how awkward and painful my mating Lucas must be for Tristan. And while I'm not so vain that I don't think he'll get over me pretty quickly, maybe it's a good thing that he's back to keeping his distance from me.

Tristan isn't the only one who is conveniently missing. A few days after I came out of my shift, I'm playing a game of pool with Eleanor when it hits me that I haven't seen Jade in a while.

If Eleanor is not in the library or with Kirk, odds are that she's conning one of her packmates into a game of pool. I was a victim early in my stay here, and only managed to avoid getting completely hustled because the gleam in her hazel eyes warned me against putting up my opal necklace.

Not that I would've. Whether I received it from Lucas in my old life, or it found its way to me through my Mom before she died, I haven't taken it off for as long as I could remember. It's value is priceless to me, and though I didn't have anything else to put and bet when Eleanor offered innocently, I was glad I went with my gut when she cleared the billiard table before I even got more than two shots with the cue stick.

She's freaking amazing at the game, and I'm a glutton for punishment because I somehow keep finding myself trying to beat her.

And I never, ever do.

Today, she's two balls away from beating my ass at another game. When I mention Jade, part of me is hoping to distract her, but since she sinks the solid red ball in before she answers me, that was pointless.

"Didn't you know? Jade's taken a couple of days to cool off." Eleanor bounds to the other side of the table, angling her cue stick, ready to go for the yellow ball. "She was hoping to leave Winter Creek."

"Really?"

That's news to me. As loyal as Jade is to the pack—which is about the same level as her open dislike of me and anyone else she thinks of as a rival... or *human*—I never thought she'd be chomping at the bit to leave Winter Creek.

Eleanor pauses, lowering her cue stick for a moment as she glances over at me. "Me and Kirk were, too."

"What? You were?"

"Not forever, silly goose. Just... we've been here a long time. Sometimes it feels like forever. I wanted to show him a world outside of Winter Creek. Maybe take an airplane back to England to show him where I used to live before the bombs came."

The bombs? That's right... Eleanor used to live in England. London specifically, I believe, and she'd left around the height of World War II when she was a teenager. She moved to the United States to escape the war, and lived here for about a decade before something drew her to Winter Creek on the East Coast of all places.

That, of course, was Kirk. But because she came, then stayed, when the curse was casted back in 1954, freezing the town in time, she never got to leave again.

Holy shit. She's so bubbly and sweet, sometimes I forget what that must've done to someone who didn't know anything about the supernatural world until she mated into it. Homesick doesn't begin to cover it.

"But Lucas... the Alpha told us what happened when you finally tested the bridge. Our plans to leave have been put on

hold until that part of the curse is broken, too.”

I swallow roughly. It feels like there’s a pile of rocks in my gut at her off-handed comment. Why? Because I was the one who was supposed to break the curse, and while *part* of it is gone, the rest of it is still affecting my new friends.

Eleanor shakes her head. “Now, don’t you worry about it, sweetie. It’ll happen. Seventy years, right? Maybe it’ll take more than three weeks for Winter Creek to catch up to the rest of the world.”

I really hope so.

Since I can’t do anything about it now, I jerk my chin at the table. If she calls the pocket for the eight ball and sinks it, she’s won. Again. “Your turn, Ellie.”

“When you’re done, can I get next?”

I turn at the familiar voice just in time to see Tristan walk through the open doorway to the game room.

It’s Tristan—and he’s limping.

THE FIRST TIME I EVER MET TRISTAN CROWDER, I WAS impressed by his graceful prowl.

Okay. Impressed, and I was more attracted to him than I probably should’ve been to the man I nicknamed Blondie if only in my own brain.

He looks the same. His pretty face, that slicked-back golden blonde hair, those blue eyes that are deceptively innocent... he *looks* the same. That limp, though... silver is a bitch for shifters. It’s the one metal that can seriously injure one of us, and with the right stab, it could even kill us. The reason behind that is simple: shifters can’t heal wounds caused from silver without a lot of time and energy.

Remy tried to kill Tristan. I wholeheartedly believe that. It was a fight that only happened because Tristan insisted on accompanying me when I planned on confronting Marie Bordeaux with the picture of her and Jolie. The Beta caught wind of Remy sneaking around and, suddenly, he was a wolf,

Remy was lunging at him with a silver knife, and Tristan went down after the witch stabbed him in the hind leg with the silver knife.

Three weeks later and, despite Lucas ordering him to rest so he can heal, Tristan is still limping. In his human form, his hind legs equals his human leg. But it seems like the healing process is an ongoing and imperfect one when that much damage is done with silver, and I'm careful not to pay too much attention to it in case he's obviously conscious of the limp.

He has to be. To show any kind of weakness as a shifter... that just shows how much he trusts both Eleanor and me. Otherwise, he'd force himself to act like the injury didn't affect him at all when the whole pack knows it did.

Why else is he hellbent on getting revenge on Remy? Because he is, and his determination to run on a ruined leg to hunt down the witch proves it.

Now, I'm all for it. Wolfy Fallon is a bloodthirsty bitch. When Lucas said that he left the witch breathing, I'd secretly hoped he was wrong. Is that terrible? Probably. I don't care. For what he did, Remy would've deserved dying at the hands of Lucas as the feral beast.

As Tristan approaches the table, Eleanor whistles under her breath. Then, in a too-cheery tone that has a whisper of her native British accent, she says, "It's my turn, Fallon. Eight ball, side pocket," and easily sinks her final shot. "Excellent. I win. Good game, hon."

As if I really had a chance against the impish hustler.

She walks over to Tristan, handing him the cue. "Here you go, Tris. Your turn."

"Thanks, Ellie. Kirk's patrolling down by the river if you want to go out and give him a small break."

"Well, if the Beta insists." She waves. "I'll see you two later."

As soon as she's gone, Tristan gives me a small chuckle. "I guess I wasn't as subtle as I thought about wanting to talk to

you, Fallon.”

He wasn’t. I knew it, and so did Eleanor. Still, I don’t want him to feel bad, so I say, “Eleanor’s pretty perceptive. Besides, you gave her permission to have a quickie with her mate. I don’t think she minds.”

Tristan winces. “She won’t. I’m not sure I can say the same for Lucas.”

“Why not? It’s just pool.” I nod at the stick in his hand. “You want to play or not?”

Tristan leans against the billiard table. “I’d love to. But only if you rack ‘em.”

His leg must be bothering him even more than that if he doesn’t even want to bend enough to retrieve the balls and arrange them in the triangle-shaped holder.

“No problem. I got it.”

“Fair warning. I’ve been playing against Ellie for decades. I’ve even beaten her a couple of times.”

“That’s better than I’ve done,” I toss back, rolling the balls a few times for luck before removing the holder. “She doesn’t even let me pretend to have a chance. Okay, Tristan. Let’s see what you got.”

Taking up point at the head of the table, he sights down his cue stick, hitting the cue ball with enough force that he sends all of the balls spinning about the table—including the yellow and blue-striped balls that find their ways to two different pockets.

“Lucky shot,” I grumble. “Okay. You got stripes.”

Tristan takes another shot, but misses. “How are you doing these days, Fallon?”

Is that what we’re doing here? Playing pool and making small talk? Sorry, Tristan. That’s not really my style.

I take my shot, smirking a little when I manage to actually get the solid maroon one to bank off of one of Tristan’s before knocking it right into the side pocket. Go, Fallon! I’m even

more impressed when the solid red is in position and I get that one, too, though I'm probably shooting for the starts to get three in a row—and I totally don't.

Lowering my stick, I shrug my shoulders. "I'm okay." When his blue eyes dart my way before he focuses on the game again, I firm my voice. "Honest. Going feral like that..." Attacking Lucas... "...that was a fluke. I'm doing alright. What about you?" *Don't mention the leg, don't mention the leg...* "What have you been up to?"

He's bent over the table, lining up his next shot. He takes it—banking two more of his seven balls—then gives me a small grin. "Thinking."

"Thinking?"

Tristan nods. Easing around the table so that he can get the striped-green ball now, he admits, "Yup, thinking. About you. Me. The pack—"

Oh, boy. "Tristan. I—"

Clink. The white ball hits the striped-orange ball, and he's down to one left. "No, Fallon, please. Let me finish. It took a lot for me to get the nerve to come talk to you today. So, if it's alright, I just have to get this out."

I lick my bottom lip, then nod. "Okay."

He sighs. "I get it now. About how, sometimes, there isn't a choice. I mean, I know I've told you that there is... and I really believed there could've been something between us... but that was just my loneliness talking. I knew from the beginning that Lucas has his claim on you because of Jolie. Then he met you, and I knew you were his fated mate. Betas don't often go feral... not like what the curse did to Lucas—and to you. But I think... I think I went a little off the rails there for a minute." Tristan laughs under his breath. "Sorry. Train pun."

Right. Because the charming Blondie is a secret train buff. Who would've thunk it? I guess that explained why he had the patrol by the river the day the train rolled in.. and why is that what I'm focusing on now?

“It’s okay.”

“Good. Because I’ve got plenty more.”

I shake my head, my opal swaying with the motion. “No, you goof. Not the pun... I mean, everything else you said. I just want you to know that it’s okay. We’re good.”

His blue eyes seem to twinkle for a moment there. “You sure? You might change your mind when I do this.” In quick succession, he sinks his last striped ball, calls for the eight ball, and knocks that in. Maybe he’s not as a crack shot as Eleanor, but it’s pretty freaking close.

And that’s okay, too.

With his confession and apology and my simple, ‘it’s okay’, it seems like that least of the awkwardness between us has finally disappeared. He’s my friend. He’s pack. He’s the Beta, and if anything, I respect him for putting up with Luc’s grumpy ass these last seventy years without losing his grin or the twinkle in his eyes.

I try to mirror it back. “What do you think? Best two out of three?”

“Rack ‘em and you’re on.”

CHAPTER 10

SEARCH MISSION



I'm one hell of a competitive chick.

It's just another part of who I am. I'm so good at compartmentalizing things, of putting things out of my head for the moment if I'm not ready to face it, but when it comes to something as simple as a race, a card game, a silly internet challenge, and, yes, a game of pool... I'm competitive, and a bit of a sore loser.

I don't give Tristan shit for beating me the next game. In fact, I feel better about him schooling me in billiards. If he was still flirting with me, I wouldn't have been surprised if he tried to cozy up behind me to 'teach' me a better way to shoot, or even miss obvious shots just to make me feel better.

That he whips my ass, going three for three is almost like his way of saying that we're cool. We're buddies. We're packmates.

And I'm happy about that, even as I stew over losing badly again and again.

That's why, after I talk Tristan into a fourth game, then a fifth—that he might've let me win, not because he still wants in my pants, but because it was kind of pathetic at that point how much I needed to come out victorious—I'm still hanging out in the game room by myself when Lucas comes looking for me.

Whether he followed our bond, followed his nose, or one of the others told him where to find me, I'm getting ready to practice another game of pool when Lucas walks in. He's fresh

from a patrol, his curls windblown, a touch of red on the heights of his cheeks. He had time to change, though, wearing a light grey t-shirt that shows off his muscular chest and sculpted biceps.

His thumbs are hooked in the belt loops of his dark denim jeans. I love it when he does that. It makes the ropey cords of muscles on his forearms stand out as his elbows are cocked.

“Hey, Luc. Want to play?”

Before he can answer me, my mate breathes in deep, nostrils flaring as his eyes dart around the room. It’s obvious that no one else is in the game room except for me at the moment. But as his gaze lands on the pool cue that Tristan took from Eleanor, then hung up on the wall before he left the game room, I can just see his mind spinning.

Another quick peek around, almost like he’s watching an invisible game of pool play out in front of him, before he moves further into the room.

Pausing on the other side of the billiards table, almost like he needs to keep a little distance between us, he rests his palms against the wood. His claws are out, the points hitting the green felt, but his face is calm as he says, “Tristan was in here.”

I wait to see if he’s going to add anything else. Because that? That wasn’t a question. That was a statement. From his lingering scent alone, Lucas knows that Tristan was in the game room with me long enough to leave his mark.

I’m competitive, and Lucas is jealous. That’s part of who *he* is. My Alpha mate has been like this from the beginning, though I initially took it as disinterest on his part. I couldn’t have been more wrong. Lucas kept his distance at first because he wanted me so badly, and it rubbed his fur wrong whenever I got too close to his Beta.

I didn’t know. I had no freaking clue actually. I just thought Tristan was coming on a little too strong, and Lucas was only inviting me to stay at the pack house because he felt bad for me. And while Tristan *did* make it pretty obvious that

he was into me, Lucas stayed away because he didn't think I'd want *him*.

How could I *not*? Even when he was the heroic huntsman in my fairy tale, I was snared under his spell. A wolf? I was down. The beast? Well, that gave me a little bit of a pause there for a moment, but in the end... I love Lucas, and that includes every part of him.

Besides, maybe it's not the healthiest reaction, but a guy being so jealous that he needs to scent-mark me after my friend touches me? That's pretty hot. Lucas's face tightening up as he realizes that I was with Tristan while he was out on patrol? As long as he doesn't think anything happened, that's pretty damn hot, too.

Mates don't cheat. I would never, but now that I have a bond with Lucas, just the idea of even making a move on another guy has me dry-heaving a bit. Add that to how loyal Tristan is to Lucas—stepping back multiple times whenever Lucas reminded him that he had a 'claim' to me—and I'm not so surprised that we had our conversation.

We're friends now. I'm sure Lucas knows that.

At least, the logical part of his human brain does. The wolfy side?

Yeah. He's struggling there, isn't he?

Good thing I know how to take care of that...

First, with words. "He was," I tell him. "So was Eleanor. She kicked my ass at pool, then Tristan came along and did the same freaking thing."

He tilts his head slightly, a predator's gaze watching my every move as I set the cue down before walking over to him. His arms open wide in invitation, and I walk right into them, bracing my palms on his shoulders.

This close, he should be able to decipher the scents and see that while the room surely stinks of Tristan, I don't.

He drops his head, putting his nose into my loose hair. Breathing in deep, he cups my chin in his hand and rumbles

softly. “So fucking sweet, sucre. Thank you. I needed that.”

It’s a learning curve, this mating thing. I get it. It’s one thing to know that this is it, this is *forever*, but we both have baggage. As a supe, Lucas waited for his one true mate—then lost her so soon after finding her. Then, sacrificing half of his own soul to bring Jolie back, he got me after *seventy freaking years*... and not only didn’t I remember him or anything about my first life, but I knew nothing about supernaturals until I got caught up in their world.

It’s mine now. Just like Lucas is mine.

So we’ll have bumps in the road. I’ll secretly be jealous of Jolie, Lucas will be jealous of *everyone*, but we’ll get over it. Once we both realize that we’re it for each other and that this fated love we have is enough to get past the worst of both of our traumas, we’re gonna get the rest of that happily-ever-after promised to us in all those fairy tales.

For now, it’s just Lucas and me—and if I need to remind him that I’m his... that I’ve *always* been his... yeah. I think I can take care of that.

I slide my hand down his chest, patting him there. “Anytime, babe.”

THE OTHER DAY WHEN WE WERE PLAYING POOL, ELEANOR told me that Jade had taken off for a few days just to come to grips with her disappointment that the stasis spell hadn’t let up yet.

Turns out, that’s something she’s been known to do. Well aware that, despite her diminutive size as a human woman, she could more than handle herself, Lucas lets her go for as long as she needs. Besides, it’s not like she can leave Winter Creek. She’s somewhere out there, either in the woods, or in the cave systems that exist behind Tristan’s secret waterfall.

But while Jade gets pissed and vanishes, the longest she’s been gone in the last seventy years was four days. When it hits a full week, Lucas calls it.

The wolves of Winter Creek are going to look for one of their own.

Well, not *all* of them.

“I’m a wolf now,” I remind my mate as I face off against him in the kitchen. It’s shortly after Tristan and I finished cleaning up the breakfast that Kirk prepared, right when the three guys were getting ready to leave me and Eleanor behind.

I get Eleanor. She’s not actually a wolf.

I am.

“Come on, Luc. Let me come. I can help.”

Lucas thins his lips. If I wasn’t so annoyed with him, I’d marvel at just how kissable they are—and *crap*. I’m fantasizing over my mate even as he dips his head, a stray curl falling forward, curving toward his eyebrows.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that.”

Yes, he can. “Lucas—”

“Can you track?”

What? “Well, no—”

“What about scents? Can you pick out one and follow it?”

Damn him. “Not yet—”

“It’s not a patrol, Fallon. It’s a search for a she-wolf who knows these woods better than almost anyone in town.”

Translation: *you’ll never find her*.

He’s protecting me again. I know that’s what he’s doing. Jade is conveniently missing, there hasn’t been a sign of Remy or any of my grandmother’s witches since the full moon, and his little dip there in the river proved that the curse hasn’t completely been broken—which means that the witches are probably still plotting.

Is that why the other wolves are determined to track down Jade? Because she might have somehow gotten caught in the crosshairs?

There are other dangers that could be out there. Living in New York, I've seen how dark some people can get. Just because non-supers don't have powers, that doesn't mean they can't hurt Jade if they catch her off-guard. And what about other supes? In a bid to educate me about his world, Lucas told me about ferals—and rogues. Broken wolf shifters and hungry vampires, quite a few have found their way to Winter Creek over the years.

The protectors eliminated them as soon as they could, proving their worth to the townsfolk, and though Lucas doesn't come out and say it, I think he's worried that Jade's disappearance is supe-related.

He's also careful not to let me know he's not so sure I really caught a familiar scent on the breeze before I shifted for the first time.

What about scents...

He's the Alpha. If there was a peppery scent on the wind that belonged to a person and not, like, a plant or something, he would've caught it, too. And maybe he was too distracted by me turning into a wolf and then attacking him, but he's a protector. We were both naked, and his beast had been in control moments before I scented it. If he had, the Lucas I know would never have let that go.

I asked him about it. During our trek back to the pack house from his cabin, I mentioned that I could've sworn I smelled something that triggered a memory so fleeting, it was gone the instant I went wolfy.

