



BOOK 2
BLACKWATER
PACK SERIES

PREY

HANNAH MCBRIDE

PREY

BLACKWATER PACK #2

HANNAH MCBRIDE



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PREY

Blackwater Pack Series, Book 2

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For Krista

Because of all the reasons you know, and so many you don't, thank you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is not intended for, or suitable for, readers under 17.

This book contains themes and scenes that are mature in nature. It also contains graphic depictions of past bullying and assault, including physical and sexual. If these issues are triggering for you, please consider not reading this book.

Also, if you're related to me ... don't read this. Not kidding. Stop now.

“STOP!” I GASPED THE WORD OUT SUDDENLY, MY BODY TENSE AND TIGHT AS pain arced through me.

Holy hell, that hurt. Was it supposed to hurt *that* much? Clearly we were doing this wrong.

Remy grimaced above me, his muscles shaking as he tried to hold back. “Stopping right now isn’t exactly an option, babe.”

I glared up at him, my jaw clenched. “Well, this hurts, so make it an option, Remy.”

His dark gaze narrowed. “I *know*. I told you it probably would the first few times.”

“You didn’t mention *this* much hurt,” I snapped, ready to call it quits now. My body shook with exhaustion, my chest heaving.

Remy sighed, his head dropping and nearly touching my shoulder. “Skye, you can’t just yell, ‘stop’ in the middle of a fight and think the person trying to kill you will decide to take a time out.”

Now I glared at him, resisting the urge to turn my head and bite his wrist where he had my arm pinned down.

But it would have been seriously childish ... and there was no way Remy would’ve allowed it. He was too fast, too smart, and too good a fighter to let that happen.

My boyfriend was definitely a badass when it came to all things shifter and fighting related. I assumed it came with the alpha-to-be territory, but when I had asked him to start teaching me some self-defense moves, I didn’t realize I was signing up for Remington Holt Boot Camp: Extreme Shifter

Edition.

I thought it would be a good way to take back a piece of my self esteem that Cassian had stolen when he kidnapped me or spent years torturing me. I had been powerless then, but I wasn't anymore.

Except right now? I kinda was.

Remy took his role as teacher very seriously, as seriously as he took my safety, which had gone from high-alert to DEFCON-5 after my abduction. He was my alpha and my mate. One would have been enough to become obsessed with my safety, but both meant he wasn't cutting me any slack on learning to protect myself.

I could see the moment he decided to call it a day, and I rejoiced even though my wolf was pissed off he had bested us at least ten times in a row.

But maybe we can both still win.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, using my lower body strength to pull him down on top of me, fitting our bodies together. Caught off guard, he fell into me, his nose brushing mine.

Remy arched a single brow slowly, glancing down at where my legs were locked around him. His heated gaze moved to my eyes, his already dark eyes getting even darker.

"While this may be a good distraction tactic," he allowed in a rough voice, his eyes once more sweeping the length of my body, "I don't think I'm a fan of you using this particular technique on anyone else."

His hands still had mine captured by my head, rendering me helpless in a way I was starting to love.

"Only you," I said softly, my gaze flickering to his mouth while my eyes pleaded for him to close the minuscule distance between our lips.

He didn't disappoint.

His lips closed over mine, his tongue sweeping inside my waiting mouth as he deepened the kiss. I twisted under him, needing my hands free to pull him closer, but he held me down, pinning me to the floor. I felt his lips curve into a wicked smile against mine as he kept kissing me.

With a frustrated groan, I arched my neck. His lips trailed down my jaw and peppered wet kisses along the column of my throat.

My legs squeezed harder around his waist, my body igniting into a series of blinding sparks as his hips rocked into mine. His body might have been just as turned on as I was, but he was taking his time kissing me as thoroughly as possible, leaving me powerless to do anything except take what

he was giving.

Which I was more than willing to do.

The front door opened behind us.

“This doesn’t *look* like teaching self-defense,” Rhodes said with a smirk as he strolled in and stopped beside us. “At least, this is never how we spar, Remy. Is this a new technique?”

Grumbling, Remy got to his feet immediately and pulled me up with him. My body pressed against his for a single delicious second that ended way too soon for either of us. With a low groan, he headed for the kitchen to grab our waters while I slapped Rhodes on the arm.

“Great timing,” I muttered, glaring at him.

He shrugged innocently enough, but there was a familiar, wicked glint in his eyes. “Maybe you two need to be properly chaperoned from now on. You know, to keep you from getting ... distracted.”

Remy flipped him off while handing me my bottle. I twisted the cap off and took a long pull of the cold liquid.

I arched a brow at Rhodes. “And where are *you* coming from exactly?” His hair definitely hadn’t been that mussed when he left here a few hours earlier, and his shirt wasn’t nearly as wrinkled.

A goofy, completely smitten grin split his face. “Larkin was helping me study.”

Remy rolled his eyes, giving me a knowing look. “Studying, right.”

“Do I even want to know what you were studying?” I asked with a smirk, taking another drink.

His grin deepened shamelessly. “Chemistry, of course.” He winked. “I’m acing that class.”

“Of course,” I echoed with a snort and shook my head. “And now you’re done studying?”

Rhodes frowned. “Lark kicked me out. Something about needing to *actually* study.”

That sounded more like my best friend. I laughed, turning away from them both and heading for the stairs. “I’m taking a shower before dinner.”

“I’ll make sure Remy stays down here,” Rhodes told me, but then I heard the sound of Remy’s fist punching his arm a second before Rhodes grunted and whined, “That freaking hurt, dude.”

Smiling to myself, I hurried up the stairs and went into my room, closing the door as I stripped out of my work out clothes. I tossed them across the

perfectly made bed.

It was hard to mess up a bed I hadn't slept in.

I had taken Remy up on his offer to move into the alpha cabin when we returned to the school a day earlier, with the provision that I got the guest room next to his room as my own. I hated the idea of not being near him, but I also wasn't quite ready to *move in*-move in with him yet.

But of course last night I slept in his bed our first night back on campus. We had only slept.

After him spending almost every night with me over winter break, mostly due to my frequent nightmares, I wasn't ready to lose that feeling of waking up with him. Especially now that we were back at GPA. The last time I had been here, I nearly died.

A shudder wracked my frame, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to shove away the memory of waking up on the side of a mountain after Cassian had drugged and kidnapped me. I tried to ignore the memories of fighting with him and going over the cliff, the sense of complete panic I felt when Remy was fighting him and Trace was closing in on us. Remy would have been outnumbered, so I leveled the playing field the only way I could think of at the time.

I took Cassian, and myself, out of the equation so Remy wouldn't fight two alpha heirs at the same time.

Parts of my memory were still broken, but I had dreams about falling, my body breaking against the hard ground at the bottom of the cliff. Sometimes Cassian was in my dreams, still alive, and he succeeded in taking me back to Long Mesa.

In the worst nightmares, it was Remy who went over the edge with Cassian. Remy's body that smashed against the gray stones and dead leaves.

Those dreams killed me. I would wake up screaming and sobbing. The first time I had that particular nightmare was right after Christmas. Mom had come running into my room, finally calling Remy and making him come to the apartment at two in the morning when I couldn't calm down.

I didn't stop crying and shaking until I saw he was okay for myself.

I was able to handle when things happened to me, but the idea of Remy being hurt or worse was more than I could take.

After that, he used the tree outside my window to sneak into my room every night over break. When the nightmares were bad, it helped waking up to see him next to me. Sometimes he felt me slipping into them before I knew

what it was, and he could talk me out of them. I would wake up, wrapped tightly in his arms, his lips whispering against my ear. After a few nights, the nightmares mostly stopped, but Remy kept coming into my room every night.

I definitely wasn't going to complain. Sometimes I think he needed the reminder that I was okay, too. The reassurance that I would wake up in the morning after he spent three weeks watching me never wake up from my coma.

There was this constant need in me to be with him all the time. I wasn't sure if it was my wolf, the bond, or just PTSD from everything we had been through.

I heard the shower in Remy's bathroom kick on as I was turning my shower off and stepping out. It took me hardly any time to towel off my hair and body and get dressed. I quickly braided my dark hair, leaving it wet despite the Montana winter outside.

A few months ago I had learned I hated hair dryers.

The blast of hot air felt too much like the New Mexico desert, and pack, I had left behind.

If leaving my hair wet meant I didn't get that split second flashback, I would deal with it. Even if the Montana air was hovering at a crisp eleven degrees.

Rhodes was playing a video game when I came back downstairs. I glanced at the clock on the cable box, noting we only had fifteen minutes until dinner would be served in the cafeteria of the main building.

"How was it out there?" I asked, sitting on the other end of the couch.

"Like a ghost town," he replied, turning off the game and giving me his full attention. "It's weird as hell, Skywalker."

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. It'll take some getting used to."

After last semester, half the packs that attended Granite Peak Academy decided not to return, leaving the campus feeling really empty and a little creepy. Half the alpha cabins around the property sat empty and dark, just empty shells where people used to live.

Rhodes still lived in the alpha house with Remy, and now me, but hardly anyone else shared a room on campus now. There was enough space for everyone to have their own rooms in the dorms for the first time in years, and most people seemed to love that.

Rhodes offered to stay in the dorms (okay, his first choice was one of the leftover alpha cabins with Larkin), but I hated the idea of displacing him from

the place he had lived since he started GPA as a freshman. Plus, his dad had just died, and he needed his best friend. Breaking up Remy and Rhodes was never an option.

Besides, it took some of the pressure off of my relationship with Remy. A relationship that was still firmly ranked as PG-13, to my growing frustration.

Remy knew my history with my first pack, and my complicated, often volatile, past with male shifters. He never wanted me to feel pressured in any way about our bond or the pace I moved at.

But my wolf and I were both a little tired of the lack of action. Not that there had been much time to do *things* over winter break. Remy and I had missed the last part of the fall semester and spent most of our break catching up so we could still graduate in the Spring. Plus, we applied to college, Remy helped his dad with the pack, and I even started working part time at the cafe with my mom.

And at night ... Well, nothing said sexy-times like a girl who was terrified of turning the lights out and prone to shriek-inducing nightmares. Remy was usually more focused on making me relaxed at night; not on activities that would have the opposite effect.

Classes started tomorrow, so hopefully having that routine would help normalize things, even if the campus was eerily absent of half the students that had been there only a few weeks earlier.

I personally was all for the emptier campus if it meant Trace, the Norwood pack, and their allies were all far away.

After attacking Larkin at the dance, breaking Katy's leg, and bringing Cassian to the school, I never needed to see Trace again. He had made it his mission to destroy my pack and my mate, and he had lost.

I knew Remy was still pissed there was unfinished business between them (mostly that Trace ran away while Remy was sitting vigil by my hospital bed before Remy could kick his ass), but I was looking forward to a much more relaxed final semester of high school before I started college.

I watched Rhodes kick ass on the TV for a few minutes until Remy came downstairs in a pair of jeans that hung low on his hips, tugging his shirt down over his abs.

"You're drooling," Rhodes murmured beside me.

I kicked at him with my foot. "Jerk."

Remy walked behind the couch on his way to get his boots, smacking the back of Rhodes' head as he went.

“Hey!” Rhodes yelled, grabbing the back of his head. “What did I do?”

“Whatever you did to make Skye kick you,” he retorted with a grin.

I gave him a smug look, standing up to go get my own shoes. Rhodes turned off the game and the TV, getting up as well.

I slipped my arms into my jacket as Remy pulled a knit beanie over my head, flicking the ends of my braid. “You’re going to freeze.”

With a shrug, I ducked past him and opened the front door to go outside.

The path that led to the main building was barely clear and snow was still falling. I quickly descended the stairs, tipping my face up to catch snowflakes on my face. I loved the fluffy white stuff.

Remy came up behind me silently, his footsteps muffled by the snow. But it didn’t matter. I could sense him behind me, near me. I could always sense where he was, even when he was out of sight.

If my heart was a compass, Remy Holt was my true North.

Probably another side effect of the mate bond we shared, but it gave me a certain level of comfort, especially when I couldn’t see him with my own eyes.

He slid his arms around my waist, pulling my back flush to his chest, lighting up nerve endings through layers of clothes and coats.

The tip of his warm nose brushed my jaw a second before his lips ghosted over the same spot. “Let’s go.”

His gloved hand closed over mine and he tugged me down the path. I watched the snow falling around us as he and Rhodes talked about some new game they both wanted when it came out in a few months. As we got closer to the building, I could see more students heading the same way.

My shoulders stiffened when I realized they kept glancing over at us.

“Why are people looking at us?” I finally asked in a low voice when a group of guys stared and started talking quickly to each other as they ducked into the building.

Rhodes threw an arm across my shoulders. “You’re famous, babe.”

With a low growl, Remy pushed his arm off of me, hauling me to his side in a show of possessive male dominance that shouldn’t have turned my insides to jelly the way it did, and probably broke a few laws of feminism.

Katy would be so disappointed.

Rhodes never stopped smiling, not phased in the least by his best friend going all alpha-caveman.

“Famous?” I echoed, slowing my steps. “What do you mean?”

Brow furrowed, Rhodes slowed with me, looking first at me and then at Remy. “Not only did you end up in a coma after a showdown with a pack of alphas, but you and Remy are bonded. That *never* happens to shifters our age.”

The mates part I could deal with, but the other ...

I stopped altogether. “Do they know ... who I am?”

Remy looked down at me before jerking his head for Rhodes to keep going. I could tell he wanted to reach for me, it was in his eyes, but we both knew I wanted answers more than I wanted comfort.

At least, right this second.

He took a deep breath. “They know what pack you’re from. They know you’re the niece of an Alpha, the granddaughter of an Alpha. They know who your mother is.”

I winced at that. My mother basically started a war between the southern packs when she turned up pregnant a week before her marriage of alliance to another pack. Needless to say, the treaty was broken and it caused a massive wave of fallout that was fairly legendary in the shifter world.

“But they don’t know the details about what happened in Long Mesa,” he finished softly, his dark eyes concerned and fierce at the same time. “That’s your story to tell when, and if, you want to, babe.”

Logically I knew nothing that happened in Long Mesa was my fault. I never asked to grow up in a house where omegas were repeatedly abused on a daily basis. A house where I knew I would one day suffer the same fate.

I never asked for Cassian, Preston, and Marc to bully and harass me, finding ways to grope, grab, and intimidate me for years before Mom and I escaped.

And I sure as hell didn’t ask Cassian to come to Granite Peak last year or to kidnap me.

But it didn’t mean I felt the shame any less. That gut-churning, black hole pit in my stomach that loomed wide, ready to devour me in humiliation when I remembered every minute of my past.

Remy leaned his forehead against mine, his skin shockingly warm despite the cold. “That life is over, babe. No one will ever touch you again.”

I wound my arms around his neck. “Except you.”

“Except me,” he agreed, his voice a deep rumble that I felt down to my toes a second before his soft lips descended on mine, coaxing my lips open to deepen the kiss.

I rolled to the balls of my feet, my arms tightening around him. I hated these puffy layers between us, the gloves on my hands that kept me from sliding my fingers through his hair and along his strong jaw.

His hands found my hips, his arms banding around me as he almost lifted me off the ground.

A series of giggles burst through the air behind us, snapping us out of our impromptu-makeout session.

Remy set me down, pulling away as our three younger female pack members looked at us with freaking stars in their eyes.

I couldn't even be mad. Lea, Bethany, and Megan had turned into the little sisters I never knew I wanted. I had even hung out with them a few times during break when Ainsley—freaking Ainsley who a few months ago hated me—had all of us over to her house for a slumber party one night.

But the three younger girls had quizzed me in every way they could think of about my bond with Remy until Katy and Ainsley told them to shut up and leave me alone.

I waved a gloved hand to them, and they waved back.

Remy followed my look with a smile. “Your fan club, huh?”

I snorted as we started for the doors. “Please. More like *your* fan club.” I gave him a serious look. “Megan definitely has a thing for you.”

He exhaled loudly, opening the door for me. “Too bad for Megan. I’m taken.”

I whirled around with a shocked gasp. “Taken? Remington Holt has a girlfriend?”

He grinned, shaking his head at me. “I am *definitely* off the market.”

“So, it’s serious?” I teased, biting my lower lip.

His arm reached out, snagging me by the waist and pulling me into him. His dark eyes were liquid chocolate, warm and soft, as he looked down at me. “I love her completely.”

I smiled up at him, my heart soaring in my chest. “The feeling is entirely mutual.”