He looked worried, then admitted he knew nothing about it. He promised to look into it, but since it had already been two weeks and no one else had mentioned it, it was a lost cause and I told him to forget it.

If only I'd been able to as well...

That's not why I want to go back out into the woods, though. If being part of the pack means I get to do chores now, what about being a shifter? Shouldn't I get to go out and search?

Not according to Lucas.

“Are you telling me I have to stay behind? I demand.

“Because you’re my mate, I’m asking you to.”

Oh, Luc. So damn slick, aren’t you? He already knows me well enough to tell that I’ll chafe against one of his orders. But if he *asks* me? How can I say no?

Especially when Kirk pipes up and says, “You can watch over Ellie while we’re gone.”

My hands go to my hips. “Let me guess: Ellie will watch me?”

“Fallon—”

I ignore Lucas. I already know I’m going to lose this one, but I’m not going to give in *that* easily. “

“Kirk. Tristan. Head out. Scatter. I’ll be right behind you. Kirk, east. Tristan, west. I’ll cover the rest of the ground. You understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” says Kirk solemnly.

Tristan nods. “Got it, Luc.”

“Good. Go.”

Kirk kisses Eleanor on the cheek, gives her a quick squeeze, then jogs out the door. Tristan looks from me to Lucas, then back again. A tiny shake of his head—telling me that, if it was up to him, he’d let me go... but Lucas is the Alpha and he’s going to listen to him—before the Beta follows after Kirk.

Now it’s just Lucas, me, and Eleanor.

Realizing that she might be intruding, Eleanor makes up a quick excuse I barely hear, then slips out of the kitchen.

And then there were two.

My mate grips me by the back of my neck. It’s a gentle yet possessive hold, and it forces me to look up at him.

Huh. I guess it really bothered him when I purposely ignored him like that.

Even worse is how, the moment our eyes lock, all I see is his determination to do what's right. To keep his mate safe, to go after a missing wolf... as the Alpha, all of the responsibilities land squarely on his shoulders. As much as I want to prove myself to him, I'm only making things harder for him by trying to convince him to let me tag along.

And what if he does? Will he even be able to give the search his full attention if he's worrying about me?

I know the answer to that. Just like I know that he's right. I don't like it, and I can tell that, if I push, this big, bad wolf will crumble like a house of freaking straw... and that's exactly why I don't.

Damn it. I chose the Alpha to be mine. Fate or no Fate, I wanted Lucas. His glower, his overprotectiveness, his need to keep me close unless it puts me in danger... I want his good and his bad, and even if I don't agree with him, I have to respect that he's only doing what he thinks is right.

He's my mate. I'm only beginning to understand what it means to be a wolf shifter. At the very least, the pack runs on a hierarchy. I might be a little higher than some others all because I'm his mate, but even I can't deny that Lucas is firmly at the top.

I nod. "I'm not happy about it, Luc, but I get it. Jade needs you—"

"You need me, too."

I'm his mate. That's part of the gig.

Only... there's that note of hesitation again. Almost like he can't believe I chose him at all, and that he's expecting me to wake up and regret that I tied myself to him for life.

Never.

I go up on my tiptoes. He lowers his hand to support my back as I grip his chin, holding him in place as I press my lips to his. "I will always need you, Luc," I promise him. "And I want you to think about letting me help protect the pack. But if you don't think I'm ready yet—"

“It’s just not safe,” he rumbles.

With the trauma in his past and his alpha instincts, when it comes to his mate, I don’t think he’ll ever believe it’s safe for me. It’ll be up to me to prove that I can handle it, that I can be just as much of a protector—a *predator*—as Lucas and the others... but I’ve learned when to pick my battles with him.

Now is not the time.

I pat his cheek. “When will you be back?”

“As soon as we find Jade. Something’s wrong, sucre.” He lifts his free hand, rubbing his chest between us. “An Alpha knows his pack. I can’t explain it so that you can understand it just yet, but something’s wrong. I have to do this.”

Know what? Lucas doesn’t need to explain it. If his bond with his packmates is anything like the mate bond we have, he would be able to tell if something was going on—or if one of his packmates needed him.

I’ll always need him, but if Jade’s in trouble?

I guess I can share him... until she’s safe with the others again, at least.

“I know. It’s fine.”

It’s not fine, but I’ll fake it.

His eyes search my face. “If you need me, tug on our bond. You know I’ll be right back for you, sucre.”

I do know that. “I will.”

If I need him.

Like Kirk, Lucas gives me a kiss, then rubs the height of my cheek with his thumb. “Love you,” he rumbles, then before I can echo the sentiment, he follows after the others.

So I don’t get the chance to say it. I shove all of my annoyance to the side, sending a rush of love and affection down our bond instead. I can feel his pleasure that I’m not *that* pissed at him as he moves further away from me, and I sigh.

And that's when Eleanor scoots her way back into the kitchen.

"Looks like it's just you and me," she says in that overly cheery tone she adopts when she's worried about setting me off. After seeing me in that cage, it's probably going to take a long time before she isn't. "You up for some more pool?"

I shake my head. "Actually, I was thinking about heading out back and doing a little shifter practice."

It's not safe, huh? I can't track? My shift's aren't reliable? Well, all that may be true, but if I practice and get better at it, maybe next time Lucas needs help, he'll actually let me come along.

Eleanor makes a thoughtful expression that catches my attention.

"What's up?"

"I don't know. It's just something I've been thinking about. What if—" She cuts herself short. "Never mind. It's silly."

Maybe, but now I'm curious. "Tell me. Please."

"Okay. I was just wondering... instead of doing that, why don't you see if you can use your magic?"

CHAPTER 11

A LITTLE MAGIC



Good question, Eleanor.

To be fair, I keep forgetting I that I'm technically part witch because Jolie was or that I might even have magic deep down inside of me.

I did know that. I mean, the head witch of the local coven is her blood-related grandmother. Just because she didn't seem to have any powers herself, that doesn't change the fact that she's half-witch, half-shifter.

I can turn into a wolf now. Can't get around that one. But if Lucas's bite triggered my hidden shifter side... did it do the same for Jolie's witch blood?

It never occurred to me before. Most likely because I didn't do the greatest job dealing with the reveal that I'm not human like I thought, but actually a wolf shifter. It was just easier to ignore any tie to the coven I might have. Maybe if the witches had made me feel welcome instead of a freaking *sacrifice*, Marie could have helped me tap into that part of my soul.

She didn't. She sought me out, tracked me down, *stole my blood*, and did all of that to break a curse that never would've been laid over Winter Creek if Jolie had survived. But because she didn't... because Lucas was willing to do anything to bring his mate back... all of the pressure is on my shoulders now.

It's not quite done yet. Why? No idea, and if the two weeks as a feral, broken Fallon trapped inside of her wolf

taught me anything, it's a tiny bit more patience. I'm sure I'm still reckless and impulsive as I ever was given the right opportunities, but I've learned my lesson. I'm not going to willingly approach the witches just because they might have the answers that the wolves don't.

For one, who knows if Marie would even tell me the truth? For another, Remy zapping me in the back with magic after he injured Tristan with the silver knife definitely makes him my enemy.

Lucas told me all about Jolie. And, yeah, if he'd done that in the beginning, I wouldn't have taken off when Jade slipped the envelope with Jolie's pictures in it under my door. Same thing with his beastly side. I know *why* he tried to keep me in the dark as long as he did, but now that we're mated, he's an open book.

And though he never expected me to be able to shift—since Jolie hadn't—he's pleased that I can. It's a weird shifter thing, but me marking him as hard as I did when I, um, chomped on his throat actually impressed him. Kind of like, the harder the bite, the more devoted I am to him. He survived it, and once I got over some of the guilt I felt for losing control, he's proud to show off his scars.

Because I'm pack. Because I'm his mate.

Because I am a wolf of Winter Creek.

But that's the thing... I like being a wolf, for the most part. Trying to work magic—admitting that I'm tied to our enemies—seems like a betrayal to me. Logically, I know that it's not. Even Lucas would agree. My mate would probably be happier if I had another trick up my sleeve to keep myself safe. Offensive magic—like being able to freeze someone like Marie can, or zapping them like Remy did to me—is just another weapon I can use, the same as my claws and fangs when I'm a wolf.

Too bad I have no idea how to do any spells.

Asking my grandmother for any tips or lessons is out of the question. Same with anyone else who is in the coven. I'll

either figure it out on my own or I won't.

Besides, Jolie couldn't do magic. In the memories of hers that I've seen, the biggest conflict between her and Marie was that she was supposed to be a witch, using magic, and not getting involved with the wolves.

But she couldn't, and she did, and I'm pretty sure that one of those issues—if not both—led to her death. If she hadn't slipped into the woods that full moon, intending to perform the mating ceremony with Lucas beneath the Luna before she got lost in the rain, would she have survived?

If she could use magic to protect herself against the wolf that savaged her, what then?

I can shift. Not that quickly, and I have to convince myself that it's possible instead of the action being instinctive like it is for the rest of the pack, but I *can* do it. My bond with Lucas—and his bite—made it possible.

Is magic the same? Or is it something I've had inside of me all along and I just never needed to use it?

"I don't think I can," I finally answer.

Eleanor gives me an impish grin. "Why not? Have you ever tried?"

Well, *no*. Can't say I had much use for trying to make my hands glow or conjure a knife out of thin air when I was sitting in my apartment in New York.

"Jolie couldn't do it, either," I remind Eleanor. "Not when she was in Lafayette." Like me, she spent most of her life outside of Winter Creek. She actually only lived with Marie for a few months before she met Lucas, discovered she was his fated mate, and died before they could be bonded. "And when she was here, she didn't bother because she knew she was leaving the coven to join the pack."

"Just because you're pack, doesn't mean you can't use magic."

Maybe. I don't know.

“How hard can it be?” Eleanor adds, a wheedling lilt to her voice. “Come on. Give it a try.”

“How?”

She gestures at my hands vaguely. “I don’t know. Hold up your hands. Dig deep. Find the magic inside of you.”

Seriously?

I lift my hands around navel-height. “I feel stupid,” I mutter.

“Hey, aren’t you the one who told me that shifting feels like hitting a light switch inside of you? That, now that you know there’s another shape in there, you flick it and you go wolfy?”

True. Because I wasn’t shifting since birth like the other wolves, I don’t take the supernatural ability to change shapes for granted. Eleanor was curious what it was like, and once I could discuss it without feeling terrible about losing control, I tried to explain it as best I could.

“Yes.”

“Maybe magic’s the same thing.”

I wish. The only thing I remember Marie telling me was that novice witches needed herbs and flowers and spells to do magic. Once they were more practiced, it really did take a simple gesture, but I have no fucking clue what I’m doing.

But with Eleanor leaning forward from her seat on the porch, chin in her hands, elbows perched on her thigh, the November breeze causing her bouncy curls to be even bouncier than usual... damn it. I’ll *try*.

Closing my eyes, I search for something that might be ‘magic’. Shit. What does ‘magic’ feel like? If being a shifter is like a switch to me, is magic like a flame?

That makes sense. Okay. A flame in my gut that’s not freaking heartburn or something like that.

You can do this, Fallon. You got this.

No, I don’t.

I grit my teeth. I probably look like I'm suffering from constipation, bearing down as I try to do something I'm pretty sure I can't. I push against nothing, finding nothing, doing nothing but making a fool out of myself.

My eyes snap open.

"Forget it. I tried. It didn't happen. Whatever." Tossing back my hair, giving my body a quick shake, getting limber to hide my frustration and embarrassment, I reach down for the hem of my tank top. "Time to practice going wolfy instead."

At least I know I can do *that*.

Before I can tug off my shirt, Eleanor holds out her hand, a small frown on her adorable face.

"Fallon... you know I'm just trying to help right? I push because I... oh, sweetie. I was here when Lucas lost Jolie. There almost wasn't a pack after he got sucked into his grief. It took years for us to be a family again... and if there's any way to keep history from repeating, I want to do it. I'm not a wolf. I'm pack, but I'm not a shifter. There's not much I can do to help, but—"

Letting go of my tank, I rub the front of my shorts. "I know, Ellie. And I appreciate it. You're right. It's just so damn frustrating that I'm, like, the world's worst supe. A shifter who went feral right away, and a witch you can't do any magic. If I wasn't Lucas's fated mate, he'd never waste any of his time with me."

And there it is. My biggest fear muttered out loud as I turn my head, glancing at the woods across the clearing.

"What?" Eleanor sounds surprised. "Oh, Fallon, hon. You don't honestly believe that."

Of course I do.

I know I'm his mate. I know he loves me. But would he if there wasn't anything tying us together? I fell for him long before I knew anything about supernaturals, just because he was gorgeous and he was kind, and he was the Prince Charming in my fairy tale before I ever discovered he was really the big, 'bad' wolf.

It's why I so desperately want to prove myself. That I'm not the damsel in distress who needs his protection, instead of being a protector—and a predator—just like the rest of the wolves in the pack.

Magic would've been nice, but I'll stick with what works for the moment.

"I'm gonna practice shifting," I tell her again, ending the conversation because I... I don't really want to talk about this right now. "Fair warning. I'm stripping now."

"On that note," Eleanor says, getting up from her seat on the back porch, "I guess I'll go on inside. But if you need me, holler. I'll hear you."

I'm sure she will.

ONE GOOD THING ABOUT BEING ABLE TO TURN INTO A WOLF? At least Eleanor respects me enough that she trusts me to stay outside alone.

Or maybe she respects that she's mated, I'm mated, and neither one of the guys would be too happy if I stripped in front of her. Lucas, obviously, since we're still too newly together; his open jealousy over Tristan is a sure sign of that. And Kirk... well, I probably shouldn't have hit on his mate when I was making my first impressions on the pack.

Sure, I was kidding. Jade was pissing me off, and despite how obvious *I* was—that I was into Tristan at first, but head over heels for Lucas once I met him—I couldn't resist teasing her by coming on to Eleanor.

It's true. She's way more my type than Jade which is probably why we settled into an easy friendship and I've barely been able to tolerate the blonde she-wolf. Like I told Lucas before, though, I don't poach. She's Kirk's mate, and I'm Lucas's, and the entire pack knows that... but tell that to a possessive wolf shifter.

Probably a better idea to wait until things are a little more settled before I start running around naked like some of the

other wolves do.

I don't want to waste any of my clothes. I've found it easier to shift outside—something about communing with nature, I guess—so shucking off my clothes and leaving them crumpled on the porch is what I do when I'm trying to practice.

The first few shifts don't come easy. I'm still stewing over how ridiculous I felt, trying and failing to do any kind of magic even when I shouldn't. I'm pretty sure it's because I'm only half and half. It took taking Lucas as my bonded mate to give me the boost I needed to shift, and since I'm not about to fuck Remy or one of the male witches just to be able to zap people, I'll have to be happy with the amount of power I have.

Then, because I want so desperately to do it easily, I start to have performance anxiety. You don't know how fucking awkward it is to be standing there, tits out, the chilly air making your nips hard as hell because your fur coat is stubbornly refusing to materialize until you're tapping your foot against the packed dirt, negotiating with your human body to become a wolf again.

Of course, then I laugh because what else can I do? It's a pretty funny picture, and I'm just glad I don't sense anyone on their way back to the pack house. Last thing I need is Jade miraculously showing up after her recent disappearance just to poke fun at me for not even being able to shift right.

Just the thought that she might is the kick in the ass I need. Imagining her smirk if I stay here in my skin, I arch my back and finally fall forward on my paws.

I do that back and forth about five times before deciding to sniff around the back clearing as my wolf. Now that I've got the knack of shifting, it's time for me to work on my tracking skills. Deciphering scents, footprints, paw prints... I'll prove to Lucas that I can help.

And I convince myself of that—until I miss the obvious approach of a stranger, only realizing that someone is nearby when an unfamiliar male voice calls out, “Excuse me? Hello? Is anyone home?”

I miss a step, and because four legs aren't my default, that one step has me tumbling into a pile of bent limbs and fur as I fall flat on my poor snout.

Can you blame me? So focused on getting this wolf shifter thing down, I kind of forgot that the rest of the world around me existed.

Damn it.

Pushing off of the grass, I shake out my fur. I don't see anyone in the clearing behind the pack house, but when I hear the slight groan from the iron fence out front, I know where it's coming from.

I just don't have any idea *why*.

If Lucas was home, he'd never let me do what I'm about to do. I'd argue because—as much as I appreciate he's trying to keep me safe—it's always rubbed me the wrong way whenever someone tries to control me and what I do, and he'd try to shut me down with his dominance before I either gave in—or distracted him to get what I wanted.

He's not even here, and I know exactly how it would go... and that's because, despite only knowing him in this lifetime for barely two months, I know *him*.

I'll have to give him a little leeway as we maneuver this life together. Not only is he from another time, but he's not human. He's a shifter... an Alpha... and his overprotective instincts are hardwired into him. He can't help it anymore than I can keep myself from being reckless and impulsive.

It's who we are, after all, and we both knew that when we decided to make this thing official.

When it comes to love, Fate isn't enough. I know that. I like to think Lucas does, too. A shifter's ardent belief that the Luna would never lead him wrong had him accepting I was meant to be his mate all because she whispered my full name to him. I have to admit I felt something drawing me to him from the beginning. But now that we've mated... the easy part is over.

We fell in love. Now we have to make happily-ever-after last...

Since I've lived at the pack house, I've never seen any outsiders. This is wolf territory. I'm not worried about who could be out there, but just in case, I decide to stay in my fur. I won't have to struggle with shifting back and pulling on my clothes before Eleanor can come outside and deal with the unexpected guest, and if they came here with bad intentions, a big blonde wolf is probably a lot more intimidating than Fallon Witt in short shorts.

As soon as I come walking around the corner, I see him. A man in his early forties or so, with short dark-hair, friendly brown eyes, and wearing a casual suit that belongs to a whole other generation, I've never seen him before.

He's obviously a human, though—and isn't that something? I've only known I was a supe for a couple of weeks, but as much as I believed I was a human for twenty-five years, it was easier than I thought it would be to accept I wasn't. Now, one glance and I just know. Something about the way he holds himself, plus the muted sweaty smell barely covered up by the strong cologne he has on... oh, yeah. Not a shifter. Definitely not a witch.

A human guy.

Interesting.

Even more interesting is how he smiles when he sees me padding toward him. Considering he found his way to the pack house and didn't seem freaked out by the three-story-high stone *castle*, I kind of figure he's one of the non-supes in on Winter Creek's secret.

Even in a supe-run sanctuary like this hidden town, the witches and the wolf shifters need to rely on humans. Well, maybe not the coven so much; as insular as the pack is, my impression on the coven is that it's *worse*. Lucas mentioned how the humans who run the restaurants, the grocery store, the clothing stores not affiliated with the coven... that's how the pack survives. The non-supes provide goods and services for the shifters, while the wolves protect the humans.

This whole time, I thought it was from the witches. After learning more about how the supernatural world worked, I'm not so sure anymore. Ferals—not cursed ones like Lucas, but insane wolves who lose control—seem to be a threat I never thought of, and rogue vampires, too. I've gotten lucky that no other supe followed me into Winter Creek when I arrived, but that doesn't mean that they haven't—or they won't.

Something about that peppery scent pings in the back of my head as I approach the gate. Now that I've gotten a little better at deciphering scents, I'm pretty sure there was a woody note mixed in that reminds me of the other wolves in Winter Creek.

Could it have been a visiting shifter that dipped before the curse could snag them, too? Possibly. It's not like any of the other wolves have caught on that we have a lone wolf trespassing on pack land so it's not likely that they stuck around. I wouldn't be surprised if they heard the sounds of Lucas and me mating, got worried—or curious—and started to approach us before thinking better of it after I lost control.

Or they could've pulled a Jade and freaking vanished in the woods somehow...

Forget it, Fallon. It doesn't matter. I only caught the strange peppery scent once, Lucas never did, and I'm only obsessing over something that doesn't matter.

Nope. The only thing that matters is the dark-haired human in front of me—and the manila envelope he's holding in one hand.

CHAPTER 12

UNEXPECTED VISITOR



I've seen an envelope like that before.

Hundreds of times, really, if you consider how I worked in an office since I graduated from Rutgers. But even here in Winter Creek... I've even seen that same style of envelope here in Winter Creek... and, suddenly, I'm very curious about what this man is doing here.

That's not all he has. At his feet, there are two large brown bags. Over his cologne-sweat scent, I pick up *food*. Meat. Fresh-baked bread. The sweetness of fruit, and something earthy. Mushrooms, maybe, or potatoes.

Ah. This must be one of the townspeople who brings the pack's groceries. Since he has that manila envelope and friendly smile, I put him down as some kind of happy-go-lucky delivery boy.

He waits for me to approach the fence before he says, "Just who I was hoping to see. I have a delivery especially for you."

For me?

Crap. I'm suddenly regretting not shifting back and throwing on my clothes after all. I might be able to understand him since he's speaking in English, but there's no way I can communicate with him. Coming out of my shift to flash a stranger seems like a pretty bad idea, too.

Instead, I cock my head, twitching my ears, trying to look like a curious wolf.

It must work. He nods to himself, reaching over the fence to put the envelope within the reach of my muzzle.

Because of course it's the envelope. Why wouldn't it be?

"I ran into Simone in the town square. Since I was heading over to bring the weekly groceries for the Alpha, she asked if I could bring this over and give it to the wolf with yellow fur. Here you go, Tristan. It must be for you."

Oh, boy. I can't really blame this guy for not being able to tell two blonde wolves apart. Tristan is much bigger in size than I am, and I'm wearing my opal around my neck like it's some kind of a collar, but he doesn't seem to notice.

I take the envelope anyway. If it's for Tristan... I'll make sure he gets it. When he angles it in front of my mouth, I gingerly bite down on the corner with my fangs.

I guess that was right because he settles back on his heels, dusting his hands off.

"These are the groceries for the Alpha," he tells me next, gesturing at the bags.

That's nice. I have an envelope between my fangs.

I hope he doesn't think I'm going to shift back and take them from him. For one thing, I'm still against flashing the guy. For another, he'll be in for one hell of a surprise if he thinks I'm Tristan and my tits are suddenly in his face.

I park my haunches on the grass and wait.

He takes the hint.

"I'll just put them over there then."

Works for me. I can grab them after I shift back and change—and maybe get a better peek at the envelope.

The human man lifts up the first bag, grunting at the weight, leaning over the iron fence to drop it down on our side. He does the same with the other.

After that, there's a moment of awkwardness that reminds me of the time that creepy old man in the bellboy costume came by to bring me a telegram from my grandmother. Am I

supposed to pay him? Tip him? Lucas's dealings with the non-supes in Winter Creek are his business. The longer I'm here, the more I'll understand them, but now? I'm just staring up at this guy with an envelope still clutched between my fangs.

He scratches that back of his neck, smile wavering. I don't blink.

He clears his throat. "Well, that's all. Let Lucas know I came by, okay? If he needs anything else, he knows where to find me."

I'm glad he does.

I let out a garbled yip so that he knows that I got the message, then wait for him to turn around and walk away from the fence. He's whistling as he goes, and I just resist tapping my paws.

Once I can't pick up the whistling any longer, I turn again and trot back to the clearing behind the pack house. I almost expect to find one of the pack—Eleanor maybe, or even Tristan—but it's still empty.

Spitting the envelope out, I shift back to human. Thank goodness for all that earlier practice because it only takes a few seconds before I'm bending over, picking up the envelope.

I don't know why, but I didn't quite buy his story that he thought I was Tristan; or, if he did, that this envelope was meant for the Beta. If someone said yellow fur and Lucas has been hiding the fact that I'm here... I'm just going to look.

My paranoia is vindicated when I lift up the envelope and, in an old-fashioned loopy script, I see the name: *Jolie Bordeaux*.

Fuck that. There's no way this is for Tristan. And since it isn't?

Damn right I'm going to open that thing up.

Before I do, I gather up my clothes. Tucking the envelope under my arm, I hop up and down, shimmying on my panties first, then my shorts. The bra is next, followed by my tank top, and only once I've patted my opal necklace back in place over

the top of it do I grab my sandals in one hand, clutch the envelope on the other, and head inside.

Just in case it really was sent to Tristan, I need privacy when I go through it. It doesn't seem right to hide out in any of the common areas of the pack house, and I'd rather not do something sneaky in mine and Lucas's room. A shifter's sniffer is so powerful, they can scent emotions. The last time I opened up an envelope that had writing like that on it, I was so shocked, it probably lingered. Nope. It's probably better if I return to my old room on the third floor for the moment.

Moving as soundlessly as possible on the balls of my feet, I tiptoe out of the kitchen, past the game room, toward the stairs. I suck in a breath when I reach the second-floor landing. Since I haven't run into Eleanor yet, she's probably in either the library or her room. I'd rather not get caught with this envelope if I can, and step lightly on the stairs as I dash the rest of the way up to the third floor.

Once inside my old room, I close the door behind me. Only then do I remember the groceries I left outside. Whoops. Hopefully there aren't any non-perishables in there because, sorry, I can't wait any longer.

I use my fingernail to carefully lift the seal. I'm trembling slightly in curiosity and anticipation, trying not to lift it in case I need to pretend I never snooped. It takes a few seconds, and I exhale roughly when I ease it open.

Like last time, there are two separate items in the envelope. I shake it out, waiting for one of them to fall into my waiting palm.

Surprise, surprise. It's another photograph—

—and, holy shit, it *is* a surprise. There's also no doubt in my mind that this was truly meant for me because I highly doubt that anyone but me would care about the woman in the photograph and for a good reason, too: they wouldn't know her.

But I do.

The photograph shows a striking beauty about my age; though there's no *about* about it since I know full well that she's two months older than me. She has deeply tanned skin, dark brown eyes, and rich brown hair with highlights that I know firsthand come from a pricy salon in Northern New Jersey. She's wearing a deep blue blouse that shows off her boobs, black jeans that hug her house even when she's not sitting on the floor like she is in the photo, and a *gag*.

Seriously. A wad of fabric is between her lips, tied around her head, making her downcast gaze seem even more submissive somehow.

And, yet, despite the uncharacteristic pose, I know instantly which one of the Lipton twins this is.

It's Jeannie. It's Jeannie freaking Lipton.

Why do I have a photograph of Jeannie Lipton looking like she's been taken captive by someone? The *gag* scares me. The way her hands are yanked behind her back is freaking me out. Then I see the familiar hardwood floor, and the basket of flowers on the edge of the photo. A few petals are scattered around her feet, with an herb that looks like rosemary stuck in her hair.

She's gagged, caught, surrounded by flowers. I think I understand why. Most of the witches in the coven need flowers and herbs to do magic—

“You'd need magic to shut up Jeannie Lipton,” I mutter under my breath.

I wince, immediately regretting the nasty comment. That was mean. Blaming it on my shock at seeing my old friend in the photo—and knowing that the flower basket and vase in the background... the familiar set-up to the room... the window in the back, off to the side from where she's perched on the floor... she's at the coven house.

I'm fucking sure of it.

But *why*?

With trembling fingers, torn between being furious and frightened and I don't even know what else, I turn the damn

photo over.

The last time someone slipped a photo inside of a manila envelope and made sure I got it, there were a few words scrawled on the back. The names of the people in the images, plus the date it was taken. It's the same thing with this one.

As if I couldn't tell my friends apart, someone helpful penned *Jean* on the back, followed by what could be today's date, or maybe even yesterday's. Shit. I know it's *November*, but without my phone and no reason to track the days anymore, I can't really say for sure what the date is.

I place the photo on my bed, turning my attention back to the envelope. I almost forgot that there was something else inside of it. Hoping it gives a little more context into what the hell is going on, I find a piece of white card stock nestled toward the bottom.

Yanking it out, I see it has four lines written in the same cursive:

*Mon cher Jolie,
I think it is time we have a little
chat, yes?
Grand-mère*

I should have freaking known.

IF IT WAS ANYONE FROM MY OLD LIFE EXCEPT FOR LORELEI OR Jeannie Lipton, I wouldn't have cared that Marie and her witches have them. I'd feel bad, but instead of running out to confront her, I would've waited for Lucas.

But these girls? Lorelei is my best friend. She has been since we were sixteen. My relationship with her twin has always been a little more contentious, but in a sisterly way. We would fight and be catty, but we always made up in the end.

I have no idea what she's doing here. If Maria sent Armand or someone else to find someone to control me, she couldn't have chosen any better unless they managed to snag Lorelei. She's human. She's tough as nails, with a no-nonsense attitude and a history of being snarky, but she's *human*.

And she's been kidnapped by the witches.

I can't leave her like that. That's not me. Knowing she's there and that Simone—who has to be one of my grandmother's witches—made sure I got that envelope today, I'm probably walking right into a trap if I go to confront Marie right away.

But I *have* to. Waiting for one of the other wolves... waiting for *Lucas* to come back from their search might be too long. Is Jeannie in danger? What happens if she realizes that supernaturals are real? Will they let her go? Make her stay?

She's not involved in this. It's not right, making her pay just because she knows me.

I have to get her back—and I have to do it now.

I don't want to get Eleanor into any trouble with the Alpha or her mate. I've been assured up and down that I'm not being 'babysat' any longer, and I'm going to take *my* mate at his word. I'm a shifter. This is a challenge...

No. It's a *summons*.

And I'm going to answer it as soon as I give Eleanor a heads up that that's what I'm planning on.

I stampede down the first flight of stairs, calling for her.

"Eleanor?" I raise my voice. "Ellie!"

"In here."

Trying my best to pinpoint the sound of her voice, I follow it toward the end of the hall where Eleanor and Kirk's room is. Good. Considering I'm feeling a little panicked, a little pissed, a whole lot of petty right now, that'll save me another trip.

I knock on the closed door. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. Door's open, hon."

Letting myself in, I find Eleanor on her belly, legs folded behind her, feet dangling in the air as reads a large hardcover set in the middle of the bed. One look at my expression, though, and she rolls over onto her back before pushing herself up.

“Hey. Is everything okay?”

No. Not even a little—but I’m going to fix this. I’m going to take care of this. And then it will be.

I don’t tell her that. Instead, I jerk my thumb at her closet.

“Do you remember the red cloak that you gave to Lucas? The one you let me borrow when he first brought me back to the pack house?”

“You mean when you were joking around that you were living in some opposite version of Little Red Riding Hood? Of course.”

Good. “Can I borrow it?”

Eleanor frowns. “You can wear anything of mine you want, Fallon. But... why the red one?”

She doesn’t ask me why I want a cloak or seem surprised that I remember them. The last time the two of us snuck out together, I got a firsthand look at the cloaks and capes in her impressive collection. Another reminder that the pack—and the witches—have been stuck in time for so long, Eleanor admitted that her style icon was an actress who died before I was born.

I don’t *need* the cloak. It might be November, but since I’ve been Lucas’s bonded mate, I haven’t felt the chill at all. However, since I’m about to take this particular trip, I feel like it calls for it.

“Why? Because I’m going to visit my grandma’s house on the other side of the woods.”

I DIDN’T EXPECT ELEANOR TO GRAB THE RED CLOAK FROM THE closet, help me put it on, then pat me on my ass on the way out the door. Not gonna lie, that would’ve been kind of sweet, but

I know better. We're friends and all, but like the rest of the pack, her loyalty is to the Alpha.

Well, Kirk first since he's her mate, but after that, it's Lucas.

One good thing about there being no phones in Winter Creek? She can't tell me I'm nuts, then run off to text the Alpha that his mate has lost her mind again. And maybe she's able to send a message through her bond with Kirk, but I hope I was able to cut her off before she did.

I showed her the photo. Explaining who the woman in the picture is catches Eleanor's attention, and that earns me the cloak, at least. Reminding Eleanor that I'm a wolf shifter who is already on the cusp of going feral again thanks to my grandmother's challenge has her passing it off, then moving toward the far side of the room.

She sinks down into the chair near the window. "We have to wait for Lucas."

I was expecting that argument. The 'we' part of it, too. This isn't the first time that Eleanor insisted on acting the role of 'chaperone' for me while I watched her back. Of course, she ended up unconscious on the rope bridge, earning a few wrinkles around her eyes when she woke up again, and I point that out to her, too, before she gets any ideas about coming with me.

She shakes her head, curls bouncing wildly. "I didn't say I was going with you. I'm sorry, Fallon, but I'm only safe as long as I stay on pack land or neutral territory. Kirk would kill me if I risked squaring off against the witches."

He wouldn't. The delta wolf would probably go nuts if he knew his human mate was thumbing her nose at the witches. She has her perks, but also seventy years of keeping her distance from the wolves' enemies.

That's a relief. I'm not so sure what I'm going to have to do to get Jeannie out of the coven house. Assuming Marie has a reason behind this little 'chat' she's so insistent on, I'm betting she's trying to push my hand. Did she finally realize

that the curse hasn't quite broken yet? All it would take is one of the witches trying to leave Winter Creek and time catching up to them.

She has to think it's my fault. Everything I was led to believe said that, once I bonded to Lucas, the curse was over. Done with. And while I chose to take him as my fated mate because I honestly believe he's the 'one' I've spent years searching for, I can't pretend that breaking the curse wasn't a big motivator in banging him out in the woods last full moon.

Not because I was looking to leave. The opposite, really. I wanted to stay. I wanted to be with Lucas, and because I love him, I hated knowing that he suffered twice a month. Even before I knew that Lucas was the feral, my heart broke for the broken beast in the woods. I wanted to help him.

And I did. He doesn't feel the call to transform into that thing whenever the Luna is in control anymore. So the stasis spell is still going on. So we're still basically stuck in time. I feel bad for Eleanor and Kirk—and, okay, even Jade—because they want to leave if only for a little while.

Maybe this is what I need to do to get the rest of the pack their freedom...

"I know. I'm not asking you, too—"

"Good. But you know you can't go alone. The males will be back before you know it. I'll stay here, you go with them... I'm just asking you to wait, Fallon."

I can't. Doesn't she understand that I can't?

It's not just because Marie has Jeannie, either. I wish I could be all magnanimous and say, oh, yes, I'm risking my own ass for a woman who made snide comments about the size of it. Yeah, right. I love Jeannie, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't have an ulterior motive to head out for the coven house immediately.

Lucas won't let me. Case in point: he refused to allow me to come along on the search for Jade. He says he trusts me, that he knows I can take care of myself, but I don't think either of us believes him. Why would we? The first time we met in

this life, I was tied to a freaking tree. I couldn't escape, and if he hadn't been able to regain control over his beast, who knows what would have happened?

Especially since I slipped in my own blood, panicked, and passed out the moment he freed me from the rope.

Talk about being a damsel in distress, huh?

I understand why he's so overprotective. Even if I was a kickass wolf shifter like the others, just being his reborn fated mate would be enough to have him treating me with kid gloves. I get it. It irks me, but I *get* it.

This is my chance to prove myself. And, sure, maybe ol' impulsive Fallon is rearing her head, too stubborn to see the possible consequences of her reckless actions, but time's ticking, I have the cloak slung over my arm, and Jeannie needs me.

"I'm going."

"You can't—"

I show my teeth to Eleanor. It's not even something I meant to do, but maybe if I treat her like a wolf, she'll understand that I'm doing this. I'll make it up to her later if I frighten her, but—

She giggles. "Okay, *Jade*."

Damn it. I'm dead serious about this, and she's amused. I don't think she's laughing at me, though. Oh, no. I know what she's doing. She's trying to keep the conversation going, distracting me until I either agree to stick it out until Lucas and the others comes back or change my mind entirely about rising up to Marie's obvious bait.

And maybe if Eleanor hasn't mentioned Jade, it would've worked.

In one motion that's probably not as fluid as I hoped, I settle the cloak over my shoulders. "Tell me this, Ellie. Would you keep on trying to stop me if I *was* Jade?"

If I was a regular she-wolf who isn't Lucas's mate?

The humor disappears from her expression. “Fallon—”

I snap the cloak at my throat. Reaching behind me, I cover my blonde hair with the red hood. “I’m a shifter now,” I tell her, punctuating the statement with a small growl in the back of my throat. “I’m not prey anymore. I can be a predator, too.”