THE CAFETERIA WAS BARELY HALF FULL WHEN WE WALKED INSIDE, AND MORE than a few heads looked up and watched us as we stepped inside. One hard look from Remy had them all looking back down at their plates.

Most students sat where they had before half of our classmates went to the dark side and didn't return, but conversations were hushed. There was a heaviness to the overall atmosphere around us, a strange prickling of awareness that things were different.

Even at our table, things were on the quieter side. Usually Rhodes and Ryder were joking around and being loud, making us all laugh, but they both were quiet, almost somber.

Remy and I were the last ones at our table. Everyone was already sitting in their usual spots, but this time there was a lot less room between Larkin and Rhodes than a few months ago.

Dante had brought part of the Brooks Ridge pack to our table. Tate sat between him and Ryder. She and Ryder grinned at me while Dante did that stoic nod that was all him.

I frowned, realizing someone was missing.

"Where's Maren?" I asked as I sat down next to Katy. Remy brushed his fingers across the back of my neck as he went to the line to grab our dinners.

Because I had a boyfriend who did things like get me dinner.

I squashed a stupid, completely girly giggle at the thought.

"Her grandmother died," Katy said softly, her lips turned down. "She stayed back for another week to be with her family."

Katy and Maren were inseparable at school, taking the crowns for PDA

Queen and Queen. Katy had even gone up to Alaska during winter break to spend time with Maren, no small feat since the Brooks Ridge pack was a small town in Northern Alaska and planes rarely flew in and out. I knew they were both dreading the impending graduation where they would have to figure out where their relationship stood and if one wanted to move to the other's pack.

"I offered to stay with her," Tate added, "but she said she just wanted to spend time with her grandfather. They had been mates for over sixty years, so he's really struggling."

"Were they bonded?" I asked, my heart aching for their loss.

Tate shook her head. "No."

Still, it couldn't be easy to lose someone you spent over sixty *years* with. I had only been with Remy a few months and the idea of losing him ...

I barely reigned in my wolf before she had us jumping up and touching him to make sure he was safe and sound. She whined at me, wanting her mate and I couldn't fault her for it, but I was getting a little concerned how attached I was getting to Remy.

I knew our bond enhanced a lot of things, but I didn't know of any bonded shifters who felt compelled to be with their mate twenty-four/seven.

Now that we were back at school, I planned to find Elias and talk to him. The old shifter was insanely knowledgeable about all things in the shifter world, including the true mate bond. He had spent his life collecting information about our kind and even had some kind of medical degree.

He had been working on formulating an idea for why the birth rate of shifters was steadily declining, but I was hoping he could give me insight into this sudden need to be with Remy all the time. He had helped me find out why I struggled with shifting, so maybe he could help me understand my wolf a little bit better.

I let out a slow breath as Remy finally returned, sliding a tray of pasta and salad in front of me before sitting in the vacant chair to my left. Stomach growling, I dug into the carbs first with my fork, my left hand reaching out to touch his thigh under the table, needing that reassurance he was here.

He didn't give me a weird look or even break the conversation he had started with Dante. He simply slid his hand over mine and squeezed my fingers because he felt the pull between us the same as I did. Sometimes, especially since Cassian's attack, we needed to just touch the other to reassure ourselves we were together.

That small, simple action relaxed me enough to focus on what was happening around me.

Which was, of course, about the packs who left.

“It will definitely make this year less stressful,” Larkin was saying as she took a bite of her salad.

“But the whole point of the school was to show packs *could* work together,” Dante reminded her, his deep voice sounding tired and frustrated. “Half the packs leaving shows that a lot of these old divides are still holding true and strong.”

“The divides will always be there. The alliances are what will help us. Now we know which packs we can’t, and shouldn’t align with,” Rhodes mentioned, taking a slow drink of his water. His dark eyes were thoughtful, reminding me there was a reason he was Remy’s beta, his second in command. “But this school wasn’t a failure.”

Rhodes was a jokester and loved to laugh and have fun, but there was also an intensity to him and a mind that missed nothing.

Rhodes gestured around the room. “For decades, Blackwater and Brooks Ridge could only count on each other. Now we’ve more than quadrupled our numbers. Yeah, we lost five packs, but we still have seven here. *That* part worked. Every shifter in this room is part of a pack that stands with us.”

Remy let out a slow breath. “You’re right. And they’re numbers we’re going to need going into the Summit.”

“You mean votes,” Katy muttered darkly. She flipped her long red hair over a shoulder with a scowl. “Amazing the year we live in and *normals* have more rights than us.”

Tate leaned back in her chair, her hazel eyes narrowed. “She’s right. It’s ridiculous that the entire Summit is run by males trying to solve a *female* problem.”

Dante reached over and cupped the back of her neck, making her look at him. “We’re not saying you shouldn’t have a say, sweetheart. You know everyone at this table, hell, every pack in this *room* agrees females should have more of a say. We’re fighting for that.”

Her hand came up to his jaw, her gaze softening. “I know that, but you don’t know what it’s like to sit back and have to wait for someone else to fight for you.”

“Or not bother fighting at all,” I added quietly, suddenly done with my meal as my stomach soured. I set my fork down, opting to chew my lower lip

instead.

Remy's arm was around my shoulders, tucking me into his side, before I even finished my statement. His lips found the side of my head. Now it seemed like *he* was the one reassuring himself I was still here.

"Your pack was a bunch of assholes," Ryder spat. "What they did..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"Has there been any word about them making waves at the Summit?" Dante asked Remy.

Remy nodded firmly, his jaw set. "Nothing concrete, but it's coming. Odds are they're lining up their allies the same way we are."

"And they definitely aren't the only ones who think females should be ... *controlled*." Katy's lips curled in disgust around the last word.

"Look at what happened to Skye," Tate agreed. "To *me*. Females are becoming some ... commodity to be used for breeding rights and then, if we're lucky, sent to live out our days quietly like good little shifters. Females who can't—"

"—or *won't*," Katy cut in.

"Or *won't*," Tate added with a nod, "do their proverbial part, are shunned or banished from most packs."

"In Long Mesa they were forced to mate," I said slowly. My packmates knew this. I had shared with them, and Tate, about what happened to lesbian shifters or shifters who couldn't reproduce or refused to take a male mate. But from the horror on Dante and Ryder's faces, Tate hadn't shared those details.

"*Forced*?" Ryder choked out, coughing hard as the food he was chewing caught in his throat.

"Yeah, and Long Mesa wasn't the only pack that thought that way," I answered honestly. "Females are supposed to produce a child, either by choice or by force."

Both guys looked ready to drive down to my old pack and kick some ass after a trip to the bathroom to vomit all the food they had just eaten. I didn't bother adding that frequently those forced matings included multiple males to 'increase the likelihood of conception'.

And that it also happened in public. A warning of sorts to other females.

I shuddered at the memories and felt, rather than heard, Remy's low growl as it vibrated in his chest.

Katy slammed a small fist on the table. "See? This is the shit females

have to deal with, and we get *zero* say in what happens to us. We just happened to luck out that our packs believe in equal rights. But even with the packs we're aligned with, we're still the minority."

"But, historically speaking, women did get the right to vote," Ryder added pointedly. "They got all sorts of rights, which is what we're all fighting for."

"Yeah, but that was after centuries of oppression," Katy snapped. "So you're saying we should just sit back and wait for Shifter B. Anthony to take up arms?"

"They also weren't dealing with their species dying off," Larkin chimed in softly, tucking a lock of dark hair behind her ear. "Females are becoming increasingly rare. Four males are born to every one female. It makes sense that the males would want to control the limited population there is and figure out the best way to keep the shifter population from dying out."

Katy opened her mouth, and Larkin held up a hand to silence her.

"I'm not saying it's right," she added quickly, "but it's where we are. Entire packs have died out. But now, a lot of Alphas are making decisions based on fear. Fear of their pack numbers dwindling, pack lineages ending ... Until they start looking at this objectively, we're stuck in a cycle no one will break."

Rhodes lifted a hand after a second of silence. "I vote Larkin for President."

We all laughed. It was the break in seriousness we needed, something to crack the tension that had us all wound up.

With a roll of her eyes, Larkin swatted a hand at him that he simply caught and pressed to his mouth. I smiled watching Larkin's eyes go soft, watching as Rhodes tugged her mouth to his next.

My friends were happy.

The fact that I could use the words 'friends' and 'happy' in the same sentence was a testament to how far I had come in the last few months.

As if sensing my mood, Remy nuzzled his nose against my neck. I bit back a giggle at the way it tickled when he breathed deeply against me.

"You guys seriously *suck*," Katy griped, but she was smiling under her glare. She was happy that we were happy.

The world might be chaos around us, but here, in this space, we were safe and we were together.

Which is of course when a scream rose up from the hallway that had

every single shifter in the room jumping to their feet as a girl with pale hair ran into the room like the devil was chasing her. She looked around with wild eyes until she spotted who she was looking for, her face crumpling.

I vaguely placed her as a shifter from the Dubonne pack in Michigan.

She never broke stride as she ran full speed at their pack campus alpha, who was now standing with his pack. He caught the hysterical girl in his arms.

“Jane, whoa, hey!” His arms banded around her, his eyes lifting to survey the room. I watched them land on each pack alpha. The other six alphas in the room, Remy and Dante leading the way, went and joined them.

The rest of us crowded close, but Jane seemed too damn hysterical to make much sense. She clung to her alpha—again, I *really* needed to learn the names of our allies—and trembled.

“Jane,” he finally said, taking her by the shoulders and pushing her back a step. He only had a few inches on her and was definitely one of the younger alphas on campus. “Jane, you need to tell us what happened.”

“She’s gone!” Jane wailed, her head dropping forward.

A hushed murmur rose up amongst the shifters and I noticed the faculty joining the gathering.

“What do you mean *gone*?” the Dubonne alpha’s tone shifted subtly, but definitely enough to know he was giving an alpha command to his pack member.

Wiping her eyes and nose, Jane looked helplessly at him. “Kit. She’s *gone*.”

“SHE’S *GONE*.” JANE’S DESPERATE, TERRIFIED VOICE CAUGHT ON A SOB AT THE last word, and the cafeteria exploded into a chaotic mess of whispers and outcries.

“What do you mean ‘gone’, Jane?” the Dubonne alpha’s knuckles went white as he gripped the girl’s arms harder.

Not that Jane seemed to notice the bruising grip he had her in. She was grabbing onto him just as hard as he held her. Desperation seeped out of her pores, tinging the air with something acidic.

She gulped in a deep breath. “We were going to walk over here together for dinner. I forgot my phone and went back in, but when I came back, she was *gone*. Her scarf and phone were in the snow next to the steps.”

The whispers grew to full-fledged shouts now. Several girls let out whimpers, clutching at the nearest male for support. I felt Larkin and Katy each take one of my hands, and I squeezed them hard as more faculty came forward.

I expected one of them to get control of the rapidly spiraling teenagers surrounding me, but it was Remy who held a hand and demanded silence with a simple, “Enough!”

The timbre of his alpha voice sent a cascade of shivers down my spine as my wolf immediately recognized the command.

Apparently I wasn’t the only one because the room fell eerily silent.

A strange sense of pride washed over me as my wolf—okay, as *both* of us—watched everyone defer to Remy. Eyes that hadn’t dropped to the floor in submission were studying him like he would have the answer. Even the

faculty seemed ready to do as he said.

His dark eyes were bright and intense as he surveyed the room, his broad shoulders squared and ready for a fight.

“Did anyone else see anything?” Remy demanded, turning slowly around the circle that had formed around him and the other alphas.

Silence hung heavy in the air.

Remy gave a curt nod, rubbing his jaw. “Okay, here’s what we’re doing,” he announced. “Dante, can you take your pack out there? See if Ryder can catch a scent or something to track?”

“Yeah,” Dante agreed, jerking his head for Ryder and the four other male shifters in his pack to follow him. He paused in front of Tate, kissing her quickly before Ryder did the same.

Dante stared hard at Tate. “Stay here where I know you’re safe.”

“I can help,” Tate argued softly, catching his hand.

“You can help by staying where we know you’ll be okay,” Ryder told her. His hand reached up, caressing her cheek for a second before he walked away with his pack.

Silently fuming, Tate folded her arms over her chest and watched them all leave.

“The rest of us are splitting up into groups and taking different directions. Ian,” Remy looked at the Dubonne alpha, “we’ll go with you to the north. Grant, take Silver Crest to the east. Mackenzie and Redwood go to the south, and Deep Creek go west.”

As he finished giving directions, his gaze landed on me. I saw the sharp intake of breath as his eyes swept across me and knew whatever he said next was going to frustrate me.

“All females are to stay inside the cafeteria,” he ordered.

Katy’s jaw dropped along with several other girls, but most of the girls stayed quiet and docile.

Just the way we were expected to be.

I ground my teeth together, wanting to argue, but knowing by the set of his jaw that Remy wasn’t going to budge.

The packs immediately broke apart, some running from the room to start the search.

I let go of Katy and Larkin and stepped in front of Remy.

His eyes flashed with warning, but I could see the worry tucked behind that. “Skye, please don’t fight me on—”

I held up a hand, pressing my fingertips to his lips. “I’m not going to. Just ... be safe, okay?”

His eyes slid shut, some of the tension leaking from his taut muscles as I did what he wanted. “I will be.” He pressed his forehead to mine, his dark eyes warm and vibrant as he stared at me, our eyelashes almost touching. “Anything happens, shift and use the bond. I’ll be back here as soon as I can.”

“Got it.” I lifted my mouth kissing him hard, and not at all ready when he tore his mouth from mine and led the rest of our pack out the doors.

The cafeteria doors swung shut with a heavy, ominous thud that made my heart pound. The only sound I heard was Jane still crying behind me.

Tate stepped up beside me, resting her head against my shoulder. “Sucks, doesn’t it? Being left behind, I mean.”

“It really does,” I agreed quietly. My fingertips ghosted across my lips as my wolf pushed at me for attention. She hated feeling useless as much as I did.

“It’s ridiculous, is what it is,” Katy seethed, her voice hushed. “Why do we have to sit here like good little girls while they go play the hero? We can help. There’s almost forty people standing here just waiting.”

I did a quick headcount. With the female teachers included, we had thirty-five females in this room. Thirty-five compared to the nearly hundred male shifters that were now scouring the area for Kit.

I knew what Remy was afraid of. Female shifters had been disappearing slowly, but steadily, over the last year. At first, no one seemed to really notice it, but when females were already scarce, it wasn’t long until packs took notice.

It was another reason that Remy had pushed me to start self-defense training. Not only because I was attacked last year, but because females were under attack as a whole.

But this was a *school*. There were gates and security guards. Plus, Kit had been waiting outside of her dorm on a campus that housed over a hundred people with heightened senses.

And the women who had gone missing weren’t teenagers.

“Does the school have security cameras?” I asked.

Larkin shook her head, biting her lower lip. “No. It’s too much of a liability. Cameras can be hacked, and the last thing we need is some wanna be hacker in his parents’ basement seeing a bunch of kids turning into

wolves.”

“*That* would get the attention of the government,” Tate murmured, raking a hand through her dark hair.

“Hey, Skye?”

I turned to see Ainsley and the three younger girls from our pack standing behind me. All four looked nervous.

“The natives are getting restless,” Ainsley said pointedly, glancing around the room where, sure enough, several females were now crying and a couple even cowering under tables.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Katy muttered with a sigh.

“They’re scared,” Larkin chided her, nudging Katy with her shoulder.

“They should be pissed off they’ve been relegated to pretty dolls on a shelf,” Katy snarked, rolling her eyes.

Tate sighed. “Not everyone is like you, Katy. A lot of these girls have been coddled and treated like glass their whole lives.”

“Yet another thing about the male-dominated shifter culture that needs addressing,” Katy added pointedly, her heart shaped mouth pursing.

“Can we table the sexism in shifter culture debate until Kit’s been found?” I asked dryly. I looked at Ainsley. “Yeah, everyone seems on edge. We all are.”

Ainsley arched a brow. “Maybe you should do something about that?”

I blinked once. Twice. “Do something? Me?”

With a huff, Ainsley gave me a look that reminded me of the girl who used to give me hell my first semester. Before everything had changed. Now we were cool.

At least, I thought we were.

“Remy’s the alpha here,” she said, like that explained everything. Her gray eyes widened expectantly, waiting for me to catch on.

“Right,” I said slowly, still not following.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t mean just for our pack on campus. Everyone here looks at *him* for leadership.”

Yeah, I still wasn’t connecting the dots and my confusion must have been obvious.

Tate touched my shoulder. “You’re his mate. You guys are bonded. That makes you the female alpha here.”

Wait, what?

“We look up to you, too,” Bethany, one of the younger girls, said to me,

her big eyes wide. “Remy’s not here, so you’re in charge.”

Whoa.

Whoa.

“That ... What about the teachers?” I gestured to the group of older females, but one had broken away and was approaching us.

Amanda gave me a thin smile, tugging her cardigan tighter around her body. She was the first person I had met at GPA. She had picked me up from the airport and calmed a lot of my fears. Plus she was one of my favorite teachers.

“Tate’s right,” Amanda said. She pressed a hand to her chest. “Remy is our alpha, and right now, he’s our leader. Not just our pack, but the school. The teachers are here as instructors, but the campus alphas hold the most power.”

“But we’re kids,” I said, still not sure why a group of adults would give authority to teenagers.

“Remy, Dante, and Ian are eighteen,” Tate said. “Technically they’re adults.”

“Granite Peak isn’t just about forming bonds between packs,” Amanda added. “It also gives alpha heirs a chance to prove they can handle the responsibilities of being a pack Alpha one day. Most of the teachers here are regular pack members. A few of the security guards are deltas and maybe a beta or two, but none are Alphas.”

“And Remy is the most alpha of all the guys here,” Larkin chimed in with a warm smile. “It’s been that way since we first got here.”

“Even the seniors followed him when we were freshman.” Katy rolled her eyes again, but there was affection in the act.

“Blackwater is a highly respected pack, especially with the packs enrolled at Granite Peak,” Amanda told me. “And with you two bonded, it’s natural that everyone would look to you with him gone.”

“So, what do I do?” I whispered fiercely, noting more and more sets of eyes settling on me.

“Give them something to do,” Amanda encouraged. “Idle hands make idle minds.”

Something to do?

I was drawing a blank, panic starting to claw at me as I looked around the room and everyone seemed to be waiting for me.

My eyes landed on the table where ten minutes ago we had been sitting

and eating like nothing was wrong.

“Dishes,” I blurted out suddenly.

Katy cocked her head to the side. “What?”

I cleared my throat, catching the attention of the nearby tables. “Hey, guys, let’s get the food and stuff cleared.”

A girl with blond hair and a tiny button nose frowned as she got to her feet. She looked exactly like one of the dolls Katy mentioned. “You mean clean up?”

I nodded quickly, maybe a little too enthusiastic. “Yes. Exactly. Clean up. We’re going to ... clean.”

Something about cleaning was cathartic. When shit got crazy in Long Mesa, I would spend hours scouring every surface with hot water and whatever rags I could find that were clean. Without actual cleaning supplies, I was usually just pushing and smearing dirt around, but it gave me something to do.

“We have staff for that,” the girl reminded me, crossing her arms in front of her. She looked disgusted that I had even suggested she clean, which infuriated me.

“Yeah, people who are currently outside in the freezing cold, searching for Kit,” I snapped, annoyed with her petulant tone and overall vibe. “So, we’re cleaning up.”

Half the room got to their feet, looking around at each other and then at me.

The other half looked annoyed, confused, and insulted by being asked to clean a freaking dish.

My wolf snarled, not liking that we weren’t being obeyed.

“Now,” I said with a sharp edge to my voice, arching a brow that dared them to defy me.

I felt my wolf’s smugness as everyone started clearing tables of food. Amanda and two other teachers headed back to where the food was served and started breaking down the serving trays, instructing students on how to start washing in the industrial sinks.

“Let’s try to keep some of that hot,” I called to them. “They might be hungry when they get back, depending on how long they’re out there.”

Several nodded back at me while the rest kept working.

“Damn,” Larkin said, coming up beside me with a grin.

I turned and flashed her a nervous look. “Too much?”

She waved a hand at the girls taking dishes to the back room to wash. “Definitely not.”

“But *dishes*?” Katy groaned, but I could see the hint of a smile there.

“Yes, dishes,” I replied, planting my hands on my hips. “There’s nothing wrong with helping out, and sometimes that includes cleaning shit.”

She whistled at me as she gathered some of our plates. “You being bossy is kinda hot, girl. Keep it up, and Maren may have some competition when she gets back.”

I swatted at her butt as she danced out of the way. Larkin followed her with a giggle. I gathered my own dishes and trailed after everyone in the kitchen.

Moving seemed to help. There was less crying and more talking as people divvied up tasks. It was quickly obvious the girls who came from more affluent packs or families, especially when it came to washing and drying the dishes.

It didn’t take us long to clean everything. I was standing in the center of a sparkling clean cafeteria, once again surrounded by females staring at me, and I was at a loss for what to do.

It had been more than an hour. My wolf was anxious, and so was I.

Judging from the amount of pacing and fidgeting in the room, we weren’t alone in our worry.

I was about to just shift to see if I could get an update from Remy when the doors opened and half the boys came back in.

Swallowing, I noticed none of the alphas were with them.

No Remy.

My heart slammed painfully against my chest, my pulse racing a sharp staccato that left me breathless and dizzy.

Finally, thankfully, Rhodes strode into the room, flanked by several of the Blackwater guys. His eyes found Larkin first and then me. He gave me a terse nod, letting me know Remy was okay before I could even ask the question out loud.

“Did you find Kit?” I asked, realizing I was still speaking for the group.

Rhodes shook his head slowly, exhaling a long breath. He hadn’t finished before Larkin was at his side, sliding under his arm and wrapping her arms around his waist.

“We lost her scent by the road near the eastern pass,” he said darkly. “She was probably moved to a truck. Ryder was pretty sure he smelled diesel

fumes where her scent ended, but it's a road used by a lot of loggers. Trucks run through the pass all day and night."

There was no way to track which truck she might be on.

Shit.

Several sobs started behind me, and I couldn't blame any of them. Part of me wanted to cry for Kit, too.

"Where's Remy?" I asked softly.

"On a conference call with his dad," he explained to me before looking at the rest of the group. "We're escorting you all back to your dorms. Some of your alphas have different orders, which your pack will explain. For now, let's all head back."

"We left some of the food hot in case anyone was hungry," Larkin told him.

Rhodes kissed her brow. "Thanks. I'll make sure the guys know, but we need to get you all settled first."

Packs started to break up with their escorts, but Rhodes kept us all in the cafeteria until it was empty of everyone but the Blackwater pack.

"Remy wants all of our girls at the Blackwater cabin tonight, until we can make sure the threat is gone. We already have a guard rotation set up to make sure you're all safe," he said firmly.

"We can help with that," Katy said. "We can take turns keeping watch, too."

Rhodes shook his head. "Not tonight, Kit-Kat."

Her jaw dropped, ready to fight.

But Rhodes stepped up to her, his expression surprisingly gentle. "Please don't fight him on this tonight, Katy. Just let us be the asshole men who keep the women folk safe for a night."

Even Katy couldn't help but agree when he gave her that adorable, half-smile that he had perfected.

"Fine," she agreed reluctantly.

"We'll have a quick pack meeting when we get to the house. But let's go," Rhodes said, starting to walk backwards to the doors. "It's gonna be a long night."

WALKING ACROSS THE CAMPUS WITH A PACK OF GUARDS FELT STRANGE. EVEN stranger was when they didn't simply let the girls run into the dorms to pack an overnight bag, but actually split into pairs to escort them.

Several guys were in the females only dorm, but everyone was silent and somber. Walking through the halls was unnerving. People were darting in and out of rooms. Some were packing to stay with their alphas and others were bunking together. Nervous energy crackled in the air.

I stayed close to Rhodes and Larkin since I didn't have a room here anymore. Katy ducked into the room beside Larkin's, while one of our packmates, Will, leaned against the hallway across from her open door. He gave me a small nod, but kept his eyes on Katy the whole time.

I was proud of Katy for keeping her mouth shut when I knew this whole situation bothered her. She hated being treated like a helpless little girl. Hell, so did I, but I didn't have to be in wolf form to sense Remy's emotions were volatile right now.

Everyone was on edge, and all I wanted was to go back to whatever normal we had.

But first I wanted to hurry this along so I could see Remy was okay with my own eyes.

"Can I help?" I asked Larkin, leaning against her open door frame and watching as she and Rhodes packed things into her overnight bag.

Or, rather, Larkin put things in the bag, and Rhodes tried to stealthily remove them.

"Rhodes!" she snapped, pulling her shirt back out of the drawer he had

tried to tuck it into.

“Baby girl, I’m trying to help you save time,” he pointed out with a devilish grin.

“By putting *away* my pajamas?” she demanded incredulously.

He gave her a shrug. “It’s not like you’ll be wearing them, so why pack them?”

Larkin squeaked, her cheeks flushed crimson as she looked at me quickly before glaring at her boyfriend.

“There will be an entire cabin full of shifters,” she hissed, her eyes darting around to make sure Will and Katy weren’t coming up behind me to hear her. “I’m *not* sleeping naked.”

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, a wicked gleam in his eye when he looked back at her. “Fine, you can wear one of my shirts then.”

“I get cold,” she answered with a delicate sniff, lifting her chin as she reached for flannel bottoms.

He crossed the room, wrapping his arms around her from behind and hauling her against his chest. Dipping his head, he whispered something in her ear that made her jaw drop and ears turn red.

But she refolded the bottoms and shoved them back into a drawer.

I chuckled as Rhodes tossed me a smug smirk. He zipped up her bag and threw it over his shoulder, all teasing sliding from his features as his gaze sharpened while stepping into the hallway and looking around. “That everything?”

Larkin nodded, exiting the room at the same time Katy did. Will pushed off the wall and fell into step with us. We waited until everyone was gathered downstairs before heading to the cabin as a unit, making the short trek to the other side of campus in a silent pack.

When we made it to the cabin, we all filed in. The fireplace was still going from earlier, but the embers were starting to fade to a soft glow. Will walked over and tossed a few logs onto it, bringing the flames back to a roar.

The door to Remy’s study was shut, and I didn’t hesitate. I crossed the floor to it, opening the door silently and slipping inside before I pulled the door shut quietly behind me.

Remy looked up from where he was on the phone, probably with his dad. The stark relief in his eyes when he saw me made me smile softly at him.

The agitation my wolf and I had struggled to keep down while he was out searching receded as we both took a deep breath and relaxed.

Our mate was safe.

Our pack was safe.

I went to his side, sliding an arm across the tight muscles of his shoulders, wanting to offer comfort. Without breaking the conversation, he pushed back from the desk, hooking an arm around my waist and pulling me into his lap. His strong arms banded around me, squeezing so hard for a second I couldn't catch my breath.

When I could wriggle an arm free, I looped it around his neck, leaning my head to his shoulder and breathing in his scent.

Remy reached over and hit a button on the phone, setting it on top of the desk.

"Skye's here," he said. "I put you on speaker phone."

"Hey, sweetheart." Gabe's warm voice filled the room, and I relaxed even more into Remy. "How's my favorite kid?"

I loved his family. They had not only given Mom and I sanctuary when we were literally at the end of our rope, but they had taken me in as one of their own when Remy and I bonded. I had spent almost as much time with his parents over winter break as I did with my mom.

"Hanging in there," I answered, giving Remy a quick glance.

Remy smiled, the action breaking some of the tension from his face. His thumb caressed my hip in a gentle, sweeping motion.

"Any word on Kit?" I asked him, my nose almost brushing his.

His eyes flashed with bitterness. "No. Not a damn clue."

"I was telling Remy that we're sending more guards for the school," Gabe told me. I could hear the frustration in his voice. "We'll be taking more precautions moving forward, but for now it's imperative everyone stays alert and doesn't wander off alone."

"The good news is, if she was taken by whoever had been abducting shifters, they only seem to strike in one pack or one place before they move on," Remy muttered.

That was the good news?

"Still, we're increasing patrols and sending more guards," Gabe said firmly. "I'm not playing games with anyone's safety, and neither are the other packs. We have a conference call with all the Alphas in a few minutes I need to get ready for."

"Okay, Dad," Remy said, picking the phone back up. "We'll be in touch if anything else happens."

“You two take care of each other. Call if you need us.” Gabe sighed. “Remy, if this is too much ...”

“I’ll let you know,” he replied firmly. “We’ll check in with you guys in the morning.”

“Tell Katy your mother and I love her. And we love you guys, too.”

A warm fissure cracked open a piece of my heart, heating me. I swallowed hard and licked my lips. “We’ll be safe,” I assured Gabe. “We love you, too.” The words rolled easily off my tongue, the way they had for the last few weeks.

I had left the broken omega behind and was starting to finally find my footing with my pack and my family.

“Bye, Dad.” Remy hung up the call, dropping the silent phone back onto the desk with a groan. He closed his eyes, his head dropping back in exhaustion.

I framed his face with my hands. “Talk to me, Rem.”

He blinked at me, his dark eyes churning with a hundred emotions. “It’s like she vanished, Skye. We completely lost her scent on the road.”

“Were there any other scents with hers you guys could make out?”

He frowned. “Ryder thinks he noticed two sets of human tracks where the scent ended. But we couldn’t get a read if they were normals or shifters.”

“You think the same people who took Kit took the other shifters?” I asked slowly.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” he replied.

“But Kit’s a teenager. Haven’t they been abducting adults?” My brow furrowed as I tried to remember the specifics of the missing shifters.

Remy nodded, one hand sliding up my spine to toy with the ends of my braid. “It’s definitely a break in their MO, but the circumstances fit.”

I exhaled through my nose, a headache forming between my eyes. “So, what happens now?”

“Now we go on lockdown,” he replied grimly, lips pressed together in a tight line. “Dad is talking with the other Alphas. They’ll all send more people to help guard the school.”

I traced an abstract pattern into the shoulder of his shirt. “Is your dad coming here?”

He shook his head, his expression turning fierce. “No. For now, they’re trusting us to handle things. They’ll intervene if they have to, but it’s on the campus alphas to keep everyone safe.”

I framed his gorgeous face with my hands. “We trust you, Remy. Tell us what to do.”

He smiled grimly. “For starters? No female goes anywhere unescorted. At least not until we have a perimeter around the school I know can’t be breached.”

“Katy will love that,” I murmured.

“Katy will deal with it,” Remy said with a sharp finality. “Until we can be sure the school is safe, and the extra guards arrive, I’m not taking chances with anyone’s safety.”

“Hey,” I said softly, waiting until he was looking me in the eye before continuing, “I get it. The girls will all be on board. If they aren’t, I’ll yell at them for you.”

A smile ghosted across his lips, something like pride shining in his eyes. “I heard about the cafeteria.”

My brows shot up. “What?”

“You took control, calmed the masses.”

“Not exactly *masses*,” I murmured, weirdly embarrassed by the attention he was giving me. I bossed around a few dozen girls.

“I’m proud of you, babe,” he told me honestly, sincerely. “It’s exactly what you should have done. What needed to be done. You’re pretty amazing, Skye.”

I smiled sardonically, even as warmth spread in my chest at his praise. “You might be a little biased.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” he replied softly before kissing me slowly. His lips moved across mine, coaxing them open so he could deepen the kiss.

Both my arms circled his neck as I pressed myself closer, angling my head to completely yield to him as his hands tightened around my waist, pulling me against the solid muscle of his chest.

Until loud voices reminded us that we had a house full of our pack mates, and the only thing separating us from them was a pair of glass doors.

With a groan, I pulled my mouth away, but Remy’s hands kept me pinned to his body, his eyes still dark and intense as he studied me.

“What?” I finally asked, shifting on his lap as a small smile tugged at my lips.

A wrinkle creased the skin between his eyes. “Something about this whole thing feels wrong, and I’m fighting the urge to barricade you

somewhere safe until I know you aren't at risk."

I cocked my head to the side. "Can you barricade yourself *with* me?"

He chuckled quietly, his gaze drifting to my lips. "God, I wish."

Everything in me wanted to kiss him again. To fuse my mouth to his as my hands explored every part of his skin. My wolf whined in agreement. She had seriously turned into a horny little bitch recently, my dreams taking a more ... adult turn when I wasn't having a nightmare.

Especially when I was in Remy's bed.

But there was always something around the corner to keep us from doing much more than kissing or a heavy makeout session.

Case in point, the room full of packmates a few feet away.

"We should get out there," I said softly, loving the way his dark hair felt sliding through my fingers.

"I know," he agreed with a heavy sigh before standing up, still holding me in his arms for a second before letting me slide down his body to the floor.