“Oh, hon, I *know*—”

Maybe she does. “When Lucas comes home, you can tell him where I’ve gone. Hopefully I’ll beat him back, but if I don’t, he’ll know where to find me. Tell him... just tell him that I need to do this for our happily-ever-after.”

Eleanor furrows his brow. “And he’ll know what that means?”

Considering I’ve been living in a twisted fairy tale for months now, he should.

CHAPTER 13

REMY



There are so many reasons why this plan of mine won't work.

Eleanor could use her bond to let Kirk know she was worried. Emotions travel between mates unless you work to keep them to yourselves, so she likely did already.

The wolves are out looking for Jade. That could take an hour. It could take until dinner. There's no way of knowing exactly when they'll return. And if they find her sulking somewhere and convince her to come back to the pack house? They could be heading home already.

Lucas could check our bond and sense that I'm on the move. Alpha or not, I'm pretty sure that he'll pass the search for Jade over to Tristan so that he could come after me.

And what if they don't stop me in time? Then I'm going to have to confront Marie and figure out a way to rescue Jeannie...

One step at a time, I tell myself. And since that step is a nervous jog through the woods, I decide to focus on getting off of pack territory first. Once I have, I'll turn my attention to making it onto the witch's proclaimed territory before anything else.

It isn't long on my trek that I realize I have no freaking idea where I'm going. By the time I'm lost in the woods, I admit that this was a mistake, but I'm determined enough to keep going. There's only one way out of Winter Creek. So long as I avoid the river itself, I'll either run into a witch, a

wolf, or a non-supe who might think I'm weird for wearing the red cloak, but give me the directions I need.

When I get back to the pack house, I'm totally working on my tracking skills. The only way I know I haven't left pack land yet is because there's a slight hum running through me that tells me I'm home. Even before I knew I was a shifter, I could sense it once Tristan pointed it out to me.

It's like the blood ward that was on the bridge. I didn't see it, but I could sense it. The boundaries between what the pack claims, the witches do, and neutral territory are just like that.

But while I'm searching for that, it's the little things that are throwing me. As I walk, the sound of my sandals snapping a twig echoes in my sensitive ears. I can hear a bird chirping for twenty feet away, but it's so close, I stop and swivel and search for it. Every whisper of the wind is someone running behind me, though when I turn and look, no one's there.

And my nose...

God, my poor nose.

Lucas said witches stink like shit. I'm sorry, my mate, but that's what the outdoors smell like, too. It's earthy and muddy, and straight-up poop most of the time.

I'm not used to these new senses. Sometimes, I doubt I ever will. When I'm in the house, it's not so bad. After almost a century, Lucas's scent overlays everything inside his family home. Any time I struggle with the overwhelming power of my new sniffer, I breathe in deep something of his until it's all I know.

Outside, though? That's so much harder.

Lucas promises it'll get easier. On my bad days, I scowl and ask, "How the hell do you know?" He's always been aware that he was a supe. I grew up as a human. Jolie might've been half-shifter, half-witch, but she couldn't shift *or* do magic. She was kind of a dud.

That's why I kind of bury my shifter senses when they get too overwhelming. Twenty-five years as a human is a bit of a hard habit to break, I guess, and when all the noise and the

scents and the second-guessing slam into me almost immediately after I headed into the woods, I close them off as best I can while moving forward.

Later, I'll tell Lucas that I knew exactly where I was going. He'll hold me close, nuzzle his nose against my throat, and make a noncommittal noise that tells me he knows I'm full of shit, but he'll let me pretend. Because, human or shifter, my sense of direction has always been shit and it's a freaking miracle that I manage to find the thin line that split the woods in half between wolves and witches.

I probably spent more time wandering around than I should have. Instead of hesitating on our side of the line, I take a deep breath and push forward.

When a shadow materializes between two trees ahead of me, I swallow my grunt of annoyance. I'd kind of thought that was going to happen since it seemed like me crossing into witch territory last time triggered a spell that brought Marie out of the coven house, but I'd hoped I'd have a little more time to plot my next move.

And then the shadow fades, leaving Remy Gauthier standing there.

Just like I swallowed my grunt, I force back my gasp.

Like, this is Remy. From the golden hoops in his ears to the low ponytail he's pulled his inky black hair into, I recognize him instantly. But there's something changed about him, and when my gaze lands on his ruined throat, I know exactly what it is.

I haven't seen Remy since his fight with Tristan. As far as I know, no one has. That makes sense now that I see him.

He probably needed all that time to recover.

It's his throat. Four slash marks cover the side of it, curving around the front. They're not open wounds anymore, but somehow the raised red scars standing out against his tanned skin is *worse*.

He grins. That old shark-like, predatory grin that I've always associated with the male witch.

“At last. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“*Remy.*”

His name comes out as a gasp. I can’t help it. Since Marie was the one who appeared out of the shadows the last time I headed for witch territory, I guess I thought she’d be the one waiting here. Especially since she sent the note.

Then again, maybe I should’ve known better. On the odd chance that I didn’t fall for it, I can’t imagine she would spend any of her precious time, waiting around the woods for me. Isn’t that what underlings are for?

Just like how Tristan was patrolling near the train station when it rolled in the fateful day I showed up, Remy appeared almost immediately after.

I remember that day vividly. There was Blondie and Ponytail, the two of them circling each other like I was a freaking bone two dogs were fighting over. It’s funny to look back on it now and see all of the warning signs I missed before I knew supes were real, but it doesn’t matter.

I chose Lucas, and even if I’m striking out on my own to see Marie, that has nothing to do with my feelings for him. If anything, I’m trying to prove to my mate that he doesn’t have to be so overprotective. He can love me, take care of me, keep me safe—and I’m going to do my best to do the same for him.

I try not to stare—and fail miserably.

“Look, Fallon,” he says, more teasing than mocking as he draws his pointer finger over the raised red scars on his throat. “We match. Only mine’s not as pretty as yours.”

He’s not wrong. I have a bite mark from Lucas’s fangs and his other teeth. As a shifter, if I hadn’t accepted him as my mate first, the mark would’ve healed with no evidence left behind. It’s one of their quirks. They can choose to keep any scars they have, but if they don’t want them, they’re gone.

Chosen scars are white, not red. Bite marks, though? They have a slight silvery sheen to them that, in a low light, might look pink. It’s how I managed to convince myself that, while

Eleanor's bite was weird, it wasn't any weirder than other scars I've seen on a few humans.

Remy's mark... it's vicious. To leave a mark that deep, he must've been close to bleeding out after Lucas clawed him. However, instead of healing like other supes, he has a visible reminder how close he came to losing his head because he pissed off an Alpha.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to bring you to Madame."

Madame... Marie.

"That's okay," I lie. "I think I can manage making my way through the woods on my own."

His slightly accented voice sounds oily as hell as he purrs, "Of course you can. I didn't mean to insult you, Fallon. It's just... don't you remember? I brought you to the coven house upon your arrival. For old times' sake, let me do so again."

Ugh. As if I needed a reminder about *that*.

Before I can refuse him more firmly, he lays his hand on my elbow. The cloak is still covering me from hood to hip so he's not quite touching me. Tell that to my wolf. I start to growl before he makes contact.

Lucas won't like it if I come back smelling like another dude. I'm already going to have to make it up to him, heading out to confront my grandmother without him, but explaining how Remy thought it was okay to grab me when I'm bonded? Eleanor was one thing. A male witch?

He might not be cursed to go feral anymore, but I can see him making an exception to go after his rival. Especially since he obviously regrets not making sure that Remy stopped breathing after the witch stabbed Remy, then used an offensive spell to zap me in the back and send me flying.

I was knocked out from the hit. If Lucas hadn't found me before Remy did whatever he wanted to with my unconscious body... I don't know what would have happened.

I'm growling, but Remy *tuts*. "Don't forget, Fallon. There is a truce between our coven and the wolves. You wouldn't want to break it, would you?"

He shifts his arm, sliding it so that he has it stretched across my shoulders, palm landing on my bicep.

Oh, fuck no.

I shake him off. Considering I'd rather grow my claws a little and slice his hand off at the wrist, he should be grateful that that's all I do. "Truce?" I echo. "What part of this imaginary 'truce' of yours meant it was okay to lob a spell at me that knocked me to the ground?"

"That was a misunderstanding—"

"Bullshit."

His dark eyes light up. "Feisty Fallon. Jolie... she wasn't this feisty. I like it."

Too bad. "Which way to my grandma's house?"

"I'll lead you. But, first, let me explain—"

"No, thanks. I'd rather just get this over with."

Besides, Jeannie needs me.

As though one of his abilities is freaking mind-reading, Remy says, "Your friend is an honored guest, I assure you. She's enjoyed the coven's hospitality these last few days. I'm sure she won't mind waiting a few moments more so we can talk."

If so, then he doesn't know Jeannie at all.

I'm not an idiot, though. Everything he said... that's just more BS. I don't know about you, but I can't imagine too many 'honored guests' have to sit on the floor while wearing a gag. And maybe the witches needed to accomplish that just to get her to take the photograph, but it doesn't matter. She didn't look happy, and I don't want to spend more time around this witch than I have to.

Especially since those scars on his throat don't seem to have taught him any lessons about screwing with me. I've got

claws now, too, you know.

Flexing my fingers, I show them off, then say with a smile, “Pass. Now... the coven?”

Remy’s sigh is so put-upon, it’s obvious it’s an act. “If I use a spell to bring you right to the coven, will you give me a few moments of your time before you leave again?”

Assuming I’m not fleeing for my life with Jeannie... “I guess.” Hang on— “Spell? What, like, a transport spell? Is that what you mean?”

He nods.

“Are you saying you could have done that all along? WHat? Zapped us and we go from here to there?”

“Something like that. It’s a little more complicated than you’d think, but imagine the shadows. We’ll conjure one here, step into it, conjure one near the coven house and, voila, we are there.”

Yeah. Like I said. Transport spell.

At least that explains how both he and Marie appeared so quickly in the woods like they did...

I narrow my eyes on him. “Then what was that two-mile walk when I first got off the train? With my suitcase?”

He shrugs. “You didn’t know you were a witch then. If I’d used magic, you would’ve bolted and run right after the train.”

True. “Still. And I’m not a witch. I’m a wolf.”

Remy’s lips twitch. “So you say.” He holds out his elbow. “Come, Fallon. You know what to do.”

Another reminder of the day we met. Acting like my freaking tour guide or something, Remy insisted that I take his elbow as he led me to meet my grandmother’s house. I should’ve known what kind of guy he was when he *insisted*, but while he was just asserting his control over me then, I’m pretty sure I understand why he wants me to take hold of him now.

I'd rather clutch the back of his black shirt. Too bad Remy's a stubborn bastard, too. I can see it now. I refuse to take his elbow, and he insists again that we walk... and who wants to bet it'll be much longer than two miles this time?

Especially if he wants to 'talk'...

"Fine." I lay my fingertips lightly on the crook of his elbow. "Now let's go."

"In a rush, Fallon, love?"

Ew. Gross. "No."

Remy chuckles. "Ah. I see. The Alpha doesn't know you're here."

I start to take my hand back. "If you want to waste me time and Marie's—"

"No, no." He pats his palm on top of my fingers, trapping them against his skin. "Hold tight. You wouldn't want to get lost in the spell."

I snort under my breath. I get lost and he has to explain that to *Madame* and Lucas.

Good luck, buddy.

But, just in case, I tighten my hold. That must be good enough for Remy because he flashes me another grin, then starts chanting under his breath. I close my eyes, not sure if my stomach can handle what it'll look like to transport to the other side of the woods, and when he stops, tapping my hand again as a signal that we've arrived, I'm actually surprised to see the front of the manor house about thirty feet away from where we are.

Talk about *deja vu*. The only difference is that Marie isn't waiting primly on the top step in front of the double French doors like she was. Instead, there are two witches: a woman with dark hair, and Armand.

Just peachy.

Leaving the other witch at the door, Armand eases down the step as Remy and I approach the entrance.

He nods at Remy. “Madame thanks you. I’ll take it from here.”

For a moment, I expect the younger witch to argue. If anything, he brought me here, and I would’ve thought he’d want to show off to my grandmother that he accomplished this task.

But I guess it’s not fun goading me with an audience because he nods, then lowers his elbow, allowing my arm to fall at my side. Nodding at Armand in return, he murmurs that he has something else he has to take care, then bounds up the stairs.

Armand waits until he’s gone before he gestures in the same direction. “Come along, dearie. Your grandmother is waiting.”

Oh, goody.

CHAPTER 14

WHAT I MUST



Armand and the female witch flank me as I'm brought inside of the manor.

On the one hand, I'm glad. Every second I spent with Remy was worse than the one before it, and just thinking about how easily he tried to touch me has my stomach going queasy. I didn't react the way I wanted to only because he smarmily called 'truce', but, oh, did I want to.

On the other hand, though, I don't trust Armand. Having the male witch pretend to be a good samaritan so he could steal my blood isn't something I think I'll ever be able to get over. Add that to how he was there when Marie left me tied up for the beast and it's no surprise that I edge a little closer to the woman.

And maybe I do that because she gulps any time I get within a few inches of her, like she's nervous to be near me, but struggling to do what she's been ordered to.

Hey. Small pleasures, right?

They leave me in front of a closed door. Armand knocks, and after my grandmother's accented voice calls out for me to enter, they back away.

Taking a deep breath, setting my shoulders so that Marie doesn't immediately try to intimidate me, I shove the door in.

Like always, she's wearing a champagne-colored satin dress that fits her perfectly. Her pale hair is done up in an immaculate chignon, her make-up and manicure on point. She

was sitting with her legs crossed on a stool next to her sewing machine when I pushed the door open, rising up on her high heels in order to greet me.

The first words out of my mouth are, “Where is Jeannie?”

I don’t see her anywhere. There are dummies in one corner, an industrial sewing machine in another, and a low table piled upon with fabric and other materials. No Jeannie, though, and that pisses me off.

Where the hell is she?

Instead of answering me, Marie primly says, “Shut the door, Jolie.”

“My name is Fallon.”

She purses her lips, waiting expectantly.

Fine. She wants to play this game? What? Unless I do what I’m told, I won’t get to see Jeannie? Freaking *fine*.

I spin on my heel, about to shove the door closed with my palms when she *tuts*.

“Non. *No*. Don’t use your hands.”

“Then how the hell do you want me to close it? My shoe?”

Marie frowns, her sense of disapproval only adding to my nerves.

Crap.

The last time we met out in the woods, my grandmother called for a truce. Since we separated after Tristan and Remy started their fight, and she was gone before Remy zapped me when I tried to run back into the woods, she never really *ended* the truce. Remy reminded me of that when I met him earlier.

Is that why she’s acting so friendly? Or is Marie just trying to lull me into a false sense of security—or, worse, distracting me from the reason why I came here?

I grit my teeth. “I’ll just leave the door open.”

“Nonsense. Tap into your magic and close the door.”

I can't. It's ridiculous that she's trying to force me into admitting that I have no witch magic, but she has to know that I can't. "No."

"It's very simple. You are a Bordeaux. You are coven. Find it inside of yourself. Grasp the power and *use* it."

To close a freaking door?

This is ridiculous. I don't have time for this BS, not when I'm expecting to hear Lucas's howl any second. As soon as he checks on our bond and senses that I've left the pack house, he won't even have to go check in with Eleanor and find out where I've gone. The tie stretching between us will lead him onto witch territory.

He's been here before. When I first arrived in Winter Creek, I saw a big, black dog watching me from my bedroom window in Bordeaux Manor. I thought it was a stray and took pity on it because, even then, I was drawn to Lucas. I fed him, and though I had no idea what tossing my scraps would signal to the shifter, he risked his feud with the witches to watch over me long before our fateful meeting in the woods.

Just because I'm on witch territory right now... that won't stop Lucas from coming after me. But since I don't want to be the reason behind another confrontation between witches and wolves, I need to find out what Marie wants from me, grab Jeannie, and get the hell out of Dodge.

"I can't, okay. And it doesn't matter anyway. I just want—"

"Oh, come here." Snatching my hand before I can take it back, Marie presses her palm against mine. "There. Try now."

I tug my hand out of hers, flinging it back with force. "What did you"—I gasp—"do?"

The door behind me slams shut the same time as my hands take on a slight glow. Like one of the super strong lightbulbs back at the office, it seems to emanate out of my palm.

"Better," she purrs.

"What did you do to me?"

“I made the mistake once before to coddle you, Jolie. To let you believe that the magic isn’t welling up inside of you as we speak. I was stubborn. A Bordeaux shouldn’t need help to cast, but I lost even more in refusing to do so. Not anymore. If you won’t go to the magic, I brought your magic to you.”

“Well, *don’t*.”

A soft chuckle from Marie sends a shiver down my spine. “So forceful. *Oui*. You will be a good leader for the coven when the time comes.”

Um... no. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“I’m aware. But, please, forgive an old woman her fancies. I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment.”

A long time? It’s only been a few weeks since our last confrontation.

“You’re making this more difficult than it needs to be. I’ve done so much for you—”

She has got to be joking. “Yeah? Like what?”

“I brought you here. I arranged your precious fate. I housed you. Fed you. Even used your blood to remind you who you were born to be. Wouldn’t you consider that generous?”

Forget all the rest. My blood... is that why she enforced the blood ward? I didn’t start having dreams about Jolie until I ran smack dab into it so, whatever she did, it worked. I got her memories, her fears, her hopes... and her mate.

I shake my head. “Yeah, and to keep me here.”

“Of course. But I had to, *mon cher*. If you left, you left with any chance to end this wretched curse, once and for all. I told you. I searched years to find you, knowing that you were my only hope to save the coven—”

And she didn’t think to just *ask* me for help? To explain in a way that I—still believing I was a plain human chick—could understand? She got me to believe she was my estranged grandmother. It doesn’t matter that, in a way I don’t quite get yet, she *is*. I would’ve done anything to impress my long lost

family. I took a train into a small town I'd never heard of, didn't I? If she had somehow introduced me to Lucas on any night other than the full moon, then let Fate take over... I could've helped her.