House full of shifters, I reminded my hormones, unable to suppress the shudder of want that shook my body and had Remy licking his lips a second before stepping back.

Reaching down, he grabbed my hand in his and led us out into the main room to talk to the rest of the pack.

SILENCE GREETED ME WHEN I WOKE UP, WHICH WAS KIND OF SURPRISING considering all the extra bodies in the house.

Katy had taken ‘my’ room, even though I had never actually used it. Larkin was down the hall in Rhodes’ room, Ainsley and the younger girls were in the room with a couple sets of bunk beds, and several guys had camped out downstairs in the living room.

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table near my head. We still had a few hours before classes started.

GPA had decided that classes would commence as usual, but Remy went over instructions that the Blackwater pack was on lockdown, even going as far as to assign escorts to all of the females.

I turned over and looked at my assigned guard, sleeping soundly beside me. All the lines of tension that had tightened his face last night and even as he gathered me in his arms to go to sleep, were finally relaxed as he rested.

I felt like a total creeper watching Remy as he slept. I was fascinated by the tiny movements he made. The unconscious twitch of a finger against my hip, the tiny frown lines that appeared and then smoothed between his eyes, the steady rise and fall of his wide chest.

Lifting my head slightly from his shoulder, my eyes slid down to where my hand rested absently on his stomach. Even relaxed in sleep, the ridges of his muscles were pronounced. One of my fingers slid into the groove between the muscles, lightly tracing the outline of his abs.

I followed the contour of muscle, outlining each ab, counting as I went. I frowned when I got to the last one and did a quick recount.

In all of the romance novels I tended to binge, the heroine always talked about the guy's six pack. But I was definitely counting eight on Remy's firm stomach, not counting the grooved indents that curved down into an enticing v that disappeared into the low band of the gym shorts he slept in.

The finger I had been using to trace his body now skirted the elastic band. I bit my lip, curious and wanting to go farther, but also feeling a little awkward.

This was new territory for me. Then again, almost everything was new territory for me. But in the quiet of the morning, with weak tendrils of dawn creeping into the room, it felt more intense. Intimate.

I glanced up at Remy's face and nearly jumped when I saw him awake and looking at me.

With huge eyes, I swallowed hard, guilt swamping me. "I'm sorry—"

I started to jerk my hand away but his long fingers caught my wrist, keeping me still.

Then I noticed the heat in his gaze as it burned off the last traces of sleep that lingered. A muscle ticked in his jaw, all eight of those abdominal muscles flexing and rippling.

"You can touch me," he whispered, his voice rough and thick.

That oh-so-familiar tug between my legs had me pressing my thighs together.

My teeth caught my lower lip again, and, watching his face the whole time, I slipped my hand under the band of his shorts.

"Is this okay?" I asked softly, keeping my eyes on his.

He nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving mine as I explored.

I slid my hand lower, lower, lower. Each centimeter I gained, his eyelids drooped a bit more. When my hand brushed against the hard, hot length of him, he hissed and squeezed his eyes shut like he was in pain.

I almost pulled away, worried I had done something wrong. But then I saw him swallow again, his Adam's apple bobbing desperately in his throat, teeth clenched, muscles shaking as he forced himself to be still.

It wasn't pain he felt. It was a pleasure so intense it bordered on the edge of pain. A sensation Remy had wrung out of me before.

And I really, *really* wanted to do the same thing to him.

"Still okay?" I needed to hear for myself he wanted this.

His eyes flew open, pure heat and lust pooling there.

"*Very* okay," he rasped out. His hand fisted in the sheets at his side as I

tentatively traced the outline of his cock, testing the weight of it in my hand, circling it in my fist.

My fingers couldn't circle around the base of him.

That made *me* swallow.

A groan fell from his lips as I moved my hand up to the soft tip, my finger gently touching the bead of moisture I found there before smoothing my hand back down.

"Jesus," he hissed, his head thrown back against the pillows. The muscles in his neck and shoulders corded with taut tension as he tried to stay as calm as possible.

"Am I doing this right?" I asked, hesitating with uncertainty. The weight of my inexperience was making me nervous.

His eyes found mine again, practically devouring me with their hunger. "You're perfect. Anything you do is perfect, babe."

I licked my lips, daring to look him in the eyes. "But I want this to be ... good for you."

I mentally high-fived myself for saying that without blushing.

He gave me a long look and then nodded. "Okay." He let go of the sheet slowly with one hand, and threw his arm across the bed, pulling out the drawer at his bedside table. I heard his hand moving, searching for something. After a second, he raised his hand.

My brows flew to my hairline.

"Lube?" I asked. Something dark twisted in my stomach. "What do you have *that* for?"

Shit. I flinched at how accusatory that sounded.

But I knew what lubricant had been used for in my former house. There was almost always a supply of it in drawers all around the house we lived in.

The memory felt wrong in this space, dredging up dark and haunted thoughts from a life I wanted to forget.

Remy only smirked at me, the warm teasing look he was giving me eased some of the unease currently swirling in my head. "I have an insanely hot mate. What do you *think* it's for?"

My brain short circuited as I connected the dots.

"You mean," I sputtered, struggling to find actual words to say what was happening in my brain. "You ... When you ..."

He chuckled, the sound low and throaty. "Jerk off thinking about you?" He lifted up to one elbow, putting himself eye level with me. "Every chance I

get.”

His cock twitched in my hand as if agreeing with him, the length impossibly thickening in my hand.

With a shaky breath I released him, pulling my hand from the sheets and extending my palm. He squirted some of the lube into my palm, his gaze latched onto the way my hand dipped back under the covers, finding him without issue.

“Fuck,” he muttered, flopping down to his back and dropping the tube with a thunk to the floor.

I watched him for cues as I worked my hand over him, watching to see what made the pulse in his throat jump, what made his fists clench, what made his breath hiss through his teeth.

Finding a rhythm, I tried different speeds and different pressure, finally settling on the one that made his entire body shudder. I repeated the action again.

Again.

Again.

Every time I slid my hand down him, up him, his muscles went tighter and tighter, coiling with a pressure I could feel pulsing steadily—relentlessly—between my legs.

“Jesus,” he gasped, his eyes unfocused as he turned his head and looked at me. “Skye—”

I leaned over, kissing him hungrily as I felt his pulse in my hand. He barely finished his release before he was flipping us over, my back landing against the mattress with Remy’s weight pinning me to the bed. He reached down, pulling out my hand that had been smashed between our bodies.

In one fluid motion, his hips were between my thighs, and he had my wrists pinned to the bed on either side of my head as he devoured me with his mouth, licking and nipping my lower lip, my jaw, my throat.

He pressed himself against me, and whatever release he found with my hand moments earlier clearly wasn’t enough because he was still hard and ready against the inside of my thigh.

Needing to touch him, I tried to pull free, but his hands tightened around me, keeping my wrists firmly encased in his hands as his hips pinned me to the bed. He pushed up my shirt with his free hand, exposing my skin to the air as I tried to move under him.

Remy was too big, too strong. I could lift my hips as his mouth moved to

the underside of my jaw, his hot breath sending the wrong kind of chills through me as my muscles remembered this moment from my former life.

And just like that ...

... I was gone.

“Fight harder, Skye. I love it when you fight me.”

The grass was non-existent behind the school as Cassian pinned me to the ground, Preston and Marc laughing above us, arguing over who got their turn next. I could taste dirt in my mouth from where they had pulled me outside and thrown me down.

I could feel Cassian’s breath hot against my neck as he ground his hips into mine, using a knee to pry mine apart. I tried to jerk, to buck him off of me, but clearly he was loving that added friction. My feet scrambled for traction on the dirt.

Tears of humiliation and frustration burned my eyes and the back of my throat as I bit back a scream.

He managed to transfer both of my hands into one of his, crushing the delicate bones of my wrists in one meaty fist. With his free hand, he jerked my shirt up, clumsily grabbing my breast and squeezing so hard I did cry out then.

Preston knelt beside us with a laugh, that sick, maniacal glint in his eye. He reached into his back pocket and my blood ran cold when he pulled out a switchblade.

He flicked it open next to my cheek, the tip grazing my skin.

With a grin, he trailed the tip of the blade down my jaw, across my throat, between the valley of my breasts, and under my bra.

The sharp blade had no problem severing the threadbare lace of the too-small bra someone had cast off as used goods for the omega house.

Cassian’s eyes glowed as he looked at my exposed flesh, his nails scraping and abrading the tender flesh as he scratched and pulled at me, even going so far as to dip his head down and bite down.

I clamped my mouth shut, internally screaming again, but knowing any audible sounds from me would only spur them on.

Preston’s knife slid to my ribs, down until it reached the waistband of my jeans. He looked up at Cassian, who pulled back, my flesh slipping from his mouth with an audible pop.

“Undo her pants.”

Cassian grinned at him, his fingers already finding the safety pin that

served as a button to hold my jeans closed.

“No!” I screamed, but Preston’s free hand slapped over my mouth painfully hard. My teeth cut into my upper lip, and I tasted blood.

Cassian started to jerk at my jeans, renewing my urge to fight again. His free hand stopped pulling down my pants long enough to slam a fist into my side, knocking all the wind from my body. My body went limp for a second and it was all he needed to finish pulling my jeans down. One of the other boys ripped them down my ankles, pulling them away and tossing them aside. The battered flip flops on my feet offered no resistance. My toes dug into the bare dirt as I squirmed and thrashed.

I could feel my wolf starting to stir deep inside of me, waking up, as I managed to drag in a lungful of hot air.

I would shift if I could. I didn’t care if these three could easily overpower me. Maybe I could summon my wolf enough to shift and surprise them enough so I could run.

“Marc, hold her legs!” Cassian snapped, as if reading my thoughts.

A second later, Marc’s hands locked around my ankles and held me still. He wrenched them as far apart as he could with Cassian’s weight on me.

Something sharp and painful flare hot low in my stomach. So much that I screamed against Preston’s hand. My vision blurred from the sudden pain.

“Jesus, dude,” Cassian said with a throaty chuckle. “What the actual fuck?”

“She’s ours,” Preston replied calmly. “I’m simply marking her as our property.”

Another flash of pain ripped through my hip, and I realized he was cutting me.

Carving into my body.

Branding me.

Hot tears streamed down my cheeks, dripping down into the dirt to form a small puddle.

“What in the world is going on out here?”

A sharp voice made all four of us jump, but the tip of the knife went in deeper when I jerked. Within seconds, all the weight had lifted off of me and I rolled to my side, curling into a ball. I pressed a hand to my side, feeling it slick with blood.

“Oh, Cassian.”

I could have sobbed hearing the submission in the teacher’s voice.

Because as third-in-line, Cassian was king of the school and could do whatever he wanted, even at fifteen years old.

“Did you need something, Mrs. Lewis?” Cassian was the picture of innocence despite the bloody, half-naked girl behind him.

She seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second. Long enough for me to feel the first moments of hope.

But she quickly smashed that.

“Not if you’re busy at the moment.” I could hear the tentative smile behind her words as she spoke to the alpha heir of our pack.

Preston chuckled under his breath, stepping backwards and kicking a cloud of dirt at me.

“We’re all done here,” Cassian told her nonchalantly. “How can we help?”

The three of them started for the side door they had drug me out of a few minutes earlier. Preston’s foot connected with the hip he had been carving into as he walked over me. They all headed back into the school.

The door closed with a heavy thunk that made me flinch.

I staggered to my feet, pulling my shirt down over my chest. The safety pin was somewhere in the dust. I didn’t bother looking for it as I pulled my jeans back on.

Holding the top of my jeans closed with one hand, I half-ran, half-stumbled back to the house. Amazingly, no one was home when I tumbled in, slamming the door shut.

There was no lock on the front door or any other door in the house. Why would there be? Omegas didn’t have rights to things like privacy. Or safety.

I made it into the downstairs powder room and leaned heavily against the door. After a second, I pushed away and looked in the mirror.

My top lip was split from when Preston’s hand had slapped over my mouth. My face was dirty and dusty, with tear tracks streaking it. With shaking hands, I lifted the hem of my shirt and pulled down the edge of my jeans.

A ‘P’ had been carved into the skin beside my hip. Wetting a cloth by the sink, I gently dabbed the area clean. When the teacher surprised us, Preston had jerked, the knife slipping and cutting a thin line down the ‘P’ that turned it into a crude, misshapen ‘R’ looking mark.

Pressing the cloth against my skin, I backed up until I hit the door. My knees gave out as I sank to the floor and sobbed.

When would it ever—

“Stop!” I whimpered, twisting against the hands that held me down, the body that had me immobile.

I couldn't *breathe*. Panic swelled in my chest, the pressure unbearable.

“Stop!” I almost shouted the word, my eyes screwed tight as I fought against the person holding me captive.

Immediately I was released, the weight lifted off of me.

Rolling to the side, I tumbled off the bed and scuttled backwards until my back hit the wall. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I buried my head against my knees, my body shaking. I pulled the oversized shirt I had slept in over my knees, stretching it out as I struggled to cover my body.

I flinched, hearing movements around me and footsteps drawing closer.

“Skye? Baby, please look at me,” a warm, worried voice begged me. It cut through the fog of desperation.

I knew that voice. That voice was safe.

Safe.

I wasn't sure if I thought that, or my wolf did, but I slowly opened my eyes and looked up.

Remy was kneeling a few feet in front of me, his eyes wide with worry. His hands shook as he fought the urge to pull me to his body and protect me from whatever my mind had conjured.

But he couldn't.

I may have killed the monster, but the scars still ran deep.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, choking on the last word as a ragged sob tore through my chest.

His hands balled into fists against the floor, his body shaking with the need to fight whatever was haunting me.

“Tell me what to do,” he said desperately. “Did I hurt you? I want to touch you, but—”

Mate.

The word rang clearly in my head, calming me down a little more as my wolf reminded me Remy wasn't a threat.

He was our protector, our mate, our love, our ...

He was just ours.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered again, as shame leeches in to replace the fear. It coiled deep inside my belly, oily and insidious, as I dropped my gaze. “I'm okay.”

Remy muttered a curse, but still didn't move. "Babe—"

Something pounded once against our door. I jumped and Remy glared at it before barking out a sharp, "What?"

"Just telling you two to wrap it up. Classes start soon, and there's a whole pack downstairs who can hear the racket you two are making."

I could picture Rhodes smiling on the other side of the door as he interrupted what he assumed to be some sort of sexy times between us.

It started off that way. It could have been that way.

It *should* have been that way.

If Remy wasn't stuck with a mate who came with enough baggage to fill the cargo bay of an entire fleet of planes.

I shoved to my feet, my hands still uselessly pulling down the hem of the shirt. "Can I use the bathroom first?"

Remy stood slowly, still giving me a wide berth. His eyes were narrowed in thought as he watched me, but didn't speak.

Scurrying past him with my head down, I went into the private attached bathroom and closed the door. After a second, I paused and turned the lock.

“OKAY, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?” KATY DEMANDED, FINALLY cornering me at my locker before the start of lunch.

I shoved my heavy pre-calculus text into the locker before shutting it and turning around to face her, Larkin, and Tate.

“Are you okay?” Larkin asked, reaching out to touch my arm.

Katy’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve been like this since this morning. What gives?”

I leaned back against the bank of lockers, not exactly wanting to rehash why I had barely spoken all morning. Why I couldn’t look Remy in the eye, and why I turned and started a conversation with Ainsley, intentionally walking us to the main building while Remy was supposed to go the opposite direction for a meeting.

Tate clutched her books to her chest, her hazel eyes studying me with too much intensity. “Did you and Remy have a fight?”

Katy snorted, but smiled. “What did my idiot big brother do now?”

Sighing, I looked around, grateful the guarding didn’t extend to inside the school building during classes. Since it was lunchtime, the hallway was basically empty except for the four of us.

My stomach sank when I realized Remy would be waiting for me at the end of classes to walk me back to the cabin, and I was going to have to talk to him.

Or, worse yet, maybe he would send someone else to walk with me.

A babysitter for his damaged mate.

“Hey!” Katy said sharply, snapping her fingers in my face. “Skye,

where'd you go?" Her brown eyes were wide with worry, and I realized I had completely spaced out.

Suddenly exhausted, my chin dropped to my chest. I couldn't bear to see the looks of pity when I told them what had happened.

"Remy didn't do anything," I answered softly. "It's me. I'm the one who messed up."

"It can't be *that* bad," Larkin told me, moving to my side and nudging my shoulder with hers.

Scoffing under my breath, I shook my head. "It was. I had some kind of flashback to when I was living in Long Mesa, and lost it. Like, I turned into a total basket case."

"What caused the flashback?" Tate asked curiously.

I glanced up at Katy, who made a face, but held her hands up in surrender.

"I'll make an exception to the I-don't-want-to-know-what-you-and-my-brother-do rule," she quipped, a half smile deepening the dimples on her cheeks. "What happened?"

"We were ... messing around," I stumbled over the words, feeling my cheeks heat. "It was good. It was *really* good. And then, he was on top of me and kind of had me pinned down." I shivered at the memory, and not from fear.

I loved the way it felt when Remy surrounded me, when he infiltrated every single one of my senses until my entire world became just him.

"Okay," Katy said slowly, nodding her head. "So, you were having fun with your boyfriend."

"Your mate," Larkin added quickly. "Which is totally fine."

"Yeah, but suddenly it wasn't me and Remy," I explained, frustration lacing my tone. "It was me and Cassian and his friends. I was being held down while they ... They did stuff to me."

"Fuck," Katy whispered, her eyes narrowed with rage.

Larkin and Tate had gone pale.

"It didn't go *too* far," I said in a rush. "A teacher came out and saw."

"And kicked their asses?" Katy demanded.

A bitter laugh escaped me. "No. When she saw it was Cassian, she didn't care. He ran the school. Most of the adults in the pack feared him, especially when he was with Preston and Marc. The three of them were like some unholy trinity of hate, sadism, and brutality. No one messed with them,

especially not over me.”

“So, she *left you*?” Tate’s expression was horrified.

I shrugged. “Cassian said they could finish with me later. They left me in the dirt and went inside, and I ran home.”

Larkin leaned her head against my shoulder. “I want to punch all of them for you.”

“Cassian is already dead,” Katy replied with a smirk, a glint of approval sparkling in her eyes. “But I wish we could resurrect him so I could kill him all over again for you.”

I exhaled, trying to be comforted by the fact that Cassian was gone and not a threat anymore. I would never have to see him again.

But still, there was a part of me that wished I had seen him. Or at least have seen his body. Maybe seeing him dead, not breathing and lifeless, would help with the nightmares. But Remy had told me that by the time they were done getting me to the infirmary and went back, Cassian’s body was gone.

He had planned on taking me back to Long Mesa with him, and even said he had a car on the way for us. It was why he had picked the spot he had; it was close to the road. They must have taken his body.

A chilling thought froze me in place.

Cassian was *gone*. Which meant someone would replace him. And I would put money on it being Preston.

Preston, whose brother and best friend I had killed.

I could feel myself starting to spiral, but I shoved the emotions down, swallowing the bile that rose up. Instead I refocused on my friends, on what was right in front of me.

“Did you tell Remy this?” Tate asked. Her brow was wrinkled with worry and concern as she watched me.

I shook my head so fast I got dizzy. “No. No way.”

“Why not?” Katy looked completely puzzled.

“Because,” I replied stubbornly. Because it was embarrassing and humiliating and made me feel like I needed a thousand showers to scrub myself clean.

And I didn’t want any of that dirt touching Remy in any way.

“Because you still feel ashamed it happened?” Larkin’s voice was soft and gentle.

I looked at her, knowing she was exactly right. “A little.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong!” Katy exclaimed, taking me by the

shoulders all of the sudden and giving me a quick shake. “Skye, you’re a *survivor*. The fact that you’re not currently curled up in a ball in a padded room right now after surviving your former pack proves that.”

“Remy would never hold anything like that against you,” Tate added. “You know that, right?”

“Of course I know that,” I said, exasperated as I knocked Katy’s hands off of me. “Remy’s incredible. But sometimes I realize how much it must suck to be stuck with someone so damaged.”

Tate frowned. “You’re not damaged—”

“I can’t even make out with my boyfriend without having a panic attack,” I interrupted her, arching a brow. “He missed almost a month of classes last semester because I was in a coma after being kidnapped and almost dying.”

“Also not your fault,” Katy pointed out.

“But don’t you see? None of this would have happened if I wasn’t here,” I insisted. “I’m the problem in this relationship, and Remy is too good a guy to bring it up. He’s trying to deal with all sorts of stuff happening at school, and I’m making it worse. I can’t even be normal for a freaking *day*.”

“Wow, okay,” Katy started, shaking her head and holding up a hand to stop me, “let’s start with *that*. First of all, I have never seen my brother as happy as he’s been since you joined our pack. Even before you two bonded, he was different whenever you were around.”

“Yeah, because I was a mess,” I retorted. “And clearly I still am.”

Katy threw up her hands. “Skye, honey, I love you like a sister, but I’m about to literally slap some sense into you.”

Tate put a hand on Katy’s shoulder. “Calm down. That’s not exactly helping.”

“If the situation was reversed,” Larkin started quietly, looking at me with serious eyes, “if Remy had been abused and came from a horrible pack that left him scarred, would it change a thing about how you feel for him? Would it make you wish you had bonded to someone else?”

The idea of someone hurting Remy seemed impossible, but even more impossible was the idea that I wouldn’t love him for *any* reason. Remy was it for me, and not just because of the bond. It was all the little things I saw him do.

The way he took time to explain things to younger pack members instead of simply barking orders.

The way he united our pack when things got crazy, and how people

respected and looked to him for leadership.

The way he protected every single member of his pack.

The way he never once judged me for a damn thing.

Even this morning when he could have demanded answers from me, he gave me space and time.

I couldn't imagine my life without him in it. It would be like living without a heart; all life would cease without him. My lungs wouldn't breathe, my brain wouldn't think, my body wouldn't move without him.

"Nothing would ever make me love him any less," I whispered hoarsely. "He's mine."

Larkin gave me a small smile. "You have to know he feels the same way."

She made it sound so simply, so easy. And maybe it was.

I sighed loudly. "Maybe you're right."

"Maybe?" She hip checked me with a grin. "Only *maybe*?"

Rolling my eyes, I started to laugh. "Okay, okay. You're definitely right. You're *both* right," I added when I saw Katy open her mouth.

Instead, Katy smiled smugly at me. "Just as long as you realize how crazy you sound."

I rolled my eyes again. "Got it."

After a second, Katy sobered, her expression going gentle and solemn. "But seriously? I think it might help you to talk to someone about this."

"I'll tell Remy," I replied, already dreading having that conversation, but knowing it was necessary.

"That," Katy hedged, "but I was thinking maybe someone else, too? Like a professional?"

"A therapist?" I knew my face probably looked as stunned as I felt.

"Might not be a bad idea," Larkin agreed, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, but telling someone *everything* that happened? Spilling my guts to a total stranger?" My spine stiffened as I resisted the idea.

"It's not like that," Tate said quickly, reaching out to take my hand. "After what happened with my parents, my father had me see a therapist in our pack. It helped me work through a lot of what happened with them. I'm not saying it's a cure, but you might be able to get a handle on what triggers your anxiety and find ways to cope and work through it."

"There's a guidance counselor here at school you could try talking to," Katy added.

“And there’s no pressure,” Tate went on. “You talk about whatever you’re ready to talk about.”

I swallowed, letting the idea settle even as doubt crept in from the corners of my mind. “But ... but what if they don’t believe me?”

“After what happened to you last semester? There isn’t a single person in the school who would doubt your story,” Katy said honestly.

She must have seen the panic starting on my face because she was quick to add, “No one knows specifics. They don’t know what happened to you before, or really even the pack you came from.”

Tate’s face broke into a smile and she giggled. “My favorite theory is you had a stalker that was obsessed with you, and you jumped off a cliff rather than be with him.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

Larkin clicked her tongue. “Or the one where Skye was being kidnapped to be Trace’s new mate? You know, since his dad lost Remy’s mom to Gabe, they needed to even the score.”

“You can’t be serious,” I sputtered, at a loss for words. Were people really speculating this?

Katy rolled her eyes, shaking her long hair out. “I swear, people will never get over that stupid fight from when my parents were younger.”

“It did fuel the fire between our packs,” Larkin commented with a shrug. “Blackwater and Norwood have a lot of bad history, and your parents are a part of it.”

“Basically everyone thinks it was a fight for your honor that got way out of hand,” Tate finished, still grinning at me. “I even heard a few guys say they wished they had known it was a contest because they would have tried for a shot with you.”

“Stupid boys,” Katy muttered. “Why do they always think they can fight to win a girl?”

“Um, years of normalization?” Larkin answered, her tone heavy with sarcasm. “Some packs still do that. If two males want the same female, they challenge each other for her.”

Katy looked absolutely disgusted. “Freaking medieval, archaic shit.”

“Anyway,” Tate cut in loudly, shutting them both down, “the point is, it might help you to talk to someone who can be objective and won’t judge you.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said with a thin smile as my eye caught movement

at the end of the hall.

My heart stumbled in my chest as I locked eyes with Remy.

His shoulders were set in a hard line, every inch of him looked powerful ... and exhausted. He didn't make a move towards me, though. He stood still, waiting for me to come to him. Still letting me set the pace.

This time yesterday, he would have come up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. Now there were yards and miles separating us.

I hated that separation more than I hated anything.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and took a step towards my future.

Towards my mate.

REMY WAITED FOR ME TO FINISH WALKING TO HIM BEFORE TURNING AND heading outside, holding the door for me. Neither of us spoke as we walked back to the cabin. Where typically I would have held Remy's hand and leaned into his warmth while walking through the snowy Montana trail that led back to the cabin, I trailed behind him by a foot in silence.

Awkwardness and uncertainty lay like a giant, immovable object between us that I needed to overcome.

No, that I needed to *destroy* before it ruined us.

The cabin was warm inside as we took off our wet boots by the door, dropping them onto a water absorbent rug before moving hesitantly into the main room.

It still bore the traces of the sleepover the night before. Pillows, blankets, and random articles of clothing were shoved to the corners of the room in a haphazard attempt to clean up before we all headed to our first morning classes.

Walking to the couch, I sank into the corner of it, letting the worn cushions comfort me as I shivered. My bones were cold, but I knew it had nothing to do with the frigid temperature outside and everything to do with the anxiety rolling through my system like a never-ending series of tsunamis.

I watched as Remy moved towards me, but paused by the couch, clearly debating if he should sit with me on the couch or across the room from me in a chair.

My heart sank at his indecision.

I had done this. This divide hanging between us—literal, physical,

emotional—was on me, and it was on me to fix it.

“Please, sit,” I begged softly, reaching out for him.

I still couldn’t get a read on his expression as he sat down beside me, near but not touching. His face was guarded, watching me for cues and tics.

His alpha face was what I called it. How he looked when he didn’t want to let people know what he was thinking, and when he was hanging back to assess the situation.

“I’m sorry,” I started, taking in a deep breath and steeling my spine. I owed it to both of us to own my meltdown and the current rift between us.

A line formed between his eyebrows; the first crack in his blank façade. “Skye, I don’t want you to be *sorry*.”

Swallowing, I pushed down the rising panic clawing at my insides. “But I am sorry. I reacted badly, and then I freaked out.”

He exhaled through his nose, his mouth pressed into a hard line.

I pressed on, needing him to understand it was my fault. “I should have told you what happened. Where my head was, but I just kind of shut down.”

“It happened so fast,” he murmured, shaking his head. “I didn’t know if I hurt you or—”

“No,” I said quickly, reaching out and grabbing his hand in mine before he could finish that thought. “God, no. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s *me*.”

“Baby, you gotta walk me through this,” he replied, his dark eyes locked onto mine. The pain in his eyes slashed through my chest. “I thought we were on the same page. Then you were shaking and crying and yelling at me like I was forcing you—”

I flinched at that, jerking my hand back and wrapping my arms around myself.

Remy froze, his jaw going slack for a second. “Is that it?” he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. “Did you think I would *force* you to do something?”

“No.” The word was barely audible between us. My voice was a whisper, twisted by horror and revulsion at the idea of Remy ever hurting me.

But in that moment, pinned underneath Remy, it wasn’t *him* that I felt touching me. It was the hands of people who had tormented me most of my life touching my skin. My brain couldn’t differentiate the past from the present.

He shot to his feet, putting more space between us as he paced to the

fireplace before spinning around to stare at me.

“Jesus Christ,” he hissed, raking a hand through his dark hair. “Don’t you know I would *never* do that? I’ve told you that we’ll take this at *your* pace. All you have to do is say ‘no’ and everything stops.”

“It wasn’t like that!” I exclaimed, getting frustrated by how quickly this was spiraling out of control.

“That’s sure as hell what it seemed like,” he replied, spreading his arms wide. “If you didn’t want to do something, all you had to do was say so.”

“That’s not ...”

Fuck.

This was getting out of hand. He just wasn’t getting it, or maybe I wasn’t explaining it right.

“I *was* fine,” I said slowly, measuring my words. “I thought I would *be* fine. That I could handle it.”

His eyes went wide, incredulous. “What the hell does that mean? You were just going to lay there and endure it? Pray it would be over quick? Am I supposed to be thankful you were just going to take whatever I gave?”

“God dammit, Remy!” I finally shouted. “It wasn’t *you*. It was *me*. I ... the position we were in ... I had a flashback of something that happened before. It happened over two years ago. It wasn’t *you*. It was *me*.”

He went statue-still. “What?”

My knees turned to jelly, and I fell back down onto the couch. I buried my face in my hands, wanting to crawl under the couch as tears burned hotly in my eyes. Humiliation swamped me, weighing me down.

“This morning was amazing. I loved every second of it,” I said quietly, forcing myself to drag the memory of Cassian, Preston and Marc into this moment with us. “But when you rolled us over and pinned me ... All of the sudden I was fifteen again, and Cassian and his friends had me pinned down like *that*. The things they did ...” I swallowed, unable to look at him as my voice dropped to a whisper. “It wasn’t you, it was a flashback.”

The silence in the room was a terrifying, palpable thing. The world stopped moving around me. The only sound was the soft humming from the refrigerator in the kitchen.

After several agonizing minutes, I slowly lowered my fingers and looked at Remy.

He looked absolutely crushed.

All I could do was manage a strangled apology *again*. “I’m so sorry.”

That snapped him into motion. He was in front of me and kneeling directly in front of me in seconds. His hands shook as his dark eyes bore into me.

“Do not ever apologize to me for what happened to you before,” he said fiercely.

I blinked and twin tears fell from my eyes. “But I keep ruining things. This morning was incredible, and then I messed it all up—”

“Skye, stop.” His tone was so strong and firm that I immediately complied, both my wolf and I submitting to our mate.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” he said, his voice kinder and gentler now as both hands reached out to frame my face. He held me in place so I couldn’t look away. “I know you’ve had a lot of bad shit in your past. I know there’s a lot you haven’t told me, and that’s fine. You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

I couldn’t imagine a time I would *ever* be ready to share with him all the things that had happened to me.

He exhaled. “But I didn’t think there might be things that could trigger you. That’s on me. I should have expected that.”

“Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?” I demanded, grabbing his forearms with my hands as his thumbs swept away more tears from my cheeks. “You shouldn’t have to anticipate your girlfriend having a nervous breakdown because you kissed her.”

“This is all still new, baby,” he replied honestly. The concern and understanding in his expression was both healing and destroying me. “There’s still a lot we don’t know about each other. I thought this morning was about me doing something you didn’t like. I didn’t even think it could be something from your past.”

My eyes slid shut, my head dropping forward. “So, it’s always going to be like this? You walking on eggshells, trying to get a read on me before you do anything?”

His forehead touched mine, the touch instantly soothing. “No. But we have plenty of time. We just need to work on communicating.”

With a groan, I pulled away and flopped back on the couch. “But I don’t *want* that. I want to be *normal*. It’s not fair to you that you’re stuck with—”

“Jesus,” Remy muttered, sitting down beside me and pulling me onto his lap in one fluid motion. His nose nearly brushed mine, and I could feel his warm breath fanning across my face.

“I’m not *stuck* with you, Skye,” he informed me tersely. “Even without

the bond? I choose *you*. I love *you*.”

“I love you, too,” I replied automatically. “But—”

“No. No *buts*. You and me. We’ll figure this out as we go. You just can’t shut me out,” he said fiercely. “I will never judge you for what happened before. And while I wish like hell I could kill that fucker, you already handled that problem.”

I snorted out a laugh, the knot tightness in my chest easing up for the first time all day.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “I’m sorry.”

His eyes flashed. “I told you—”

Quickly, I covered his mouth with my fingertips, silencing him. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you what was going on. It wasn’t fair. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He raised a brow at me, challenging that thought.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” I corrected, smiling back when he did. “But I shouldn’t have run out this morning and left you wondering about what happened.”