Now?

Get the hell out of here.

"I don't care about your coven," I tell her honestly. "I just want to protect the pack."

It's true. It doesn't matter that I'm part witch, part shifter, or that a touch from her triggered my magic just now. Marie is the one who seems to think I have to choose being a witch if I want to end this curse, once and for all. Even if I wasn't able to shift into a wolf, or if I could conjure up magic as easily as she seems to think I should be able to, *it doesn't matter*.

From the moment I felt that tug between Lucas and me, pulling me toward the Alpha... I will always side with the wolves of Winter Creek.

Marie scoffs, momentarily losing her gentile and haughty nature. Then, with a wave of her hand, she gestures at the low table beneath the window, disappearing the topmost covering.

What I thought was a lump of fabric turns out to be a large golden werewolf sprawled out on her side. Unmoving, maybe even not breathing, I recognize her instantly.

No wonder the others couldn't find Jade. How could they when she was tucked away inside of the coven house.

"This is where you throw your loyalty?" snaps Marie. "To them?"

"What did you do to Jade? Is she—" Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy *shit*... I swallow my rising panic and spit out: "*Dead?*"

"Elle n'est pas morte." She says that impatiently before adding, "But she's lucky not to be. One of my witches found her on our territory. Spying, as I understand. Trying to find our weaknesses so she could bring them back to your Alpha. Silly girl. She called it loyalty. As if a shifter knows the meaning of the word."

Tell me how you really feel, *Grandmere*.

But she's wrong. For all her faults, Jade *is* loyal—and she still looks like she's dead.

She isn't dead, echoes the part of me that is still Jolie. That's what Marie said in French. That Jade isn't dead.

I've grown used to silencing it; if not that, then ignoring it. It was rough at first. After two weeks trapped as a wolf, it was bad enough that I needed to remember being human. Having memories of two distinct lives was driving me freaking nuts until I made the conscious decision to move on.

That's what I do. What *Fallon* does. I put it behind me, looking toward the future instead. I have Lucas. Every day I spend with him, every night I sleep by his side... the more I instinctively know that there isn't anywhere else I'd rather be. Then there's my friendships with the pack. I can see Eleanor becoming one of my best friends, while Kirk is a great wolf to chat with over a cup of coffee.

And Tristan... things are still awkward, sure, but something tells me it's for a whole other reason. He has his own demons he's battling, and when he needs someone to talk to, he knows I'm here. If anything, wearing Lucas's bite on my neck just makes it easier for him to recognize me as his Alpha's mate instead of a single woman who might be interested.

I like that about the wolves. Things are either black or white. No shades of grey for the shifters. You're either an enemy or you're pack. Someone to fight or someone to protect.

I'm either Fallon or Jolie.

I'm Fallon. I appreciate Jolie's ability to translate French if only so my heart can kickstart again and go back to beating... but just because Marie said Jade isn't dead, I'd be a fool to take her at her word.

After all, she's already proven she can lie straight to my face, only to chide me for not being witch enough to tell...

I throw Marie a doubtful look, then cross the room so that I'm standing in front of the table. Jade's eyes are closed. I never thought I'd miss seeing those too-green peepers until I'm staring down at the eerily still wolf and her eyes are closed.

Beneath her sleek fur, I'm not so sure she's even breathing. I shove my hand in front of her snout, relieved when I feel a whisper of air against my fingers. Other than being still, she looks okay, though I do notice she has an inch-wide, shimmering metallic collar in place around her neck.

What the—

“Jade? Wake up. Jade!”

“She can't hear you. She's resting.” Marie pats her chignon though it's as perfect as ever when I glance over at her again. “A little spell to keep her quiet, and a silver collar to remind her what she is.”

I clench my fists. “Yeah? And what's that?”

“A dog.”

At the insult, my hands glow even brighter as the points of my claws dig into my palms. Peering over at Marie, I see that she's smiling softly now. Whether it's because she's using my emotions to manipulate me to force me into using magic or she just enjoys putting down the wolves, I'm not sure.

But I do say, “Let her go. Give me Jeannie, too, and you won't have to worry about any *dogs* in the coven house.”

“Don't be cheeky, mon cher. It doesn't suit you.”

I wasn't being cheeky. I was giving her a chance to end this without the tensions between shifters and witches getting any worse.

“But you're right. I could send her back to the dogs. I could give her to one of my witches to practice on.” She taps her pointed chin with a perfectly manicured nail. “Or maybe play with. Remy insists on having you, but Claude has shown an interest in the wolves.”

“But he's a witch—”

“And she would have to join the coven, of course. We may have an uneasy truce, but I will always put the coven first.” Marie *tsks* as she looks at Jade. “She seemed less than pleased at the idea. She also didn’t think you’d come to retrieve her if I sent her photograph to you. Luckily, we have other leverage.”

Jeannie.

“As for the wolf,” Marie continues conversationally, “I got tired of her howling and after I was so kind and gave her the photograph of Jolie and I last month.” So *that’s* why the cursive was the same. Marie sent over *both* envelopes! “Ah, well. I’ll wake her up eventually, but the mutt isn’t the reason you are here. Is it, *petite fille*?”

I don’t know what’s worse: hearing her call me ‘Jolie’, or the repeated reminder that she was Marie’s granddaughter.

Both. It’s both.

“I want my friend.”

“The human girl is with Remy now.” Of course she is. “Once we’re done here, you can have her. But, first, business.”

No. “I don’t have any business with you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Maybe, but I don’t care. Ever since this woman proved that her precious coven is more important to her than any blood tie we might have, I want nothing to do with her. She told me where Jeannie is—and as much as I don’t want to deal with Remy again, I *will*—and that’s all I need to know.

I’ll get Jeannie. I’ll figure out how to save her and Jade. Fuck the truce. I’ll rally the whole pack if I have to because, damn it, Jade’s ours, Jeannie is mine, and I’m sick of these damn witches.

I start for the closed door, but I don’t even make it two steps before her voice stops me.

“You should thank me. I gave you to the Alpha and you tamed him. Look. I see his bite on your skin. I had my doubts that you would, but you did it. And now here we are.”

Are you fucking kidding me? She makes it seem like she played matchmaker between me and Lucas. I don't care that, even as his feral, Lucas recognized how important I was to him. If he hadn't have gotten control of himself, he probably would've mated me—and regretted it when he came back to his senses—but I don't think he would've killed me.

But *she* didn't know that, did she?

I certainly didn't.

“You tried to sacrifice me to him!”

“For the coven,” she says simply. “I sacrificed my son for the coven. Why wouldn't I sacrifice my granddaughter? There isn't anything I won't do to see a Bordeaux lead the coven. No split loyalties. It's coven or nothing, and time you understand that, Jolie.”

I *don't*.

There's no point reminding Marie that my name is Fallon. So maybe I was Jolie once, but she lived her life. She lost it—and if she hadn't, who the hell knows if I'd even be here—and I'm sorry for the ripple effect her death had on so many lives, but, yeah... that's life. It sucks. Whether it's because your adoptive mom died of cancer, or your bio parents died in a crash—

I sacrificed my son for the coven...

“What do you mean 'sacrificed' your son?”

“He chose the wolves. He chose *Guinevere*. Of course he had to be eliminated once he had a child to carry on our name.”

Guinevere... A shiver runs down my spine at the name. Not only because it has meaning to *me*, but because the way Marie sneers it, I just have to ask, “My birth mother?”

I was adopted as an infant by Adrienne Witt. She named me herself. Fallon Genevieve Witt. When my classmates would poke fun at my first and middle names since they were both unusual, she'd tell me stories about Queen Guinevere from the days of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Camelot. Of

course, she kept them PG since it's one of the most infamous love triangles in literature, but still. She loved the stories, loved the name, and loved me.

As for Fallon, she always said she just liked the sound of it. After looking it up once, I learned my name meant 'in charge' and 'descended from a ruler'. Considering Mom's fascination with a medieval queen, it made sense.

"The whore who stole my son away from his coven. He didn't do what he must, so I did it for him. That's what comes of being in power, Jolie. Sometimes the choice is never yours."

Is that so?

The glow around my hands seems impossibly brighter. The magic swarms around me, flooding my veins, making my belly feel like it's on fucking fire, but my mind is clear. My heart is icy cold as my birth mother's predatory instincts align with my father's blood.

My fingers flex, claws curving around the tips. I'm still in my skin, though there's no doubt in my mind that my wolf is taking over.

If not my wolf, *something* is.

I have a mouthful of fangs. As Marie looks down her nose at me, I show them off in a wicked grin.

She matches it. The matriarch of the coven is a witch, but something about the way she bares her teeth at me in an encouraging smile has me vibrating in place.

"Oh, Grandmere," I whisper, using the name she insisted on the first time we met, "what big teeth you have."

She shakes her head haughtily. "Yes. And what big claws you have, petite fille."

I *know*.

Marie crooks her finger at me. It's a dare. It's a command.

It's a challenge.

I'm not an Alpha, but I am a wolf shifter. And whether Marie knew what she was doing or not, she begged for a challenge.

And that's what she gets.

My hands are still glowing with magic. Is that what makes it so easy for me to grab the slick material of her fancy dress in one hand before plunging the other through her chest, right for her heart?

The dress doesn't stop me. The skin and bones, muscle and sinew... that doesn't stop me. I dig my claws into her chest, squeezing her heart, doing everything I can to make her realize that I'm not the obedient granddaughter she lost to the wolves—or the son she sacrificed for her own petty whims.

I'm Fallon, and this is *my* story.

It all happens in a matter of seconds before reality comes crashing in and all I can think is: what the fuck did I just do?

I yank my hand back out of her chest, horrified at my actions, but also feeling a sense of righteousness.

Like I was *meant* to murder my grandmother.

Because I did, didn't I?

Supes are long-lived with impressive senses. The wolves can go from human and back. The witches can throw magic around like bombs. Marie used hers to freeze me. Lucas is strong enough in either form to move the heavy iron fence surrounding the pack house or carrying my dead weight through the woods. Even Eleanor can track using her human nose.

But one thing I've learned? They're not immortal. They can die. Jolie did, run down by a wolf that tore her to pieces.

They can die... which means they can be killed.

Magic can heal a lot of injuries. A silver blade to my inner arm or Tristan's hind leg, or a feral wolf going for her lover's throat... a wolf shifter's regenerative properties are even more amazing. But whether I squeezed Marie's heart or decided to go after Jade next, there is some damage that can't be undone.

What I just did to my grandmother? That's one of them.

She gasps softly, elegant even in her last breaths. Instead of using her magic to avenge herself, she smiles as her champagne-colored dress blooms with bright red blood.

“J’ait fait ce que je devais, petite fille.”

I did what I must, granddaughter.

And so did I.

CHAPTER 15

TRUTH COMES OUT



When the white glow around my hand disappears, it takes all of the blood and gore from stabbing Marie in the chest with it.

Good thing, too. It's bad enough I just became a damn murderer. To faint at the sight of the blood I caused, to lose my head because my hands were sticky with the stuff because I *shoved my claws into her chest...* that would've been the cherry on the top of this shitty *I've lost my fucking mind* sundae.

And I thought I already had when I turned on Lucas...

Keep going, Fallon. Move on. Don't stop to think about what happened otherwise you will lose it entirely... and I can't afford to do that just yet.

Have I hit my limit? Amazingly, every time I think I'm tiptoeing up against it, I'm surprised by how much more I can take. I guess, after being murdered myself, the bar's kind of high... but killing my grandma?

I swallow roughly, hiding my claws under my cloak as I turn my back on Marie's body.

Jade. I have to take care of Jade.

She's still motionless on the table. I can't tell if it's because of the control Marie had over her or the silver collar she's wearing, but since Marie is... gone now, I figure my only shot is to go for the collar.

The second I reach for it, trying to figure out how to remove it, I hiss out a breath. Genius me, I completely forgot that I'm part shifter which means the silver? It burns the crap out of my hand.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. My fingers are on fire from it, but I grit my teeth and yank. The silver is no match for a frantic, panicked shifter with thumbs and it cracks in half.

I toss it as far away from me as I can. Then, flexing my fingers, hoping like hell these amazing healing properties I'm supposed to have kick in and the pain dissipates, I bend down so that I'm at Jade's side. I don't want to risk hurting my fingertips any further so I don't probe her. Instead, I tap her snout with my elbow.

Her eyes blink open. I don't blame her when her first instinct is to rear back, showing off her fangs as she rumbles, but it's a little annoying when she sees it's me and the rumbling lowers in pitch.

Really? I saved her and this is the thanks I get?

For Lucas, I tell myself. She's part of the pack, and I'm going to do this for Lucas.

"Jade? It's me. It's Fallon. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The rumbling dies down as she gets up on four shaky legs. Her head swivels, checking to see if we're alone, yelping when her gaze lands on my grandmother's body.

I refuse to look behind me. "I know," I tell her, assuming she *can* understand. "Long story, but the gist of it is that Marie is dead. We gotta get you out of here before anyone else finds out. Can you shift back?"

Jade lowers her muzzle. Her body trembles for a few seconds before she shakes her head, ears flattening against her skull as she whines.

I was afraid of that. Marie's spell on Jade might've broken when my grandmother died, but the silver collar must have really screwed with her. My fingers are still aching, and I don't know how long it'll take for all those visible burns around her

neck to heal. I'd been afraid it might affect her shift. Looks like I'm right.

Marching her through the manor as a wolf seems like a bad idea. If they had one collar, who's to say they don't have *two* more? No. She has to go, I have to stay, and there's only one thing I can think to do.

Leaving Jade where she is on the table, I hurry over to the window. A small sigh of relief escapes me when I see that we're on the first floor. I probably would've still insisted on my plan if we were on the second, but this is better.

The window opens easily. Shoving the curtains back, I go over to the table and—before she can react—heft Jade up in my arms.

In her human form, Jade is tiny as hell. Super petite. As a wolf? She's much bigger, but I instinctively tap into my newfound strength and pick her up. She doesn't fight me, thank goodness, and stays still even after I shove her bulk through the window and drop her three feet to the ground.

Cats are supposed to land on their feet when they fall. I don't know if it's the same for wild wolves, but Jade manages to before stumbling a few steps forward, dropping down to her belly.

Oh, no. That's not going to work for me.

“Go,” I half yell, half whisper. “Go back to the pack.”

She takes a few tottering steps before looking behind her.

I shoo her. I'm dead fucking serious, too. We might never be bosom buddies, but we're packmates. She got caught by Marie because of me. The least I can do is rescue her before I go looking for Jeannie.

Jade bobs her wolfy head and starts away from the house. After a few more steps, she goes from trotting to running. I don't breathe until I see she's made it to the woods, disappearing into the trees.

Welp. If Lucas doesn't know I'm here yet, once Jade gets back to the others, he will.

Here's hoping I can get out of this mess before I involve my mate in it.

First, though, I have to get Jeannie. I came all this way for her. Jade's safe now, but she's a wolf shifter. I got the collar off of her. She'll be fine.

Jeannie's human. I have no idea why she's here, but it's too big of a coincidence to assume she isn't the perfect trap for me.

And she is, isn't she? Because I'm about to walk right into it.

IT ISN'T LONG BEFORE I REALIZE MY BIG GOOF. MARIE TOLD me that Remy was watching over Jeannie, but do you think it occurred to me to ask where?

I give myself a pass. With everything else going on, just confirming that she was here was enough. Now that I need to find her, though? I'm a little stumped.

I'm also feeling a little feral.

The Fallon that was here two months ago would never snarl at one of the meek and mild witches that always seemed to be traveling around the manor, their heads down and their hands holding baskets full of herbs. I'd been more curious about them since they seemed to act either like I wasn't there, or like they were genuflecting or something. Either way, it bothered me, and I kept my distance.

Right now? I grab the shoulder of the first one I see, shove her back against the hallway, and demand, "Where's Remy?"

She's a witch. If I'd given her enough time to cast, she'd probably use magic to defend herself. The one I grabbed is visibly younger than me—though that doesn't mean much in Winter Creek—and her hazel eyes go wide in fright as she takes in my teeth.

My, Fallon, what big teeth you have...

I snap them. "Well? Where is he?"

She points. “Upstairs. In Jolie’s bedroom.”

Jolie’s... and, how much do you want to bet, *mine*?

As creepy as it is that Remy decided to take over the bedroom that Marie delegated as mine during my stay—and as obvious in retrospect that it had to have been Jolie’s seventy years ago—one thing works in my favor: I don’t need any further directions. I know exactly where it is.

Releasing the dark-haired witch, I warn her to get away, punctuating it with a little growl that has her dropping her basket and hurrying down the hall.

I wait until she’s out of sight before running in the opposite direction, heading for the stairs.

No one stops me. Whether they’re gathering resources to take me out or I’m somehow managing to storm through the manor without running into anyone else, it doesn’t matter. I take advantage of the empty halls to make it to my old bedroom in no time.

The door is closed, but not locked. Since he brought me here, I’m thinking Remy has spent the last twenty minutes—because, holy shit, it’s been like twenty minutes at the most—waiting for me to find him again, especially since he’s the one watching over Jeannie.

And he is. The moment I push in the door, hoping that he hadn’t moved her while I was with Marie, I see Remy sitting comfortably on the edge of my bed, Jeannie huddling on the floor.

In the photo, Jeannie had a piece of fabric shoved in her mouth, wrapped around her face. The gag is missing, but she’s sitting in the corner, her hands obviously bound behind her back.

“Ah, Fallon.” He rises up from the bed. “I’ve been waiting for you. Hello.”

Ignoring Remy’s welcome, I burst the rest of my way into the room. “Jeannie, are you okay?”

Remy waves his hand. I can't tell if he used magic to keep her quiet or if he's already hurt her enough that just the gesture stops her from answering me, but she's silent as the grave as her dark eyes glance from the witch to me and back.

I do the same. Glaring at Remy, I move until I'm nose to nose with the witch and snap, "Are you fucking crazy?"

He laughs. His breath is hot on my skin and I *hate* it. "Would it surprise you if I were? Seven decades waiting for you to return to me... to make up for your betrayal... it weighs on a witch."

"I— *what?*" I stumble a few steps away from him. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me that you don't remember."

Remember... oh. I remember. I remember how, when I was Jolie, Remy tried to convince her to leave Lucas, choosing a partnership with him instead. And I also remember how sure Remy was that I would fall for him after my recent arrival in Winter Creek.

But *betrayal*? Does he really see it as a betrayal that I picked my fated mate over him?

He waves his hand again. Not because he's casting any spell—though I learned my lesson after he blasted me in the back that one time—but because he's entering into a conversation with me, knocking aside that last topic. "It doesn't matter. The years were long, but worth it. We will try again, Fallon. We'll rule the coven together—"

I nod. "Oh, yeah. That settles it. You *are* nuts."

"Not nuts. Only determined to have what should've always been mine." Remy grins. It's that winning smile that once made me think his sharp features were alluringly attractive. Now, though? Ugh. "That you came to me tells me I'm right."

"I came for my friend—"

"You came because you did what you were born to. A wolf with magic... you'll lead the coven now, with me at your side."

Um... no. I won't be doing that. But how does he know? How does he know that the coven is leaderless after what I just did?

Before I can ask, Remy tilts his head slightly. The afternoon sunlight streaming in through the window winks off of his golden hoops. "I think I might prefer you as Fallon. Jolie... she was weak. She chose the Alpha, but how could she hope to survive him when she couldn't even defeat a wild wolf?"

"Of course," he adds, his smile taking on a dark edge, "a charmed wolf is a lot more dangerous."

What?

Remy sees the confused look on my face and laughs. The bastard *laughs*. "Is that something else you forgot? Because I told you, Fallon. I'm the one who charmed the wolf to chase Jolie, to show her that it wasn't worth it to forsake the coven for a dog."

He did tell me that. At the time, I didn't have any idea what that meant. I didn't even know the truth of who Jolie was or how she really died... but the wolf in Lucas's cabin? It was controlled by Remy to slaughter Jolie in the rain?

Is that what he's telling me?

I'm not the only one trying to mask sense of what he just confessed.

Jeannie looks from me to Remy, back at me again before settling on him. "Wait a second."

Remy looks surprised that Jeannie is speaking. "You're supposed to play your role, little hostage. I caught you. I brought you here to control my new bride. Now be quiet."

First of all, ew. I'm not his bride. Jolie rejected his sleazy ass for good reason, then ended up being killed because some fuckers just don't know how to take 'no' for an answer. I would've done the same, but if he thinks he can use Jeannie Lipton to keep me in line... well, he's kind of right, but just until I can figure out how to free her.

Only... I don't have to.

Ignoring the ill-disguised anger he spewed at her, she simply says, "You're the one who killed Jolie Bordeaux?"

Did I think I was shocked when I saw Jeannie's subdued expression in the photograph and realized she was in Winter Creek? That's nothing compared to the heat in her accusation as she pushes her tied-together hands off of the floor, leaping gracefully to her feet.

First, because I've never seen Jeannie move as easily as that. Then, because I would've flopped about on my belly, only able to crawl, if the witches had tied my hands behind my back. No way could I have done that as a human—and she's human.

Isn't she?

I convinced myself that it was one hell of a coincidence that had Jeannie somehow tracking me down in Winter Creek. That, or my grandmother sent another of her coven to snatch someone from my old life to control me. Jeannie and Lorelei are identical twins. I can tell them apart, but an outsider wouldn't be able to. And even if they tried to take my best friend and got my frenemy instead, she's still a Lipton. I'd do anything for those girls.

That's why I fell right into Marie's trap, after all. Only... was it hers?

Or has Remy been playing the long con of getting revenge for Jolie rejecting him all those years ago? He killed her—he killed *me*—and, now that I'm back, he thinks I'm going to give up Lucas for him so that he can get what he wants.

My bond is unbreakable. I'm not worried about that. Lucas is mine, and I killed my grandmother to keep him. If I have to do the same thing to the male witch, I will.

I don't have to do that, either.

One twist of her wrists and the rope is torn in half. She hunches over and, in a burst of her ruined clothing, she goes from the Jeannie I've always known to a pure white wolf in the blink of an eye.

I gape, Remy jolts, and Jeannie attacks.

There's no other word for what she does. Launching herself off of the floor, her paws land dead in the center of Remy's chest. The last thing I see is a look of fury replaced by one of surprise, his ponytail swaying before the force of Jeannie's hit has him falling backward.

She's on him immediately. With fangs even sharper than mine, she does exactly what I did when I went after Lucas during my first shift: she clamps her jaw down on Remy's throat.

Unlike me, though, she doesn't instinctively recognize the male she's attacking as someone she shouldn't. Nope. With a wild jerk of her head, she rips the whole fucking thing out.

And I watch her do it, unable to look away. I'm gagging, moaning, whimpering... but I'm still watching as she mauls Remy.

Then, as he gurgles on his blood, choking on the stuff, Jeannie bites down on his shoulder. The white wolf drags the dying witch across the room, hiding his body on the other side of the bed I once slept in.

Because of me, I think hysterically. Even as a murderous wolf, Jeannie must've remembered my thing about blood. Instead of taunting me with it like she used to do when we were in school together, getting her kicks seeing me go pale after she showed off the slice from a paper cut, she's actively trying to hide the aftermath of her attack.

Um... I guess that's thoughtful.

Right?

I mean, I still bend over and throw up my breakfast all over Remy's floor, barely avoiding Eleanor's sandals as the shock and his blood has my stomach rebelling, but at least I don't faint.

Instead, I wipe the back of my mouth with my hand, trying to swallow back the urge to hurl again as Remy goes silent. A moment later, Jeannie reappears, the only sign that she just

went furry and freaking ripped out Remy's throat like that is in how she comes back from it without a stitch of clothing on.

No blood on her face, thank goodness, but *shit*. She doesn't even have a strand of hair out of place as she greets me with her tits on the other side of my old bed.

I... I...

Holy. Shit.

"Jeannie? What the fuck!"

That's all I can think to say. As thick as my throat is right now, I'm lucky enough that I managed that—but when Jeannie's dark brown eyes suddenly turn silver, a faint whitish glow emanating for her tanned skin... I lose my voice entirely.

But I still think: *holy fucking shit*.

Jeannie laughs softly. The tinkling sound is nothing like the husky laugh I'm used to from her.

Because the glowing skin and eerily pale eyes weren't a clue that something really fucking weird was going on, it's her strange laugh that has me admitting that, whatever it is, something's not quite right...

And then—

"Forgive my guardian. She had her orders. By admitting he set into motion the events of the last seventy years, she was to dole out death to the traitor. It was her duty."

Excuse me?

What the...

Look. That's Jeannie standing right there. Like, that's Jeannie Lipton. I see her. I *know* her.

But that wasn't her laugh. That's not her voice. The way she's standing, straight-backed instead of slouching slightly, her arms across her chest as she rolls her eyes at whatever phone game Lorelei and I were obsessing over at the time...

That's not actually Jeannie, is it?

My guardian... her orders... her duty.

If she's not Jeannie, then—

“Who are *you*?”

“Me? I'm the Luna.”

No fucking way.

CHAPTER 16

THE LUNA'S GUARDIAN



Another laugh, probably at my shocked expression. “I know. It must be a huge surprise. I rarely need one of my guardians to be my avatar here on Earth, but because of my agreement with Hecate, I decided to make the allowance.”

Hecate... what? “I’m so freaking confused.”

“I know, my pup. There’s a fine line when it comes to resurrecting souls. Too many memories of your first life will color your second. You were brought back because of a plea made from one of my wolves and another from Hecate’s witches. I could never do it on my own, but we agreed that it was worth it in this case so that your soul could do what it was meant to.”

“And what the hell is that?”

“Unite the supernaturals in this sanctuary town. Born of a witch male and a she-wolf, you carried parts of both of their powers in you. As Jolie Bordeaux, and, later, as Fallon Witt. You were fated to Lucas Guidry, but he wasn’t the only tie drawing you to this place. Hecate, my fellow goddess... she chose you to lead her witches into another world.”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!”

The Luna laughs. “I assure you, I’m not. It took decades of pooling our powers to bring you back to a time where you could do what you were meant to. Plus, power of that magnitude required sacrifice.”

I gulp. “The curse.”

She nods. “That’s right. Marie Bordeaux trapped her coven in the stasis spell that Hecate casted over the supernaturals in this town. Lucas gave up part of his own soul in the hopes his mate would return to him.” Her eyes turn even more brilliantly silver. “You.”

“Because I’m Jolie.”

“Because you *were*,” corrects the Luna. “But, I told you, there’s a fine line with resurrection. If you lived your life again as Jolie, you were prone to make her same mistakes. Instead, you were reborn as Fallon, a name given to you by a human woman who would keep you away from supernaturals until the time was right. But, alas, humans aren’t as hearty as my pups so when she fell ill... I gave you two of my best guardians.”

It takes a second for me to understand. I know she’s talking about Mom and her cancer, but guardians.

Holy shit.

“Jeannie and Lorelei?”

She nods again.

I... I don’t know what to say. I mean, yeah, the Lipton twins moved to my school the same year that Mom was diagnosed. We were fast friends at a time when I needed them, and though I was always closer to Lorelei, Jeannie was there, too. Through Mom dying, then college when we lived together, to me being stubborn Fallon who insisted on living alone in New York...

Lorelei wanted me to stay in New Jersey with her and Jeannie. I put my foot down, and she accepted that I would do what I wanted... but maybe that was because, firmly in my twenties by then, it was time for me to do what the Luna expected of me.

And I guess I did, didn’t I?

“So... is the curse broken? Because Lucas stopped being the feral already, but the years started to catch up to him when we tried to leave.”

“I am aware. That’s because I removed my power before Hecate did. You bonded to Lucas so my clause was settled. But until you accepted you were also of the coven... the spell endured. It no longer does. It’s over.”

It’s... over?

Finally?

Right. And if I believe that, then I really am freaking gullible.

“So the curse is broken. What happens now?”

Instead of answering me, the Luna as Jeannie blinks a few times. When she finally stops, the eerie silver glow is gone. Her pupils are the same dark brown I’ve always known.

Jeannie is back.

She exhales softly. I guess it takes a lot out of a wolf shifter, being the avatar to a freaking *goddess*.

Then, with a shrug, she answers my question. “You tell me, Fal.”

And that’s when I feel a tug on my bond with Lucas a split second before a roaring howl seems to shake the whole freaking manor, and I know what to do.

My mate is here—and it’s time for us to *go*.

THERE’S SO MUCH MORE I WANT TO ASK JEANNIE—A HUNDRED questions? Try a *thousand*—but there’s a time and a place for interrogating my old friend and this? It ain’t it.

I start shrugging off my cloak. Undoing the snap that connects beneath my chin, once I have it in my hand, I hold it out to Jeannie.

She doesn’t take it. “What’s that for?”

Seriously? I use my free hand to gesture vaguely at her body. “Unless you want to borrow Remy’s pants or something, this is all I have for you to cover up. Hurry. We’re leaving.”

Jeannie snorts. “I’m good, Fal. If they don’t want to see what I got, they can look away. Besides, this is a witch coven. Don’t they strip down and do spells when the Luna’s out? I’m pretty sure they do.”

Oh my God. Really? It’s bad enough that Jeannie is a supe—and wait until I’m coherent enough for *that* bomb to finally settle—but she’s another Jade? I should’ve expected that. Both Jeannie and Lorelei were like modesty, don’t know her, when we shared a dorm at school. I saw their tits more than my own those years which is probably one of the reasons I never developed a crush on either of the twins. It was just too... too easy.

Of course, I was also best friends with one, frenemies with the other, and it just goes to show how shitty my luck is that it’s *Jeannie* who the moon goddess sent to Winter Creek. One of the only things I missed from my old life were my evening gab sessions with Lorelei, but she’s not here, Jeannie is, and the stubborn Lipton twin is about to march through the coven house bare-assed naked.

I’m not about to go searching for one of Marie’s seamstress outlets to grab a dress to yank on over her head. I don’t even waste the time to see if any of the dresses she gave me are still hanging in the closet.

Shit. I’m in my old room, and I don’t even bother looking for my purse. That and everything inside of it—my wallet, my ID, my phone—all belong to a different Fallon. This one? She just wants to get away from the witches while she can.

Now, I’m no prude. I couldn’t give a shit if Jeannie wants to strut around with her tits hanging out. However, my senses are pinging like freaking mad, telling me that Lucas is near, and there’s no time to waste. Two witches are dead. Odds of us sneaking out of the house without dealing with the others are low enough. Kind of hard to be discreet when she’s completely nude.

And, okay, I’d prefer her to be a little bit covered when we reunite with the pack...

“Forget it,” I snap, holding the cloak close against my chest. “Take a zap to the ass as we make our escape. When your wolf has a bald patch, don’t complain to me.”

“Oh, give it.” Just like I thought, Jeannie falls for my reverse psychology—or her vanity—and snatches the cloak from me. Rolling her eyes, she struggles with putting it on, huffing under her breath as she uses her long nails to snap it. “Happy?”

Freaking ecstatic. “Come on. Let’s get out of here before we both have the witches coming after us.”

It’s inevitable, right? No matter why or how I lost control, Marie is dead because of me. No denying that Jeannie freaking slaughtered Remy. Obviously, we can do a lot of damage together, but against forty, fifty witches?

No. It’s better to run like hell, get back on wolf territory, and figure out what happens next there.

We’re on the second floor. Helping Jade out of the first floor window seemed like a good idea at the time, but I didn’t think it would be smart to swan dive out of this one. I had every intention of finding an exit on ground level.

And that’s when Jeannie throws open the window, peeks down, then braces her hands against the frame.

“Jeannie. Jeannie... you’re not going to do what I think you’re going to do—”

She tosses me a daring grin. “See you outside, Fallon.”

I don’t even get a chance to stop her. A push off the edge and she’s gone. By the time I dash over there, she’s landed in a practiced crouch before gesturing for me to follow.

Crap.

I’m not afraid of heights—nope, my kryptonite has always been blood... though immersion therapy has seemed to be doing wonders for me today—but at times like these, I wish I was. It’d be so much easier to avoid jumping off of high things if I was too much of a chicken shit to do it.

But, hey. I jumped off of the rope bridge into the Winter Creek. More importantly, there's no way in hell I'm going to wimp out on something that Jeannie Lipton did easily.

Taking a deep breath, hoping my shifter side knows how to land without breaking my legs because I sure don't, I climb up on the windowsill and jump.

So my landing isn't as graceful as Jeannie's. When I bounce back up, my ankles aren't broken or twisted. I consider that a win in my book.

And then I see the wolf behind the howl that shook the house and nothing else matters.

“Lucas!”

The Alpha is in the lead, tearing out of the woods, racing across the grass toward Jeannie and me. Forming a triangle behind him, I see two fair-furred wolves; gold compared to Jeannie's shocking white fur. One is limping, but motoring. The other is slightly unsteady on her paws, but determined to keep up.

Tristan and Jade. Either she found them or they found her, but she made it out in one piece, coming back to save me.

Okay. Maybe she's not so bad...

Leaving Jeannie behind me, I take off for the big, black wolf. As I do, his body shimmers. In between one step and another, Lucas shifts to two legs, his muscular chest heaving, dick basically flopping as he pours on the speed.

The only reason we don't collide is that Lucas is prepared for me to launch myself at him. As I throw my hands around my mate's neck, I bury my face against the scars in his throat, breathing him in as he squeezes me so tightly, I end up short of breath.

“I'm okay,” I whisper, choking out the words. “Luc... I'm okay.”

I don't think he believes me.

He runs his hand over my back, checking for who knows what. When I gasp, he realizes just how tight his hold is.

Setting me on my feet, he releases me, that old familiar glower twisting his features as he looks me over.

I knew he would be pissed. I'd braced myself for it. Sure, I hoped his relief that I was okay would outweigh how reckless I just was, but that glower has me edging away from my mate.

"Lucas—"

"You stink like blood."

Back on my feet again, I glance down. Luckily, there isn't any on me. The magic got rid of it from my hand, and if any blood spray dotted my clothes, it's hard to tell on my black tank top. Besides, the red cloak was covering most of me before. Jeannie has it on now and considering she doesn't have anything on beneath it, I'm not looking over there.

The stink's still in my nose, though. The rusty, metallic stink that—once upon a time—would've had me going light-headed before dropping into a faint. I don't think I'll ever get past my hemophobia, and I wouldn't be Fallon Witt if I *did*, but at least I can breathe through my mouth and deal with it for the moment.

Until Lucas sucks in a deep breath and that's the first thing he notices once he's assured himself that I'm alright.

It could've been worse. My mate could've picked up Remy's scent from where he tried to sling his arm around my shoulders before I shook him off...

Of course, right as that thought flits through my head, his chin dips. Another deep breath and his amber-colored eyes burn like molten gold. "Gauthier touched you, too. He touched my mate. I'll kill him. This time, I won't leave that fucking witch breathing, I'll—"

"Too late, Guidry. I took care of him already."

When he first burst out of the woods, Lucas only had eyes for me. Once he saw that I was okay, he barely glanced at Jeannie; that's the Alpha in him, checking out all threats. But because she's not pack or an obvious enemy, he didn't pay too much attention to her. The blood stink and the fact that I'm still feeling a little shocky as we made our escape was

probably a distraction to the big guy. Plus, she's naked and *not* his mate. Once he noticed, he probably dismissed her quickly.

But the way Jeannie tossed that part out so casually? Oh, yeah. She's got his attention now.

"Who are you?" His nostrils flare, cheeks hollowing as a flash of recognition shadows his gorgeous face. He looks down at me. "That scent from the woods?"

He must have caught the tingly, peppery scent. I nod. "This is Jeannie Lipton. She's—"

A soft growl cuts me off. Thinking it's from Lucas, I frown... and that's when I notice his expression hasn't changed at all.

I turn to Jeannie. Nope. She didn't growl, either—and neither is she watching Lucas.

Oh, no. She's glaring at something in the not-too-far distance.

Following the direction of her stare, my mouth falls open when I see that the growl belongs to *Tristan*.