There was absolutely no way to doubt the love in his eyes. He nipped once at my fingers before kissing them. “Apology accepted.”

The knot of tension was almost gone. I drew in a deep breath, glad that burden was gone.

“How about if going forward, I check in to make sure you’re okay?” Remy suggested, his voice going husky in a way that made my toes curl and my insides quiver.

But still ... ugh. That sounded pretty unromantic.

“I don’t want you to have to always check with me.” Now I just sounded whiny.

Remy took in stride, even grinning. His gaze swept hotly down my body. “It might not be so bad.”

I huffed out a laugh a second before his lips landed on my neck.

His teeth scraped the tender skin of my throat before his mouth and tongue slid along the flesh, pressing blisteringly hot, open-mouthed kisses along it.

I gasped, arching into the touch as he lifted his head. Pleasure unfurled in me, sending ripples of heat and awareness through my system.

“This okay?” he murmured before repeating the action on the other side of my neck.

“Um, yeah,” I whispered, my hands finding his shoulders and grabbing tight as my bones melted against him.

I could feel his lips curve into a smile against me as his hand slid along the outside of my thigh, stroking up to my hip.

“Still okay?”

“Definitely.” My voice broke as my head fell back, silently offering him more access.

His lips moved to my jaw as his hand slid around to my back, slipping under my sweater and tracing the line of my spine with the rough tips of his fingers. He pressed his palm flat against the small of my back as I arched towards him.

“Still?”

Was he serious?

My hands went to his head, tangling in his hair as I pulled his mouth to mine. A warm chuckle escaped him a second before his mouth slanted across mine, his tongue sweeping inside to devour me.

The hand on my back slipped up higher until it was wrapped around the back of my neck. He took advantage so he could angle my head just where he wanted it.

The collar of my sweater pulled at the front of my throat where it was being stretched under his powerful arm. I was seconds away from ripping the sweater off even as alarm bells rang somewhere in the clouded recesses of my brain.

His teeth caught my lower lip and tugged gently before pulling away.

“Remy.” His name was a whispered plea even as the bells kept going off in my head.

No, *not* in my head.

Actual bells were going off.

Blinking my eyes open I saw Remy smiling up at me with a totally satisfied male grin. He shifted us, reaching into his pocket for his phone. He turned off the alarm he had set before giving me a sheepish look.

“Lunch is almost up. We need to get to class before they send out a search party for *us*.”

My wolf howled in my chest, not wanting to let him go.

I get it, girl.

Remy stood up, taking me with him and holding me in his arms for a second, full on bridal style in the middle of the living room.

“We’re good?” he asked, but there didn’t seem to be any doubt lingering in him as his eyes roved over me.

I made a face. “We’d be better if the alarm didn’t go off.”

Laughing, he set me down, but pulled me close again for another lingering kiss that had me rocking to the balls of my feet when he broke it.

“Tease,” I muttered, but I was smiling.

The knot of stress in my chest was almost completely untangled, but I absolutely hated these moments with Remy; the moments when I would lose it and there would be some serious soul-bearing after. But I couldn’t deny that every time I told him something else the weight got a little bit lighter to shoulder.

And I felt even closer to Remy.

“Are you going to class or do you have more meetings?” I asked as we started pulling our shoes and coats on again.

He shook his head. “No, I’ll be in class. The guard reinforcements showed up this morning so we were getting them all up to speed on what was going on.”

I opened the front door to a frigid blast of air. “Does that mean no more personal escorts?”

He shook his head, pulling the door shut behind us. He grabbed my hand in his as we headed down the front stairs.

“Nope. We’ve assigned a protective detail to the dorms and tripled the amount of perimeter guards.”

“Tripled?” That caught me by surprise.

“The packs all sent extra guards,” he replied as we walked down the snowy path. “We’re keeping some shifted to keep to the woods and mountains, just to be safe, but there’s a full perimeter set up with a rotating shift of guards. No one is getting in or out without us knowing.”

“You think that’s necessary?” I leaned against his arm, letting his bigger body shield me from some of the wind.

“I’m not taking any chances.” His hand tightened around mine.

“But we’ve still lost our personal escorts around campus?” I pressed. Katy would be happy about that.

“For now,” he replied. “But only as long as you’re on campus. Any off-campus trips to town have to be approved by the alphas, and we’ll send a group of guards along.”

I nodded, digesting that. I didn’t have any plans to go into town, but it

was sort of freeing to know the school grounds were safe.

Remy sighed and pulled us to a stop. He moved around in front of me, blocking all of the icy wind. “Can I ask you a favor?”

The seriousness of his tone took me by surprise. “Of course,” I answered.

“Just don’t go off on your own for a little while?” His chest rose as he held his breath, waiting for my answer.

“Should we still be worried?” I asked softly.

He shook his head. “No, but it still has me on edge, and I just need to know you’re safe. I’ll have a lot of meetings with the guards and the other alphas to make sure everything is going okay, and it would help knowing you’re protected.”

“Tell you what,” I said slowly, “if I’m not with my friends, I’ll be with my boyfriend. He’s kind of a badass and would probably keep me safe.”

“Probably?” His brown eyes lit with laughter.

I pretended to think about it, tapping a finger on my chin as I looked up at the skelton canopy of trees. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Brat,” he muttered under his breath before kissing me hard.

EYEING THE STREAMERS AND GIANT BANNER HUNG OVER THE FIREPLACE, I sipped my soda and wondered if Katy had gone overboard with Maren's *Welcome Home* party. If she had, the cabin full of teenagers didn't seem to care as they invaded the Brooks Ridge cabin on Friday night.

That, or they were as relieved as I was to finish the first week of school without any other incidents.

Music was pumping from a stereo in the main room, and the furniture had been shoved to the perimeter of the room to set up a makeshift dance floor. Almost every pack was present at the party that was now spilling outside onto the back deck where it looked like some guys were competing to see who could sit in the snow the longest.

Ainsley was smiling as she walked over to me. Her hair hung over her shoulder like a curtain of caramel silk against the white cashmere of her sweater. She looked completely at ease in the midst of the party while I hung on the fringes, perched on the arm of the sofa near the big picture window of the Brooks Ridge cabin. I couldn't see anything in the dark, but the window was a cool contrast to the heat all these shifter bodies were giving off.

"Not a partier?" Ainsley asked, standing to my side as she sipped something that smelled alcoholic and fruity.

"Not really," I said wryly.

She took another drink. "Where's Remy?"

"With Dante." I jerked my head towards the stairs that they had ascended a few minutes earlier. Something about pack business with a few other alphas following them.

Ainsley offered me her cup. "Want to try?"

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. "I'm good, thanks."

The smile she gave me back was warm and genuine, a vast contrast to the venomous girl I met when I first came to the school.

"God, they're adorable."

I looked up to see what—or *who*—Ainsley was talking about.

With a grin, Rhodes spun Larkin around in a circle before pulling her back into his arms. I watched her head tip back as she laughed, happy and completely at ease. He kept her pressed tight against his body, which was probably for the best since I had witnessed Larkin's interesting form of dancing when we first arrived.

The circle that cleared a space around her was more for everyone's safety than to watch her, although there were definitely some odd looks thrown in before Rhodes stepped in and joined her.

Again, another significant change in our pack dynamics from last semester.

I sipped my soda, smiling into my cup at how perfect they were for each other.

"Where *is* she?" Katy demanded with a sigh, coming up to us and peering outside around me to the window. She glanced down at her watch with a frown. "Her plane landed four hours ago. It takes a little less than two hours to get here from the airport."

"You realize it's snowing like crazy, right?" Ainsley pointed out, jerking her chin at the window. "They're calling for another foot of snow."

Katy waved a dismissive hand. "But this is Montana. They know how to handle snow."

"Still," I said, siding with Ainsley. "They're probably taking their time and being safe. They shut down the airport an hour ago, so we were lucky her flight could even land."

Katy pulled her phone out of her pocket and quickly fired off a text message. A second later she groaned. "Freaking mountains. There's like, zero cell service out there. All her messages keep coming back as undelivered."

Ainsley choked down a laugh beside me. "Want me to grab you a drink?"

"No," she replied, her eyes flaring wide for a second before she shoved her phone into the back pocket of her jeans with one hand and grabbed me with the other. "Let's dance."

With a shout of approval, Ainsley downed the rest of her drink and set the

empty cup on the window sill.

“No, no,” I said quickly, trying to pull away from Katy, but Ainsley grabbed my other arm.

“Guys, I can’t dance,” I told them quickly, my heart pounding faster than the bass spilling from the vibrating speakers.

It was the truth. Thanks to my upbringing, dancing was something I really hadn’t ever done. Since moving to Blackwater, my mom was prone to turning on the radio and dancing around the apartment when I was home, but I never joined in.

Glancing at the girls, and a lot of the guys, on the dance floor, I knew there was no way my body could move with the same fluid grace theirs did. The idea of even attempting it felt strange and dangerous.

The last thing I needed was to be the coma girl who danced like a dying flamingo.

“We’ll teach you,” Katy said, not accepting my refusal. She grabbed my cup and set it down.

Ainsley nodded and arched a brow. “Trust me. I’m a great dancer. I used to take classes.”

“She really is,” Katy added with a grin. “You should give Larkin some pointers, too.”

I glanced over to see Rhodes pull her back before she smacked someone’s head while waving her hands.

“I’m not a miracle worker,” Ainsley replied bluntly to Katy, shaking her head. “That girl may be a freaking genius, but she has zero rhythm and coordination. But I think I can work with Skye.”

Which was how I found myself standing in the middle of a mass of gyrating bodies.

Ainsley came up behind me and settled her hands on my hips. She leaned into my ear and said, “Just follow what we do.”

Katy came closer to my front with a contagious smile. She flipped her russet hair over one shoulder. “Just feel the beat and move.”

Ainsley added pressure to my sides, moving my hips in time with hers, knees slightly bent. My arms hung limply at my sides as I rocked awkwardly from side to side.

With a loud laugh, Katy shook her head. “Stop thinking so much. You look like you’re in pain.”

“I look like an idiot,” I shot back.

“Because you aren’t trying,” Ainsley answered, stopping behind me. “Okay, close your eyes.”

Still feeling ridiculous and wanting my spot on the couch back, I sighed and closed my eyes.

“Feel the beat? That *thump-thump*?” She tapped the side of my arm in time with the heavy bass.

I nodded. It was hard not to feel the way the beat echoed in my bones.

“Music and dancing is all about getting in touch with yourself,” Ainsley added, slowly walking around me. “It’s about feeling and sensing. There is no right or wrong way to dance.”

“Except when Lark does it,” Katy interrupted with a laugh.

“Except then,” Ainsley agreed. “Just let the music flow through you and move.”

Easy for her to say.

“You’re doing it now,” she pointed out smugly and my eyes flew open to see her right in front of me.

“I wasn’t dancing.”

“Your head was swaying to the beat, your foot tapping. You feel the rhythm. You need to sever that connection between your head and your heart and just *feel*.”

Ainsley danced back, her hips swaying seductively, her hands running up her body as she moved with the beat of the music seamlessly.

Katy gave a low whistle and leaned into me. “If Maren doesn’t come back soon, I may hook up with Ainsley.”

Ainsley laughed, twirling around. “I’m too high maintenance for you.” She made her way back to me. “Now, Skye, close your eyes and let go.”

My stomach flipped nervously. “But—”

Ainsley gave me a look. “Let. Go.”

With a groan, I closed my eyes because if I was doing this, the last thing I wanted was to see the eyes of everyone looking at me.

Feel the rhythm, I told myself. It became a chant in my head until I realized Ainsley was right—I had been bouncing my head to the rhythm.

Inhaling slowly, I let go, slowly rotating my hips the way I had been watching everyone else do. Eyes closed, I let my other senses take over.

I could feel the heat of the bodies pressed in around me. Instead of it being stifling, it was sultry. Hot, I ran my hands up my body and lifted my hair off my neck, letting cool air wash over my exposed skin for a second

before I dropped my hair back down.

“That’s it,” Ainsley encouraged, her hands going to my hips again as Katy closed in behind me. The three of us found a rhythm dancing together.

“This is fun!” I admitted with a laugh, finally opening my eyes to see most people didn’t care that I was dancing.

A few guys were staring, but I figured that was more from watching three girls grinding against each other.

Katy and Ainsley let me go, the three of us still dancing together, not caring about the crowd around us. The song changed to something with a heavier beat and several people cheered at the track change.

“Here we go,” Ainsley said with a groan, looking over my shoulder.

“What?” I asked.

A second later, I got what had her complaining as several guys came up, attempting to dance with us. Katy and Ainsley swatted them away, dismissing them without missing a step. One guy even went as far as to wrap his arms around Ainsley, but she stepped back hard onto his foot and whirled around to level him with a glare that sent him stumbling away.

I remembered being on the receiving end of that look a few times last semester; it wasn’t pretty.

Thank God those days were over.

No one touched me, though. In fact, most of the guys studiously avoided my gaze. Those that actually did make eye contact quickly looked away, and they absolutely did not touch me.

“I actually feel bad for these guys,” Katy said, her cheeks flushed a soft pink from the heat of the dancers and moving around.

Ainsley arched a brow.

“Three of the hottest girls dancing together? Spank bank material for years. And they only have a shot with Ainsley since I’m clearly Team Pride and Skye is basically married to an alpha who would gouge someone’s eyes out for looking too long.” Katy’s dimples flashed.

My jaw dropped. “No, he wouldn’t.”

Ainsley licked her lips. “I wouldn’t mind having a hot mate who would rip these idiots apart for touching me.”

Something in me smiled at that, loving that I didn’t have to deal with a lot of male attention since Remy and I were not only bonded, but he was an alpha and definitely not one another guy would challenge.

But a small part of my brain locked on Ainsley’s description that he was

‘hot’. Which, of course Remy was beyond hot, but no female should be looking at him. He was mine.

Ours.

My wolf growled the single syllable in my head, definitely not a fan of anyone looking at Remy.

Taking a deep breath, I shook off the overwhelming sense of possessiveness that surged up.

I really needed to talk to Elias about the mating bond because I was getting more and more territorial when it came to Remy. My wolf wanted to claim ownership, and I was having a hard time reminding myself owning people was a *bad* thing.

Unfortunately Elias wasn’t coming back to campus until next week. Remy had told me that he was currently working with a few smaller packs that were more isolated and nearing extinction, preparing for the Summit in a few months where he would give a recap to the Alphas attending.

“Incoming,” Katy warned.

Ainsley stiffened, and I watched the guy approaching her from behind. He was tall and I recognized him, but I couldn’t remember his name. He definitely wasn’t one of our pack, but he was zeroed in on Ainsley in a way that said he didn’t care *what* pack she was from.

At the last second, his eyes went big and he turned and quickly hurried the other direction.

Strong hands slid around my waist, pulling me against a hard chest. The body behind me fell into step with my body as I danced, fitting us together like two pieces of a puzzle.

Remy.

I inhaled deeply, relaxing against him. His steady heartbeat thumped against my back as his large hands settled low on my hips.

“Having fun?” I could feel the words rumble from his chest, hear the smirk in his tone.

“More fun now,” I admitted truthfully, lifting an arm and looping it around his neck, keeping his mouth close to my ear.

His lips grazed the side of my throat. A full body shiver rippled through me as I pulled him closer.

“When can we leave?” he asked, his voice definitely huskier. He rocked his hips into mine, and it was all I could do not to grab his hand and drag him out of the room now.

“Soon,” I managed to get out. His hips rolled against my ass again. I swallowed audibly. “Definitely soon.”

Remy spun me around in his arms so fast I almost lost my footing. He steadied me with sure hands, his full mouth lifting into a soft smile that almost made my knees buckle again. The white of his thin henley was a vivid contrast to his tanned skin.

I wound my arms around his neck, pressing my chest to his, arching into his touch. His hands slid down my hips slowly, his eyes on mine the whole time, gauging me for any reaction.

My eyes slid shut as his hands slid into the back pockets of my jeans, and he pulled me closer by sliding a thigh between mine. His hands squeezed my ass through the denim.

Holy shit.

“This okay?” he asked softly.

My eyes snapped open, and I nodded so fast I probably looked like a bobble head doll.

His eyes glittered. “Good.”

I tilted my head up, not giving a damn that Katy was still dancing near us or that we were in the middle of a group of people.

I wanted his mouth on mine *now*.

There was no missing the smugness in his smile. Especially not when he lifted the leg between mine barely an inch. But the sudden friction right *there* had my vision blurring as I gasped a ragged breath.

“Still okay?” His teeth nipped lightly at my earlobe after he whispered the question to me.

Was what okay?

My mind was spinning, my world narrowing until it was just us. I was vaguely aware that we were still dancing, sort of, but all I could feel was the bass and Remy.

Chuckling, he kissed under my jaw, his lips moving down to the pulse fluttering erratically in my throat. “Guess that’s a yes?”

I bit my lower lip as a groan started low in my chest.

“We should go,” I managed to get out.

“I thought we were leaving *soon*,” he replied, his tone teasing. He readjusted his stance, rocking his hips into mine while pulling me down to grind against the hard muscle of his leg.

“Now is better,” I said quickly. I was going to go up in flames any

second.

With a laugh, Remy lifted his head and looked down at me a second before his lips captured mine. I moaned into his mouth, not giving a damn who heard, as his tongue slid against mine. He licked into my mouth hungrily, devouring me as he pulled me down onto that unyielding leg again.

I tore my mouth from his on a ragged gasp. “We need to—”

“—go,” he finished firmly, his eyes feverish with lust.

His hands slid out of my pockets as he stepped back, his leg slipping from between mine, and I bit back a groan of frustration. He grabbed my hand in his and started pulling me through the crush of bodies to the front door.

Most of the bodies quickly parted a path when they saw him coming, which was good, since Remy didn’t seem to be slowing down for anything.

His hand closed on the front door and he jerked the door open. The cold air swept over my heated skin, but it did nothing to actually cool me off.

Remy stopped so fast I ran into his back. Finding my footing, I peered around his shoulder to see one of the teachers standing in front of the door.

My eyes went wide as I looked behind me at the partying teenagers, wondering exactly how much trouble we were going to be in.

“Mr. Hendricks,” Remy said, not seeming concerned at all that a teacher was standing there.

He cleared his throat. “Remy, I’m glad you’re here. Is Dante inside?”

Remy nodded slowly, his spine going stiff. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been an accident,” Mr. Hendricks explained, his right eye twitching.

“What kind of accident?” I asked softly, a sinking feeling settling in my stomach.

Mr. Hendricks glanced at me and then back to Remy. “The SUV bringing Maren back to campus slid off the road and flipped into a ditch a few miles outside the school grounds. A teacher coming back from town noticed the car. The driver died on impact. There’s no sign of Maren.”

“What do you mean ‘no sign’?” Remy demanded, crossing his massive arms over his wide chest.

Mr. Hendricks actually took a step back, his eyes dropping in deference. “We think she may have been thrown from the car. We need to send out search parties.”

I looked past the teacher where snow was still falling steadily, heavily. The temperature was forecasted to dip into the negatives tonight. If Maren

was hurt or unconscious in the snow, she might not have much time left.

REMY SPUN AROUND, HIS EYES ALREADY SEARCHING THE CROWD. HIS MOUTH tightened when his gaze landed on Katy, who was still dancing and laughing with Ainsley. A second later he looked down at me.

“Dante’s still upstairs. Can you get him? I’ll grab Katy and shut the party down.” He barely finished the sentence before he was moving past me to get to his sister.

I turned and headed for the stairs. The music died by the time I was halfway up them, a few dancers complaining loudly at the sudden silence. Once at the landing, I looked at the open and closed doors wondering where Dante could be.

Thankfully he stepped out of a room down the hall a second later, rubbing the back of his neck. He frowned when he saw me, his hand falling to his side.

“What’s wrong?”

I took a deep breath. “There was an accident. Maren’s missing.”

It was a little scary how fast Dante went from relaxed to intense, his already sharp features hardening as he ran down the hallway, brushing past me and hurrying down the stairs as I followed behind as close as I could.

“We need to go look for her *now!*” Katy yelled shrilly as I reached the bottom.

Remy was holding her by the shoulders, half comforting, half holding her back from running out the door. Mr. Hendricks had come inside and was talking to Dante. The group of partying teens had gone eerily silent.

“Move!” A sharp voice snapped, and the crowd parted for Tate and Ryder

as they came in from the backyard.

“Someone said Maren was in an accident?” Tate demanded, coming up behind Dante as he spoke quietly with Mr. Hendricks.

I made my way through the quiet group of teens until I was at Katy’s side.

“Remy, we have to go look for her,” Katy urged, her voice teetering on the edge of hysterical. She yanked on his arms uselessly, trying to break free as Rhodes and Larkin came up behind her.

“Shh,” Larkin soothed, stroking her back gently.

Remy’s eyes cut to me. I didn’t need to shift to read his mind.

I gave a short nod, wrapping my arms around Katy’s waist as he let her go and stalked back to where Dante, Ryder, and Tate were furiously talking with Mr. Hendricks.

Katy turned to me, her dark eyes huge against her pale face. “Skye—” Her voice broke as she whispered my name, my heart squeezing at the despair in her expression.

“We’ll find her,” I promised quickly, praying to anyone listening that I could keep that vow.

A sharp, ear-piercing whistle made the entire room flinch in tandem. Seconds later, the remaining Brooks Ridge pack emerged from the crowd and swiftly followed their alpha out the door.

Katy jerked against me, ready to follow them.

“Listen up!” Remy barked, turning around and commanding the attention of the room. “There’s been an accident. One of us is missing. We’re sending out scouts from each pack to track her. Five minutes until we move out.”

Remy’s gaze caught mine and he jerked his chin at us. Like a trained unit, the four of us moved to him, following him outside and down the stairs. Seconds later, the rest of our pack joined us.

“Remy—” Katy started.

He held up a hand to silence her. “You’re coming with us,” he told her, his dark eyes sympathetic as he watched her.

Katy gave a sharp nod, squaring her shoulders as she shored up her resolve. Her skin was almost ashen, but there was no missing the determined glint in her eye.

“Larkin, can you and the twins take the rest of the pack back to the cabin? Once we know anything, I’ll call you and let you guys know. Make sure everyone sticks together,” Remy told her, his gaze moving back to where

Konnor and Kyle stood off to the side.

“Of course,” Larkin said, her eyes going from me to Rhodes.

“Will, Rhodes, and Skye are coming with us. Let’s go!” He turned and started moving quickly through the snow, back towards our cabin.

The majority of the pack followed Larkin inside while I went with Remy and the others to where the truck was parked around the back.

“We should just shift and run,” Katy said, frustration lacing her tone as Remy and Rhodes worked to clear the snow from the SUV.

“They’re miles away,” Will told her, brushing snow from the windshield. “It’s snowing like crazy. Fastest way is to drive there.”

I stepped forward, helping them clear the rest of the snow from the truck with my bare hands until they ached.

We all quickly climbed wordlessly into the car. I snapped my seatbelt into place as Remy shifted the car into drive and started forward, the chains around the tires crunching across the snow.

Glancing over my shoulder, I exchanged a worried look with Rhodes, who quickly wrapped a supportive arm around Katy’s thin shoulders as she shivered.

None of us had bothered getting our coats before we ran out the door, the mix of fear and adrenaline keeping us warm until now.

“How far away?” Will asked, his eyes already focused on the world outside the cab as he squinted to see through the darkness as more snow fell heavily around us.

It took several minutes before we pulled away from the large front gates of the school, joining several other SUVs and trucks heading down the road to where Maren had crashed.

“Mr. Hendricks said a couple miles outside the grounds,” Remy answered, his knuckles white around the steering wheel as he tried to go as fast as possible without sliding off the road. There were easily twenty miles between the front gates of GPA and the outer edge of the boundary lines of the property.

I exchanged a look with Remy. He was doing the math, too. It would take us longer than anyone wanted to get to where the accident was, but driving would still be better than trying to run through snow up to our bellies if we shifted first.

Katy leaned forward. “Hurry up, Rem.”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” he replied, jaw clenched.

The wipers on the windshield furiously tried to keep the snow from blocking his vision, but it was a losing battle. The snow was too heavy and too dense for him to drive more than thirty miles per hour.

I reached across the consol between us, letting my hand rest on top of his rock hard thigh as he drove. A small shudder rippled down his body, but he relaxed a fraction at my touch. I stroked my thumb against the rough denim of his jeans absently as I tried to keep my thoughts positive.

The drive took forever between the tension in the SUV and the blinding snow outside. All the terrain blended together in a world of white snow, pitch black darkness, and the red glow from the taillights of the caravan of trucks we were leading into the night. Several times Remy had to ease off the gas as the truck started to slide.

“We’re almost a mile out,” Remy murmured, not needing to raise his voice to be heard amongst the silence. “When we get there, everyone shift. Katy and I will take one direction, Skye, Rhodes, and Will the other direction.”

His eyes cut quickly to mine and he tapped his temple. I nodded. We would still be able to communicate if one of us found Maren.

As we rounded the corner, bright red and blue lights lit up the sky around us.

“Fuck,” Remy swore, the leather of the steering wheel protesting under his unforgiving grip.

“What?” I asked as we pulled up with other vehicles.

“Cops,” he said with a sigh. His eyes lifted to the rearview mirror and he slowly shook his head.

“No!” Katy yelled, already trying to scramble over Rhodes.

Remy twisted in his seat with a grunt. “Katy—” He managed to push her back into Rhodes before she could reach the front of the cab.

“Fuck you!” Katy hissed, fighting against Rhodes with everything she had.

I spun around in my seat, stunned to see how completely out of control Katy was. Her dark eyes were wild with fear and anger. “Katy, stop!”

“Calm down,” Rhodes said gently, wincing when her nails caught his forearm and drew blood.

I reached out for Katy as a fisted hand knocked against my window. With a gasp, I whirled around, stunned to see a man standing next to me, a wide brimmed hat covering his face as a gust of wind whipped more snow around.

My window slowly lowered as Remy pressed the button, his shoulder rubbing mine as he leaned across me.

“Deputy,” he greeted in a level voice.

The deputy ducked his head closer to the window, his cold blue eyes sweeping across all of us before landing on Remy. “You kids need to turn around and head back to the school.”

“We just came from there,” Remy said calmly, almost nonchalant. “A friend of ours is missing. We came out here to help look.”

“We already know about the accident and the missing girl,” the man replied firmly, his jaw set. “The department is already here, and we’ve called in state help. We’re working on sending a team out for her.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Remy went on evenly, “we know this land and might be able to help.”

The deputy squared his shoulders. “The last thing we need is a bunch of teenagers getting lost out here, too.”

“You don’t understand,” Katy started from the backseat.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you go back and wait where it’s warm and safe? I promise we’ve already called in the best in the state to look for your friend. The middle of a storm is no place for you kids to play hero.”

“We aren’t going anywhere without our friend,” Katy snapped.

The deputy’s eyes narrowed. “Honey, I wasn’t offering a suggestion. You kids turn this car around and go back to the school, or I can assign another deputy to drive you to the station where you can wait for your parents to come and collect you. They’ll have to personally sign each of you out of our custody.”

His lips quirked into a thin, condescending smile. “I hear you all attend a boarding school, so it might be awhile before your parents sign for your release.”

“Understood,” Remy said quietly. “Thank you.”

The deputy tipped his hat and started back towards the flashing lights as I wound the window back up.

“Fucking hell,” Rhodes muttered.

“Remy, we need to get out there,” Katy urged, reaching up to grab his arm.

“We can’t.” Remy pulled away and put the truck in drive, turning around slowly and heading back for the school. The rest of the cars followed.

“What the hell are you doing?” Katy screamed, reaching for him again,

but Will and Rhodes pulled her back. “Maren is back there!”

My heart was pounding in my chest as I touched his shoulder. “Remy.”

His hands flexed around the steering wheel. “The locals are there. If we try to interfere, they’ll arrest us.”

“Then pull over, and we can shift!” Katy snapped, still struggling.

“And have a bunch of armed normals shooting at wolves in the dark?” He shook his head. “We can’t. I’m sorry, Katy.”

“No!” Katy yelled, tears in her eyes for the first time since she heard Maren was missing.

My stomach dropped as I swallowed hard. “Katy, they’ll find her.”

Her furious eyes glared back at me. “You don’t know that!”

“I’m sorry,” Remy repeated, his eyes fixed on the road—or lack of road—in front of us as he drove. The convoy that had followed us out was now behind us on the road, everyone trailing Remy back to the school.

“If Maren is hurt, I’ll *never* forgive you for this, Remy,” she threatened, her voice shaking as hard as she was.

He sighed softly, but didn’t speak.

“Let go!” Katy shrieked, finally pulling away from Rhodes and Will. She pulled her knees up to her chest, sobs tearing through her body as she cried.

Again, I reached across the console for Remy, needing to touch him.

The second my fingers touched his leg, he dropped a hand and caught mine in it, squeezing so hard I felt my bones grind together.

He was clinging to me like I was a lifeline.

I swallowed my own tears, squeezing him back, and feeling just as helpless and frustrated.

A KNEE DIGGING INTO MY BACK WOKE ME UP THE NEXT MORNING.

With a small groan, I turned in the bed, almost toppling off the edge as I looked back at the two other bodies sleeping with me.

It had taken hours for Katy to settle into a fitful sleep. Even now, her mouth was in a hard line and her brow creased as she slept in the middle of the bed. Larkin slept on her other side, the three of us squeezing into the queen sized bed in my room in the cabin.

Katy had refused to speak to Remy since we made it back. Once we got inside, she walked upstairs and slammed the door. It took over an hour for Larkin and I to convince her to open the door for us.

It took another two hours for her to stop crying, followed by nearly an hour of us trying to keep her from going down to look for Maren on her own before Remy firmly told her he would sleep in front of the door so she couldn't leave.

Which led to another ninety minutes of screaming and crying before she finally passed out right before dawn.

I sat up, slowly easing out of the bed so I didn't wake them before tiptoeing to the door and slipping out of the room. I was exhausted and definitely needed a shower. My clothes from last night felt gross against my skin, but we had all fallen asleep in whatever we had been wearing the night before.

I walked next door to Remy's room, not surprised to see the bed hadn't been slept in. He was likely sleeping in the living room by the front door so Katy wouldn't try to leave and go search for Maren on her own.

As fast as I could, I grabbed a change of clothes from one of the drawers I used in his room to stash clothes in before using the attached bathroom to take the world's fastest shower and brush my teeth.

I walked barefoot downstairs, my long hair still damp against my back.

Remy and Rhodes were already awake, both of them turning to look at me from where they were quietly talking on the couch as I came downstairs.

With a grim smile, Rhodes got off the couch. "How's Katy?"

"Asleep," I replied, shaking my head. "Larkin's still with her."

Rhodes gave an absent nod, rubbing his jaw. "I'm going to take a quick shower," he said as he walked by me.

I looked at Remy, who looked absolutely exhausted, still wearing his clothes from last night and sprawled on the couch. His hair was completely disheveled, and I had a feeling he had spent much of the night stabbing his fingers through it.

Silently, I walked across the floor until I was in front of him. I didn't hesitate as I lowered myself onto his lap, straddling him and wrapping my arms around his neck.

His arms came around me immediately, pulling me tight to his body as he hugged me. A bone deep shudder rippled through him, his breath coming out in a heavy sigh as he relaxed around me, nuzzling into the crook of my neck.

I stroked his hair, my fingers tangling in the short strands as his hand smoothed up my spine.

His lips pressed lightly against the fluttering pulse in my throat, then moved to the underside of my jaw. I tilted my head, claiming his lips with mine in a slow, lingering kiss that was definitely more comfort than passion.

But still made me shiver and crave more.

Pulling away, I smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "Any news?"

His dark eyes looked solemnly up at me. "Dante texted me an hour ago. Tate's a mess. There's no sign of Maren. The cops did what they could, but the snow was coming down too fast for a real search effort."

"The guards you had around the perimeter didn't see anything?"

He shook his head. "No. They were on the school grounds. The accident happened almost four miles outside the main gates. We've reassigned some of them to help look for Maren. Ryder is out there with them now. He's their best tracker. Dante brought Tate home to force her to get some rest, but then he's going back."

My eyes slid shut for a second as I digested the news. "Katy's not going

to take this well.”

“I can’t blame her,” he murmured, looping his fingers through the belt loops on my jeans and anchoring me to him.

“What do we do now?”

He sighed again, this one laced with frustrated bitterness. “Not much we can do. Not with the cops all over the place. Sounds like they’re calling in the National Guard to help search, but we got another foot and a half of snow last night. At this point they’re expecting a recovery, not a rescue.”