The gold wolf is pacing back and forth, swishing his tail as he keeps his icy blue eyes locked on Jeannie. The low growl has turned into a sustained rumble that goes up and down in pitch as if he's actually saying something instead of just making animalistic sounds.

I... I kind of think he is. At the very least, Jeannie waits for him to stop before she tosses her head back. Honestly, if I hadn't insisted on her putting on the cloak, I doubt she would've bothered with it. I'm glad now that I did—just because Lucas didn't look doesn't mean it wouldn't have set off my own jealous tendencies if he *had*—but something about Tristan's unexpected reaction has me wondering what the hell is going on here.

And then Jeannie says, "Yeah. I had to shift. What of it?," and I'm even more gobsmacked.

"You can understand him? When he's a wolf?"

It's one thing to focus enough to understand English when I'm in my fur. But to be in my skin and translate a wolf's grunts, yips, and howls and understand? I didn't think that was possible—but it seems to be for Jeannie.

“It's a Luna-touched thing.”

Lucas's head snaps toward Jeannie again. “You're Luna-touched?”

“Yup. And you're the cursed Alpha.” Jeannie looks him up and down, but before I can growl at her for ogling my naked mate, she dismisses him just as quickly. “Well, not cursed anymore. Congrats.”

Now I feel bad. I should've known better than to expect the worst when it comes to Jeannie Lipton. This is the woman—she-wolf—*whatever* who came to me when my human boyfriend tried to hit on her. Lucas is mine so there's no way she'd be interested—especially since she's a wolf, too, and has to understand how significant a mate bond is.

I don't understand what Luna-touched is or why that seems so significant to Lucas, but considering the moon goddess turned Jeannie into an avatar upstairs, that has to have something to do with it.

There's no time to explain, though—and even less than I thought when it's Jade's turn to growl, and the rest of us turn in time to see a pair of witches have stepped out from the back entrance of the coven house.

I recognize one instantly. Armand looks even older than the last time we met, though that might have more to do with the deferential slouch to his shoulders as he approaches.

The other witch is also a male. He has a head of thick, dark brown hair, eyes a couple of shades lighter, and a scowl as dark as Lucas's. A bean pole of a guy, he tops Armand by a good six inches, and he's at least twenty years younger.

Lucas moves in front of me. Only the unfamiliar witch seems bothered by Lucas's nudity, but he doesn't do anything other than frown and glance away.

My mate focuses on Armand. “What do you want?”

“Claude and I have come to speak to Madame.”

CHAPTER 17

RUN



Oh. Shit. Does he not know... I mean, I thought everyone would've known by now. It's part of the reason I wanted to grab Lucas and Jeannie and get the hell away from witch territory before they decided to retaliate.

I don't get the chance to explain myself. Of course not.

Know why?

Jeannie freaking Lipton.

She snorts. "Sorry. Ding dong, buddy. The wicked witch is dead."

I close my eyes for a second. Thank you, Jeannie. Because I wasn't already worrying about the witch's reaction to me going all killer in there. Now you just want to make this whole situation worse.

And how the hell does she *know*? Remy seemed to guess what happened to Marie, but I never confessed to anything in front of them.

Blood, I think. As a witch, Remy couldn't scent Marie's blood on me—but Jeannie probably can, just like Lucas did just now.

As I sigh in resignation, Lucas glances over his shoulder at me. One look is all it takes for him to know that Jeannie isn't exaggerating—and that I'm responsible for Marie's fate.

His expression doesn't change, though he sends a surge of assurance down our bond. Without a word, he's letting me

know that he'll continue to protect me, and that if I had to kill Marie, he's sure I had a good reason.

I hope he's right.

And then the younger witch—Claude—surges forward. A trio of wolves—a quartet if you include me—all make warning sounds in the back of their throat as Jeannie yawns.

Armand holds out his arm. Claude stops, but his expression turns murderous.

“Don't you talk about Madame Bordeaux like that. She sacrificed her own life to make sure that the coven had the leader she chose.”

Sacrificed...

Side-stepping Lucas, I move toward the two men. Behind me, my mate follows me closely, hands settling on my bare shoulders. I can feel the heat of his naked body through the material of my tank top, and while that's usually one hell of a distraction, I purposely turn my attention to Armand and the other witch.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Claude—”

He ignores Armand. “Did you really think you had the nerve to kill your own blood? I knew Jolie. With a wolf bitch for a mother or not, she was too weak. Madame knew you were the same. You couldn't do what needed to be done so she charmed you to do it.”

Wait— *what?*

Lucas's growl is deep in his chest. “You dare call Fallon weak? Listen to me, witch. Disrespect my mate one more time and there will be two funeral rites given today.”

Three, but I'm not about to mention Remy right now. If the other witches don't know yet... maybe it's better to keep it quiet.

“We already have two since one of your wolves slaughtered Remy.”

Never mind, then.

Before anyone can react to Claude's accusation, Jeannie steps forward. It's hard to see the silver glow of her eyes in the sunlight, but not impossible. If anyone doubted she was really Luna-touched they don't anymore, especially when she announces, "The Luna gave me permission to take down whoever was responsible for Jolie Bordeaux's murder. Remy Gauthier confessed he was responsible, and he was eliminated."

Claude shuts up. When Armand nods, murmuring his apologies our way, I'm not sure if he knew that Remy had done it, but it doesn't matter. The truth is that he did and he was killed for it, and while I would've preferred to tell Lucas that myself, his only reaction is a barely-there flinch before he squeezes my shoulders again.

I know him. He needed closure about Jolie before we could truly move on together. I hope he has it now—but it's my turn to command the conversation again.

"Are you saying that she *wanted* me to kill her? Is that it?"

Claude glances over at Armand. Armand sighs.

"It was always the plan. When the curse broke... if you didn't choose to lead the coven on your own, she would do what had to be done to make sure you did. We need a new generation of Bordeaux blood. We need you, Madame."

Good luck.

Well, at least part of that is a little bit of a relief to me. In the back of my mind, I was beginning to wonder if becoming a wolf made me lose any of the humanity I had. Like always, I'd shoved that to the side because I wasn't ready to deal with that.

It all happened so fast. I wasn't thinking—and if this witch can be believed, I wasn't in control, either. Once Marie realized that she was about to lose the one thing she spent more than seventy years waiting for... once she understood that, like my bio dad, I wasn't about to give up my mate for the coven... it seems like she made the choice for me.

She couldn't kill me. I was the last of the Bordeauxs. Her only hope to keep the coven in her bloodline. She had no other children, and she murdered her son. No wonder she was so set on bringing me back to Winter Creek.

It wasn't about the curse, was it? It was about the future of the coven... and now she's dead, I'm not, and these two are looking at me like I'm not a murderer but, instead, their new leader.

Ah, shit.

"No, no. Sorry. I choose the pack—"

"And the coven chooses you."

The younger witch huffs. Obviously, he didn't, but it doesn't matter. If Marie's last wish was for me to take over... he might not want anything to do with his leader's killer, but he must respect her enough to go through with this nonsense.

Armand certainly does.

And, to my surprise, so does *Jeannie*.

I wasn't expecting that. I still don't quite understand why she's here. Like, I know the Luna told me that she needed one of her guardians to check up on me since me being resurrected was an agreement between the wolves' goddess and the witch's, but they took Jeannie. They kept her prisoner until they could use her against me. And, okay. I'm pretty sure that was part of her mission, but I still didn't think she would side with the witches over the wolves now.

But she does.

"The Luna brought you back because you were one of hers," she tells me, that same annoyance in her voice that I'm intimately familiar with. "Same with Hecate. You owe the witches."

Do I really?

I turn to Lucas. His lips thin, his expression shadowed, and all he says is, "You embraced your shifter side. What kind of mate would I be if I told you you couldn't do the same for any witch blood you have?"

Oh so *now* Lucas wants to finally understand that I'm not the type of chick who likes to be told what to do?

Damn it. Why does that make me love him *more*?

Because the truth is that I got a thrill when I tapped into my magic. And, sure, it seems like Marie used her own to control me so that I *could*. That doesn't change the feeling inside of me that it was *right*.

Does that mean I'm going to jump right into leading a coven? Fuck no. I'm not even sure I want anything to do with the witches now. But if it means that things will be easier for supes in Winter Creek... I'll think about it.

"I'll get back to you, okay? We'll think about it. All of us. Just. Truce for now." I wave my hands awkwardly. "No more witches versus wolves in Winter Creek, okay?"

"We were never enemies until the night Madame's granddaughter died. You've returned, dearie. Madame gave you to the Alpha as a sign of good faith, to bridge our differences."

Is that how Armand remembers it? "She had me *tied* to a *tree* so that the beast in the woods could have me."

The older witch glances over my head. "And I'm sure the Alpha is more than pleased with Madame's generosity."

Prick. He's not wrong, but that doesn't make him any less of a prick for pointing that out.

"Whatever."

So my fairy tale has a happy ending. My grandmother might've been the villain, the big, bad wolf the hero, and Red Riding Hood a killer in disguise... but I did it. I broke the curse, Jeannie avenged Jolie's death by tearing out Remy's throat with her teeth, and Lucas's possessive hum traveling down our bond tells me that my mate is two seconds away from throwing me over his shoulder, running back to pack land with me, and proving to both of us that we're here, we're together, we're *alive*.

I'll have to explain in further detail about just what went down. There's no way he'll let me brush past it—especially since, charmed or not, I *did* kill Marie Bordeaux—but that can wait.

Because right now? Shacking up with Lucas and showing my mate just where my loyalty lies sounds pretty good to me.

I don't know what the hell is going on with Tristan and Jeannie. Jade probably just wants to get back to the pack house and forget what happened to her in the coven house. Though I don't want to think about it, now that Marie and Remy are gone, the other witches have things they need to take care of... and I just want to get the hell out of here while I can.

I wrap my arms around Lucas. "I just want to go home."

My mate stiffens—and not in the fun way. I can feel the muscles of his back go taut as he goes still.

I tilt my head back, meeting his gaze. "Luc?"

He swallows roughly. "Home? If the curse is finally broken... you want to take the train?"

Two months ago, I had every intention of being back on the train as it rolled out of Winter Creek. Once I knew the blood ward was keeping me stuck here, I gave up hope on taking it anytime soon. To be honest, I don't even know if it's come by at all. It must have or else Jeannie wouldn't be here, but I stopped keeping track.

Marie is gone. If Armand and Claude are telling the truth, I'm supposed to be the new Marie. With the curse broken, I could figure out how to leave... but why the hell would I do that?

I know Eleanor and Kirk want to travel the world for a while. Jade, too. When they come back, they can bring some of the modern age with them, and with the stasis spell lifted, Winter Creek can go from the 1950s to now.

But if I had to give up things like the internet and my phone to stay here? I'm a wolf. I'm a witch, too. There's so much to explore about my new identities... I think I can

handle it. And if Jeannie Lipton can visit, there's no reason why Lorelei can't—and no reason at all for me to leave.

Most importantly, though, I have one big reason to *stay*... and I'm looking at him.

“Lucas—” I begin again.

He drops his head down, laying his forehead against the top of my hair. “Because I'll go with you, Fallon. If that's what you want... I'll follow you anywhere, my mate.”

Can you imagine gruff and glowering Lucas Guidry walking around the streets of New York? His nose would probably permanently wrinkle when he got his first whiff of the city, its garbage, and all of the people who live there... I mean, mine did and I still believed I was human back then.

No. My big, bad wolf belongs in the forest. A monster out of a fairy tale, a hero out of my most fervent dream come true... he belongs in the woods of Winter Creek.

And me? I belong with *him*.

I lift my chin, taking a quick kiss before I grin. “Then you should follow me back through the woods to the big stone house. Who knows? I might lose my way, and there are dangerous wolves who might take advantage of me.”

Lucas lifts his hand, rubbing his thumb along the bite mark he gave me when he made me his. His shifter's eyes flash hungrily. “And if you find yourselves in the arms of the baddest wolf of all? What happens then?”

“I say thank the Luna because that's the only place I want to be.”

It's Lucas's turn to kiss me. Not a peck, like I gave him, but an open-mouthed kiss that he deepens as he lowers his hand to the small of my back, dipping me so that he can take his time with his kiss.

I don't care that we're still on witch territory. A glance behind me after he breaks the kiss reveals that Armand and Claude are gone, but I have no doubt in my mind that plenty of others are watching the pack gathered from inside the manor.

Jeannie is standing by Jade. Tristan is parked on his haunches, watching her unblinkingly.

For the first time since I met him, the Alpha seems completely oblivious to what's going on around us.

Oh, no. His predatory stare is locked only on me—and I feel a shiver of anticipation rush through me as I realize that.

“The cabin is closer than the pack house,” he rumbles. His eyes glitter. “*Run.*”

Two full moons ago, the beast rasped out ‘run’, and I fled as if my life depended on it. Seventy years ago, Jolie tore through the woods, a charmed wolf on her heels, and her life *did* depend on it.

But now? I place my hand on Lucas's heart, feel the thrum of his heartbeat as his lust and need and *love* come pouring down our bond at me, and know that he needs to claim me as his as much as I need him to. To take me out of my head, to forget all that ‘what-if’s and ‘holy shit’s that have been running through my mind since the moment I got handed the envelope with Jeannie’s photo in it... to ignore what my grandmother made me do, and what might happen because of it...

Lucas is mine. He always has been. He always will be—and he told me to run.

So I do... and it doesn't matter that he catches me long before I make it to our cabin.

In fact, I kind of prefer it.

CHAPTER 18

AFTERMATH



If you'd told me three months ago that a telegram would change my life, I probably would've laughed.

Well, first I'd have to double-check that I had the right idea about what a telegram *was*, but once I did, I would've laughed and said that it would take a lot more than an unexpected message from a stranger to get me out of the rut I'd been living in for way too long.

But it did, and while my happily-ever-after isn't completely smooth sailing, without the threat of the witches coming after me again, I'm enjoying living in Winter Creek.

I also proved myself as fierce a predator as anyone else in the pack. Good thing, too, because we're down to four members at the moment.

As a group, we waited about two weeks for everything to settle down. Call me paranoid—or just traumatized from the whole 'being tied to a tree' thing—but I kept expecting the witches to retaliate for Marie's death; if not hers, then Remy's. So far they haven't. As though they really meant it when they said that I'm the new leader of the coven, the witches as a whole have backed off, giving me space to process how quickly my life has changed.

Lucas is my fucking rock. And, sure, maybe he still can't shake his protective nature, but I've come to expect that. It's the Alpha in him. He needs to make sure I'm safe, and if it makes him happy to do so, I can deal.

But he also agreed that, as a pack member *and* his mate, it's time I go all in. I have my turn in the rotation for all chores—and jokingly bemoan the days when I didn't have to scrub the many toilets in the pack house—and even get to go on patrol.

Not too far, of course, because I'm still getting used to my wolf. But the fact that I'm allowed out without a babysitter? It's a huge one-eighty from how he treated me in the beginning and I'm grateful for it. I try not to admit he didn't really have a choice. With three pack members gone, he kind of had to.

Eleanor and Kirk were the first to take a train out of Winter Creek. For seventy years or more, she told her mate all about her life in England from before she moved to the States. At the very least, she looked forward to showing him around, even if it's going to be a huge shock for her to see how time's moved on without them.

The Luna was telling it straight when she said the stasis spell was finally broken. All of us took the walk over to the bridge when one of Lucas's contacts in town told him the train was due to arrive. Alpha or delta, it doesn't matter, since Kirk is just as protective of his mate. He crossed the bridge first, and only when nothing happened did he come back for Ellie.

They promised they won't be gone long. Considering they've never really had the time to be alone without at least three other super-hearing wolves living in the same house, I figure it's going to be a while before we see them again. I miss them, but I get it. I just hope they're having fun.

Jade left next. About three days after Kirk and Eleanor did, she didn't even wait for the train. With nothing more than a few whispered conversations with Jeannie—and a piece of paper with Lorelei's contact information on it—she strapped a bag to her back and started walking along the tracks.

I pity anyone who sees the petite blonde beauty with the glittering green gaze and thinks she's an easy target. If I was prey in the beginning, Jade's always been the predator—and it didn't take long before I learned she was on the hunt.

Turns out that one perk of being Luna-touched is the ability to sense bonds. That's Lorelei's gift, Jeannie confessed, and she gave Jade her sister's information so that the lonely she-wolf could finally track down her own. Because Lorelei could sense them even before a wolf could, while Jeannie's role as a guardian was more... claws-on, I guess. I figured that's why she was the one the Luna sent to Winter Creek, and since the topic makes Jeannie snappish, I left it at that.

I thought the witches snagged Jeannie on purpose. Nope. That was pure dumb luck. She came to Winter Creek because the Luna wanted her here after she knew I'd arrived. It took until the second full moon until Jeannie made it—about when I scented her shortly after I mated Lucas—but then I went feral, and she kept her distance, watching from the woods.

Until Remy captured her, that is, and because she knew the Luna was working with the witch's goddess, Hecate, Jeannie decided to go along with it. Pretending to be a human who knew Fallon back in New York—with her charged phone and the pictures on it backing up her story—she was the perfect prisoner... until she proved to be the perfect assassin.

I keep expecting her to leave, too, now that her mission is complete. Yeah... that would be a no. Like me, Jeannie has declared she's ready for a vacation after a years-long assignment, and wouldn't you know it? She's settled on sticking around Winter Creek.

Lucas didn't mind. If anything, he felt like he owed Jeannie for avenging Jolie by killing Remy, and because she watched over me when he couldn't.

Plus, Luna-touched females seem to be almost as revered as the goddess herself. Even Jade didn't have a bad word to say about Jeannie... though that might've been because she wanted the twins help to find her own mate.

That's all Jade ever wanted. Not Lucas specifically, but a mate she could be devoted to. And since I've gotten a pretty good handle on Jade these days, I expect to see her sooner than later. Even if she does find her mate, I have no doubt she'll insist on him coming back to Winter Creek with her.

So Jeannie is here. Tristan stayed, too, but if I thought Jade was obnoxious when it came to me being a new guest, that's nothing compared to Tristan doing everything he can to avoid being in the same room as Jeannie.

She's the new 'Fallon' now. She stays in my old room on the third floor, and I brought her a couple of meals before she rolled her eyes and told me to stop. That, if she was hungry, she'd fend for herself. Taking the hint, I left her alone.

And who am I kidding? I'd be lying if I said I haven't been trying to avoid Jeannie myself for the last week or so.

I have no idea why Tristan's being an antisocial ass around my old friend, but my reason for giving her her space is obvious: whenever I'm around her, she eventually starts nagging me about the coven.

She thinks I need to at least give it a shot. Me? I have no idea how I'm supposed to do that... or if I even want to take over for Marie.

But just because I haven't had to hear Jeannie talking about it for a few days now, that doesn't mean it's not on my mind. Even after another mind-blowing mating session with Lucas, right when I should be dozing off, content and cozy and well-loved by my mate, I find myself thinking about it.

Lying back on our bed, staring at our ceiling, I sigh.

Of course he hears it. If I thought he fell asleep before I did, I've forgotten what kind of guy I tied myself to for life.

Lucas props himself up on his elbow so that he's leaning over me. With a careful swipe of his hand, he brushes my sweaty hair out of my face. "Talk to me, sucre."

"You know, there were times I swore you were sick and tired of my voice," I tease, turning on my side so that I can trail my fingertips over his tempting chest.

"Never," he rumbles. His thumb returns to my cheek, stroking it gently. "I went seventy years without hearing my mate. Of being alone, even with my packmates living here. I could never get tired of hearing your voice."

“Even when I’m asking my questions?”

“Ask me anything. Tell me a story. Fucking sing me the alphabet, Fallon, I don’t care. Your voice is music to me.”

“When you play me piano...” I scoot closer to Lucas, pressing a kiss between his pecs. “That’s music.”

He’s been playing so much more lately. Two nights ago, he took me by the hand, brought me to the piano room, and invited me to take a seat. And then, once I had, he played me a piece of music that was so beautiful, there were tears in my eyes by the time he was done.

Of course, then he told me he composed it himself for me. I started to blubber. By the time he shyly confessed the name of it, there was snot and everything.

Because he called it *Fallon*. Not *Jolie*. Not even *Sucre*.

Fallon.

Could I love this man—this *male*—any more? I don’t know, and I’m looking forward to forever to find out, but after he told me the name of his composition and I managed to get past the sobs, I insisted on an encore—both of the piece, and his favorite pastime of perching me on the edge of his expensive Grand piano before dropping to his knees in front of me.

Whoever I was... whoever I am... it doesn’t matter. I’m *me*, and that means I’m part shifter, part witch, and all Lucas Guidry’s.

But that’s the thing. I love being his mate. I’m getting used to being a wolf shifter.

As for being a witch, though?

I sigh again. “I’ve been thinking...”

He runs his hand up and down my arm. “Go on.”

The best part of becoming Lucas’s mate and finalizing this bond between us is how sure I am of his affection for me. Not only that, but my mate can sense my feelings for him. He knows how much I need the validation and small reminders

that we're together. So far from the days he was unsure of how I'd respond to him—no matter how often I took the lead when we were together—he touches me because he wants to, and because *I want* him to.

“The whole reason I got this second chance at life... this second chance with you... is because the Luna wanted me to embrace being both: a witch and a wolf. I didn't want to do it at first...”

“But you're having second thoughts,” he guesses.

I nod. “I don't want to leave the pack house. My home is here.” I slide my leg between his, caressing his ankle with my toes. “It's with you. But if we can fold the witches in, making the coven part of the pack... what do you think?”

Lucas lowers his hand, settling it on my hip, giving it a possessive squeeze. “I think that, if you're still awake and worrying about this after what we just did, you have enough energy to let me mate you again.”

“Lucas!”

He swallows my laugh with a kiss. By the time he's done, I've almost forgotten what we were talking about—and that we'd just finished mating only a few moments before.

And as Lucas guides me to my back again, easing his weight on top of me before returning his lips to mine... hey. I've put the decision off long enough. What's one night more?

EPILOGUE



Lucas is willing to go along with whatever I decide. So long as I understand that he won't let me leave our territory and walk onto the witches' without him, he's game for anything I decide to do.

It's a compromise I can live with. Honestly, I expected as much. I was able to make it up to him, leaving the way I did to confront Marie on my own, but that just means Lucas is firm in putting his one condition on this: until we can trust the witches completely, we're a package deal. If they want me, they have to take him.

I've never had someone who has my back as much as that. I agree with him over breakfast, then go looking for Jeannie when Lucas goes out for a morning run.

I'm pretty sure he's trying to get a hold of Tristan. Since the other pack members have all left, the Beta's been quieter than usual, and I know better than to get involved. We made our peace over pool after I chose Lucas. We're friends, but I don't know him nearly as well as Lucas does. If someone is going to find out what's going on with Tris, it'll be Luc.

Right?

Right.

Jeannie, on the other hand, is my responsibility. She'd probably roll her eyes at me if she knew I thought of her like that, but I can't shake the feeling that there's more to her staying in Winter Creek than because she wants a vacation.

I find her in my old room, standing at the window, watching the back of the house. When I let myself in, she turns to look at me, then raises her eyebrows.

Yeah, yeah. I've finally got the nerve to talk to you again. Big deal.

When I went off in search of Jeannie, I did so because I wanted to let her know that I was going to give in and at least talk to the other witches about what they expect from me. However, despite the way she raises her eyebrows at me like that, there's something about the wistful expression I caught for a split second before she walks away from the window.

Was she watching someone? Or just thinking?

I don't know, but I want to.

"Can I ask you something?"

She snorts. "Can I stop you?"

Probably not. "I just... I've gotta know. I fell in love with this place because I fell hard for Lucas. A place with no TV, no phones, no Youtube... why are you so eager to stay?"

"Are you trying to tell me you want me to go?"

"Not even a little. We've had our ups and downs. You know that. I do, too. But no matter why you and Lorelei became my friends, we *are* friends. You can stay as long as you want. I just... I want to make sure there's not another reason why you are."

I want to say that I mollified Jeannie with my words, and I did a little bit. But the way she winced slightly when I mentioned her sister... followed by the way she says, "I like the peace," has me echoing her snort.

"Jeannie, babe, I'm sorry. I love you, but you're a shit liar."

She always has been. Her face gives her away. Just like I suspected, there is something going on that I've missed.

Jeannie has her own defense mechanism. As quickly as I called her out on it, she resorts with, "I'm a shit liar, but you

had no idea you were sharing a dorm room with a pair of wolf shifters for four years.”

“Well, yeah. Because I’m gullible.”

She laughs, immediately catching the meaning behind my comment. “Shit, Fal. I still can’t believe you checked the dictionary.”

“I knew Lorelei told you!” When her laughter cuts short, I’m not sure what it was I said. I go to stand next to her and bump her shoulder, knowing Lucas will probably be rubbing his sweaty cheek along mine later on. “You’re the one who told me my picture would be next to the word. I was seventeen. Of course I’d check.”

“What’s your excuse at twenty-five?” she asks.

“I don’t know. What’s yours?”

I’m so used to a catty back and forth with Jeannie Lipton. That was how our relationship always seemed to go. Lorelei was the good, sweet, caring twin. Jeannie was a demon, but if you took a pot shot at me or Lorelei, Jeannie would be even *worse*. At least she liked us.

She was ruthless passing as human. Now that I know what she really is... Danny’s lucky he got her on one of her good days.

So, yeah. I thought she would have another clapback for me. Instead, Jeannie sighs—and tells me the last thing I thought she ever would: “Lorelei found her fated mate.”

What?

I mean, that’s awesome. And I knew that Jeannie being this Luna-touched wolf meant that my best friend would be, too, ‘cause, you know, *twins*. I also know from experience how amazing it is to find the one guy meant for you... so why does Jeannie seem so sad? Is it because she’s jealous like Jade, or because that’ll throw the dynamic she has with her twin way out of whack?

That would explain why she’s here, wouldn’t it?

“Who is he?”

Her dark eyes turn impossibly black as she gives me a name. “Cal Reynolds.”

Huh. “I don’t know him.”

“That’s because you were so busy in New York that I never got the chance to tell you about my boyfriend.”

Boyfriend?

Wait a second.

Did Jeannie just tell me that *Lorelei*’s fated mate is *Jeannie*’s boyfriend?

I don’t even have to ask. Like Jeannie, my face gives me away.

“Yup,” she says, her tone deceptively light. “Fate’s funny that way, isn’t it? Here I thought that I would never have a fated mate because my whole life’s been pledged to the Luna. Why shouldn’t I mess around with a human or two? A wolf’s got needs, right, and there was no reason to hold out for my mate when I shouldn’t have one. So I date a nice human guy for a couple of weeks, then bring him home to meet my twin and *bam*. Instant sparks.”

I whistle. “That’s pretty fucking messy, Jeannie.”

“You’re telling me. All I can say is thank the Luna that we were in the early stages of our relationship. We’d fooled around, yeah, but mating...” She slides her dark gaze my way. “I make my lovers wait a couple of months before I’ll fuck ‘em.”

That’s a knock at me, but I decide to be magnanimous and forgive her for making it.

“That’s why, when the Luna wanted someone to be here on the ground in case you needed help, I volunteered. Lorelei could get to know Cal, I could finish this mission, and then who knows? Now that I know I could have a mate, maybe I’d find him.”

If that’s the case, why didn’t she set out with Jade?

Unless...

“And then I *did*.”

She did? “That’s wonderful—”

“It’s not.” Jeannie glances out the window again. “I never thought I’d have a fated mate. For him to be a wolf... that would’ve been fucking amazing. But I get stuck with *him*.”

Him?

Who’s *him*?

Hold on. She said wolf. As far as I know, the only wolf shifters in Winter Creek are part of the pack. Kirk is mated to Eleanor. Lucas is mine. And then there’s—

Oh, no.

Suddenly, things seem to click into place that I probably would’ve noticed by now if I hadn’t been so distracted myself. That wistful expression from before... Jeannie staring out behind the pack house... not to mention the way she was so defensive against Tristan the one time I saw them interact.

What about Tristan’s distance to the pack—and to our new guest?

Oh, no, no, no.

“Jeannie?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Tristan your fated mate?”

And, if he is, why is he hiding out instead of flirting with her the way he did me? Sure, he was convinced I was his... that there was something drawing him to me... but if Jeannie’s his mate, he has to know?

Right?

Jeannie scoffs. “Is that his name?” Her arms go over her chest, the same old Jeannie Lipton stinkface showing me just how pissed off she is deep down. “I wouldn’t know. He never even introduced himself before making it clear he wants nothing to do with me.”

Ah, *crap*.

Well, who ever said it was boring being one of the wolves
Winter Creek?

Not me, I'm sure.

Wow.

AND THAT'S THE END OF FALLON'S STORY—AND THE
beginning of Jeannie's!

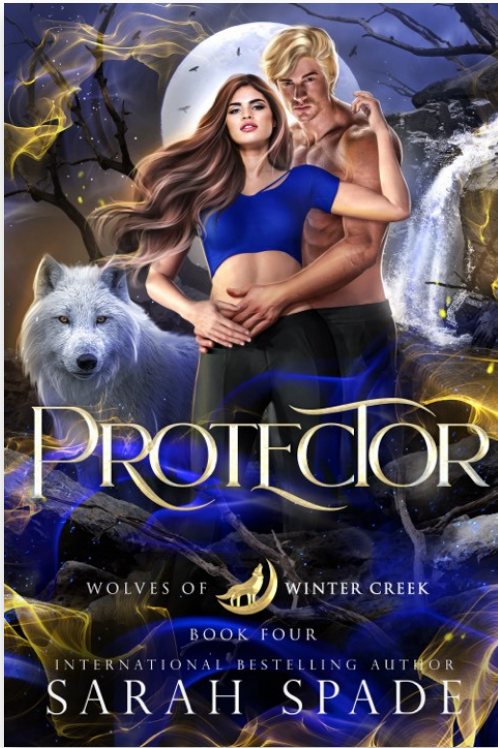
There will be one more book in the **Wolves of Winter
Creek** series: Tristan and Jeannie's romance. What starts out
as a rejected mates romance before it hits some of my favorites
tropes—forced proximity, yes!—it will delve into why Tristan
is keeping his distance, what Jeannie wants, and how the two
of them—despite a rocky start—are just what the other needs.

So thank you for reading along with Fallon and Lucas so
far, and keep scrolling/clicking/page-turning to get a peek at
Jeannie and Tristan—and what their book will be about!



PRE-ORDER NOW

PROTECTOR



I NEVER
THOUGHT I'D
HAVE
FOREVER...

As an avatar for the Luna, I'm not supposed to fall in love. My sister and I... we never believed we'd have a fated mate of our own. We were born to serve our goddess, a pair of twins descended from the line that began with Romulus

and Remus, and while we could enjoy males, they weren't meant for us.

And then the Luna whispered to Lorelei that she *did* have a mate: my boyfriend, Cal.

Lorelei's always been the good twin. So of course she'd rather sacrifice her happiness for mine—but I won't let her. Leaving my twin and her mate to the other, I head out on my own for the first time ever.

Not sure where to go, I let the Luna guide me... and I'm not so surprised when she leads me to Winter Creek.

With my twin, we spent the last ten years watching over one of the Luna's chosen: Jolie Bordeaux. Known as Fallon Witt now, she did what she was resurrected to do, breaking a death curse that settled over the supe town. Winter Creek has always been a sanctuary for supernaturals in need, so why shouldn't I start my life over there?

And then I bumped into the golden-haired Beta with the sad blue eyes and an unnatural limp, and I got the answer to that one.

Because Tristan Crowder is *my* fated mate—and he wants nothing to do with me.

At least, that's what my first impression is. But when an old enemy attacks because of what we are, we're forced into a situation where Tristan can't avoid me—and I can't avoid the side of me I've spent so many years trying to hide...

**Protector* is the last book in the *Wolves of Winter Creek* series. Telling the story of Tristan and Jeannie, the bad twin and the second-in-command find their ways to one another in order to get their own happily-ever-after.

[Out May 7, 2024!](#)

HINT OF HER BLOOD

SNEAK PEEK AT ANOTHER LUNA-TOUCHED HEROINE

I blink. I'd been halfway convinced that he was going to boot me from Muncie after my display of power. "Hire me? For what? To break bonds?"

"When necessary, yes. To sense them as well, since I know that's also part of your blessing. But, more than that, I'd like to make sure that you don't use that ability against my people."

"So you're going to pay me *not* to use my 'gift'?"

"Mm. In a way."

There's got to be a catch. Being paid to act like I'm not a Luna-touched female? That's the freaking dream.

"Anything else?"

"Since you mention it," Roman begins, even as I want to say: *I knew it*, "I have another offer for you."

"Okay."

"I'm sure you know that vampires prefer the night. Me? I'm old enough that I rarely sleep, but that's not the case for all of us. Our doors are open twenty-four hours a day for every citizen of Muncie. But because I can't hire just anyone to serve as a receptionist for me, I tend to struggle to find a vampire who will willingly take the dayshift. Did you see the vampire at the lobby desk?"

I nod.

"That's Leigh. She's doing the daylight hours temporarily as a favor to her mate. Eventually, she'll either take over at

night or take on a patrol. You're a shifter. You're diurnal. I think you'd be perfect for the job."

And I'll be close enough that he can keep his eye on me. A shifter who can snap even a vampire's blood bond even though he acts as if he doesn't want me to? I'm just as valuable to Roman as I was to the Wicked Wolf.

On the plus side, I don't sense even a hint of interest coming from the cool vampire. Sure, he doesn't have a bond of his own, but my instincts tell me that, unlike the Alpha, he isn't going to try to convince me to join with him permanently.

Nope. He just wants to hire me.

And I need money way more than I need a mate.

"It won't be a difficult job. Answer calls, keep my schedule, do my filing. Keep out any unwanted visitors. Hardly taxing, and I'll pay you well for your time." Steepling his fingers, Roman leans back in his chair. "What do you think?"

I think that I would be an idiot to refuse.

I'm used to those in authority wanting to warp my "gift" for themselves. Even before I developed the ability to break bonds—when my gift became my "gift", or sometimes *curse*—my Alpha used the way I could dampen scents to his advantage. I was happy to let him because it meant I was serving the pack. I was useful.

Needed.

If the vampire wants to hire me as a receptionist while really keeping an eye on me and my Luna-touched wolf, that's fine with me. I woke up this morning looking for a job. Charlie's was a bust, but this might just be a better fit for me after all.

"When can I start?"

AVAILABLE NOW

HINT OF HER BLOOD



When Aleks looks at me, he sees his past. Me? I see a future that I just can't have...

For most of my life, being Luna-touched was a blessing—and then I met Jack “Wicked Wolf” Walker and it wasn't long before it became a *curse*.

The powerful Alpha lost his Luna-given mate before I was born, but that didn't stop him from trying to claim me. Only my quick thinking and quicker mouth kept me from being his new mate, but I still ended up

locked in a gilded cage.

I thought I'd be trapped in the Wolf District forever—until the Alpha's daughter came, handing him his first defeat in more than twenty-five years. She spared his life, but our laws are clear: an Alpha who loses a challenge is no Alpha. Our pack disbanded, and I was free.

Which... wasn't as great as it sounded. I have no family. No real friends. No money. And a vampire who looks at me

like I'm lunch.

Aleksander Filan thinks I'm someone that I'm not. And while it would be too easy to let this handsome, sexy, magnetic vampire take care of me, I reject him if only because I'm terrified of what the Luna whispers to me at night.

No. *No*. He can't be my fated mate. I'm a wolf. He's a bloodsucker. I'm damaged goods, and he's... well, he has his own baggage, doesn't he?

He promises that he wants me. He sees *me*. And when the Wicked Wolf follows me to Muncie, Aleks will have the chance to prove it.

After all, for a hint of my blood, he vows he'll do *anything*.

* ***Hint of Her Blood*** is the fourth novel in the *Claws and Fangs* series, and the first in Aleks and Elizabeth's story.

[Out now!](#)

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