My stomach churned and flipped at the thought. “But Maren might be okay.”

“Maybe,” he allowed softly. “Dante got a look at the car. The windshield was shattered, and so was the passenger window. If she was thrown from the car ...”

I shook my head, not ready to consider that. “But they would have found her. She couldn’t have gone that far.”

“Depends on if she woke up and was disoriented. Maybe tried to walk away on her own? In that snow, injured? She could have collapsed somewhere. It snowed another foot last night.”

I shifted on his lap, my fingers curling into the soft cotton of his shirt. “Shifters can take a lot more than humans. She could still be out there, alive.”

I knew better than most did that shifters had a much higher tolerance for pain and injuries, and we healed a lot faster. It was something that was counted on by my old pack who was quite content to use and abuse omegas any way they wanted.

But it took a lot to actually kill one.

I had taken a header off a cliff and came back from it. Maren could absolutely be fine after a car accident.

“You’re right,” Remy agreed. “But it’s the cold that’s the biggest issue. If she was able to shift, she might be able to stay warm enough until we can get to her. But if she’s not, then hypothermia is a real issue. We’ll be sending out search parties until she’s found. We just have to be careful about it.”

“We need as many people looking as we can,” I murmured, my eyes going to the big picture window that showed a world of white and fresh snow.

“We need people who can be discreet,” he told me. “Especially if the authorities are involved.”

“Katy will want to go.”

He gave me a hard look. “Katy *can’t* go.”

My eyes went wide. “Good luck keeping her away.”

“She’s too emotional,” Remy said firmly. “The only way we’ll be able to look without getting caught or shot at by the cops is by keeping a low profile. Katy’s too on edge. I know my sister; she’ll take risks. Risks that could get herself or someone else killed.”

“It’s *Maren*,” I replied.

“I know,” he snapped, frustrated. “And last night it took Will *and* Rhodes to keep Katy in the car when she tried to jump out three times. She’s not thinking clearly, Skye. I can’t have her running around, putting a target on herself when there’s people with *guns* involved.”

He blew out a harsh breath. “I want Maren found, too, but not at the expense of my sister. I won’t let Katy put herself in danger.”

I bit my lower lip, knowing he was right. Katy was impulsive and reckless, and now she was desperate. But I also knew she was going to be livid and more than a little heartbroken.

“You’re going to have a hell of a time getting her to stay put,” I finally said.

A dark look crossed his face a second before he looked away.

“Remy?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he still wouldn’t look at me.

Slowly, a feeling of dread slid through me, coiling in my stomach like a living, writhing thing.

“You can’t do that,” I whispered, shaking my head slowly.

“It’s the only way.”

“Rem—”

His eyes flicked to mine, twin flames of resolve and fire. “I don’t want to, but I’m not seeing where I have a choice, Skye.”

An Alpha Command.

When issued, it was unbreakable. The stronger the Alpha, the more ironclad the Command would be to pack members. It was in our wolf DNA to submit to the Alpha, to yield to his command.

If Remy gave Katy an Alpha Command, she would be completely bound by it. Even if her human side wanted to fight it, the wolf side of her wouldn’t allow it. I had seen a few Commands issued in my old pack, and it was absolutely terrifying to watch.

I had even seen Cassian use it around school. I lived in fear for the day he

would use it on *me*. For the day he would order me to lay down and accept whatever he wanted to give or take.

He never had, though. Probably because he enjoyed it when I, or others, fought back. He got off on the struggle, in the fight of his victims.

But he also wasn't the alpha Remy was. In order for the Command to work, the alpha issuing it had to be respected amongst the pack. The stronger the alpha, the stronger the Command. An alpha's strength came from his pack.

And Blackwater was one of the strongest packs around.

"But you're not technically her Alpha. Your dad is," I said quietly. "You're the Blackwater alpha heir and the campus alpha."

He gave me a sideways look. "I can still do it. I don't want to, but I can."

"Have you done it before?" I asked curiously.

He nodded. "A few times. The first time was when Sam and Dax wouldn't shut up. They were seven, I think. I didn't even know what I had done. I just told them to shut up and they did. For two days."

A smile twisted his lips as he shook his head ruefully. "Dad had to tell me what I had done. Usually it takes a few years to get to the point where the Command is followed completely. Guess I was an early bloomer."

"You were a badass even as a kid," I muttered with a smile. I brushed my fingers through his hair and traced the curve of his cheek until he leaned into my touch.

"The last time I did was actually on Larkin," he admitted as he turned his head and kissed the inside of my wrist.

I pulled back, stunned. "You did that to *Larkin*?" Sweet, innocent Larkin who would do whatever someone asked of her?

"Sierra was bullying Larkin into writing all her assignments and homework. I told her to stop, and she did, but then she had other people bug Larkin into doing her work *and* theirs." Remy grimaced. "Rhodes was furious. I ordered Larkin not to complete another assignment for anyone else."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why didn't you just Command Sierra to leave her alone?"

"Because before you, Larkin was soft and easily manipulated. Rhodes, Katy, and I protected her as much as we could, but she was a people-pleaser. She hated making waves. The Command wasn't about controlling Larkin; it was about protecting her. It took the pressure off her having to tell people

no.” His fingers dragged across my thigh and curled around my hip. “The Larkin we know now has grown so much, and I think a lot of that is you, babe.”

“Me?” I almost choked on a laugh. “Yeah, sure. I’m the ultimate role model.”

Remy’s head tilted to the side, the morning light catching the gold flecks in his irises. “You know, I hate when you do that.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Don’t believe in yourself,” he replied softly, reaching up to cradle my jaw. “Maybe I should Command you into seeing how incredible you are, Skye Markham.”

I swallowed, feeling completely exposed as his eyes assessed me. “I don’t think it works like that.”

“Hmm,” he hummed in agreement. “Guess I’ll just have to keep reminding you.”

He pulled me down, taking his time to kiss me slowly. His teeth nipped at my lips, coaxing them apart until he could slide his tongue against mine. I sank into the moment, loving the feel of his arms around me while his mouth claimed mine.

I pulled back reluctantly, my hands braced on his chest. “Are you sure there’s no other way? With Katy, I mean?”

Remy would have no problem literally forcing Katy to stay put if he issued a Command. Katy’s wolf would obey, but it would destroy her. It would break her heart.

“I’ll talk to her first, but I know my sister. She’s not going to stop looking for Maren unless I make her.” There was no denying the sadness in his eyes.

“She’s your *sister*,” I managed.

He gave a small nod. “She is. But she’s also part of my pack. I can’t just think of my sister—I have to consider the pack.”

“So, you’ll order her to stay here?” My hands shook against him, my heart beating erratically as I struggled to accept what he was saying.

“If it comes to it,” he said evenly. His hands let me go, falling to his sides.

“It’ll come to it,” I said so softly I wasn’t sure if I spoke the words or thought them.

Until he answered, just as quietly, “I know.” His massive chest rose and fell between us as he warred with his position as alpha heir and big brother.

“Can your dad do it?” I asked, wanting to spare him what I knew would cost a lot. This could forever change his relationship with his sister.

Remy shook his head. “He’s too far away. It has to be me. It’s part of my job here, to keep the pack safe. Besides,” he added, swallowing hard, “if she has to hate someone, it might as well be me. If Maren is hurt or worse, she’ll need my parents to lean on.”

I tilted my head to the side, reaching down to thread our fingers together. “That’s still a lot to take on,” I said gently, hating that he had to do this. “Maybe if we all talk to her she’ll be willing to stay put and let you guys search?”

He gave me a sad look, a weak smile on his full lips. “You think that’ll work?”

“No,” I admitted honestly. “I just hate that it’s going to drive a wedge between you two.”

“I would hate something happening to Katy even more,” he replied, bringing my hands to his chest and holding them over his heart. “I can handle Katy hating me if it means she’s safe.”

“But you shouldn’t have to,” I said stubbornly. I tugged my hands free, sliding them down his chest to his waist. I bent over, resting my cheek against the wall of his chest, feeling his heart beating against my skin.

His arms circled me, gently cradling me to his chest. I sank into the feeling, my wolf practically purring at the affection despite the way my heart was aching for Katy and Remy.

“Maybe Maren will be found.” Wistful hope tinged my words as I spoke them.

He hummed in agreement, the sound echoing through my body as his arms tightened into steel bands around me. “I hope so.”

I lifted my head to look into those chocolate brown eyes I loved so much. “Whatever happens, I’m here, okay? I love you, and I’ll support you no matter what.”

“I know.”

I lowered my forehead to his, resting in the silence around us and trying to soak it in while it lasted. Here, like this, Remy was the only world that existed and everything would work out.

I let myself believe the lie until I heard footsteps above us. I had barely turned my head before Katy was all but tumbling down the stairs.

“Any word?” she demanded, looking around wildly like Maren was

stashed in a closet, waiting to jump out and surprise her.

Remy stood up, still holding me as he rose before gently setting me on my feet. He stepped around me to look at Katy.

“No,” he replied hoarsely. “Dante and the Brooks Ridge pack searched through most of the night. I think Ryder might still be out there, actually. But the police called in the Guard. The only thing keeping this from being a full blown media circus is the storm.”

Her eyes flashed. “So? Maybe having the media would help!”

Whoa. The last thing the shifter world ever wanted was the attention of any type of governmental body or media company.

“You know what a bad idea that would be,” he said stiffly. “One of the reasons this school works is because we lay low. We can’t call attention to ourselves. No one can know what we are, Katy.”

“I don’t give a shit about laying low, Remy!” she snapped, planting her hands on her tiny hips. “Maren is *missing*. She could be hurt. We can deal with any media fallout later on when she’s home, *safe*.”

His head dropped as he exhaled hard. “You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“Fine, but I can go and look for her!” Katy retorted, heading for the door.

Remy stepped into her path, blocking the door.

“Move, Remy,” she demanded, actually shoving his chest.

Remy didn’t budge, but I took a step back at the sudden swell of rage that surged up from within me. From my wolf.

No one touched our mate in anger, not even his sister.

My hands fisted at my sides as I tried to remind my wolf that Katy was frustrated and our friend. She wasn’t actually trying to hurt Remy.

“Katy, you can’t go look for her,” Remy said quietly.

Her face went blotchy and red with anger. “So, you’re just going to *leave* her out there?”

“We’re setting up search parties,” he explained, but quickly added, “and you won’t be part of them.”

“Why?” Her voice shook as her body went completely still.

He sighed, shaking his head. “Katy, the cops are involved. The military is involved. We need to keep our search parties off their radar, and you can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can!” she insisted.

“No, you can’t. We had to force you not to jump out of a moving car in a

blizzard last night.” He folded his arms over his massive chest, his eyes cold and flat as he watched her. “Right now, you’re too emotional. You’re a liability, Kit-Kat.”

Squaring her shoulders, Katy lifted her head, eyes blazing. “You can’t stop me.”

“Yes, I can.” His jaw locked, and he looked away for a second.

Her mouth dropped open. “You wouldn’t *dare*.”

“Katy—” He took a step towards her.

“Don’t you fucking *dare*, Remington Holt,” she hissed, shoving him again. “I will *never* forgive you.”

I forced myself to take another step back when I realized I had moved closer the angrier Katy got. I was fully ready to step in front of Remy to keep her from touching him again.

My wolf’s anger was a tangible thing, bitter on my tongue as we craved protecting him.

Not that he needed it.

Remy easily caught Katy’s tiny fists in his large hands and held her still. He could have hurt her, but it was obvious he was doing everything in his power to be gentle as he held her back. Most alphas would have her on her knees, but not Remy.

He didn’t need force or cruelty to establish dominance over his pack.

He barely lifted his voice as he said, almost simply, “I forbid it.”

Those three simple words were an atom bomb detonating in the living room. The Blackwater cabin had just become ground zero for pack fallout.

Outside, snow covered the world in a soft, glittering blanket. Inside this room it was absolute emotional carnage splattered on every single wall.

Katy wrenched her hands from him and staggered back, her normally porcelain face going ashen as he issued the Command. Her gaze swung to me, but there was nothing I could do. No comfort I could offer that would help her.

“You know when Skye went missing, no one stopped you from going to find her,” Katy hissed, tears spilling down her cheeks. A ragged sob ripped out of her chest that made Remy and I both flinch.

“But I guess it only matters when *your* girlfriend goes missing,” she seethed, not bothering to wipe away the tears.

Remy’s mouth tightened. “I know you’re angry—”

“Try fucking *furious*, big brother,” she spat.

“I promise we won’t stop looking for Maren,” he vowed. “I’ll be looking for her, Katy. I’ll call you as much as I can to give you updates.”

She lifted her chin, glaring at him. “Fuck you, Remy.”

A strangled sound escaped me. “Katy—”

She whirled on me. “Screw you, too, Skye. You’re supposed to be my best friend. You think this is okay? Do you actually agree with him?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer her. I loved Katy, but my loyalty was completely to Remy.

Besides, I knew Remy wasn’t wrong.

Katy was passionate and did everything with her whole heart. She would be reckless in looking for Maren, which could bring a lot of trouble when the mountains were crawling with military personnel who would probably love to get their hands on something supernatural or wouldn’t hesitate to shoot a wolf running through the trees.

She snorted and glared at me. “That’s what I thought.”

“This was my call, not Skye’s,” Remy said sharply, bringing her focus back to him. “Don’t take this out on her.”

“Right. Of course. *You* make the decisions. Skye’s just the puppet who does whatever you say.” She gave me a look of scorn, but I could see the hurt buried under there.

She flashed me a mocking smirk, full of bitterness and anger. “Kind of like you never left Long Mesa, huh? Traded one asshole giving you orders for another.”

I gasped, heat flushing through my body followed by ice water in my veins. It couldn’t have hurt more if she shoved a dagger into my heart.

I barely registered Remy’s deep growl or the way he pushed between us. The only reason Katy was still standing was because she was his sister, and he knew she was trying to hurt him the way he had hurt her.

But she was seriously toeing the line of too far.

“Enough,” he said coldly, his voice terrifyingly arctic. “This is *exactly* why you’re not going. You get upset and lash out like a little kid. Maren doesn’t need that, and we don’t need to babysit you while we try to find her.”

Katy’s nostrils flared, but she stayed quiet. Her gaze moved from Remy to me behind him. Regret filled her eyes as she looked at me, but I was too busy reeling from the emotional roundhouse she had just delivered to care.

After a second she looked back at Remy, her expression stony and hard. “Can I go to my own dorm? Or am I under house arrest here, alpha?”

“Go,” he snapped, jerking his head at the door.

She whirled around and stalked out the door, slamming it so hard the windows rattled in her wake.

Remy turned to me, his face thunderous, but I could see he was trying to calm himself down. I closed the distance between us, burying my face against his chest as his arms closed around me.

“She didn’t mean it,” he told me after a heavy beat of silence.

“I know.” It was hard to swallow.

“She was angry at me, not you.”

I nodded, squeezing my eyes shut against the tears that threatened. “I know.”

But it didn’t make my heart hurt any less.

REMY: *NOTHING YET*

Those two words made my heart sink as fast as it had risen. I almost dropped my lunch tray trying to pull my phone out of my pocket as it chimed that I had a new message.

SKYE: *Stay safe*

Text bubbles popped up on the phone as he started typing his reply.

REMY: *Always*

With a sigh, I dropped my cell phone face down on the table, shoving my still full lunch tray away as Larkin sat down beside me.

“That Remy?” she asked, nodding to the phone. With Rhodes out looking with Remy, the two of us were left with text messages to check in with them sporadically.

I nodded. “Still nothing.”

Larkin’s hands fell to her lap as she looked down, biting her lip. “It’s been three days since Maren went missing.”

My eyes slid shut, my stomach churning and all thoughts of eating lunch completely shoved aside.

It had been a stressful three days.

I had barely seen Remy, who had been out searching with Dante, Ryder, Tate, and the other alphas almost non-stop. They had even pulled some of the extra shifters sent to help with campus security to search as discreetly as possible.

It helped that after twenty-four hours the police made an open call to the community asking for volunteers to help with search and rescue efforts. But

Remy told me that he had overheard two deputies talking yesterday.

At this point, they weren't sure they would find *the body* until the snow started melting in the Spring. The police and National Guard were going to suspend all search activities if she wasn't found today.

I had no idea if Katy knew or not. I hadn't seen her in almost three days since she didn't come out of the dorms.

"How's Katy?" I asked softly.

Larkin grimaced, her pretty features tight and strained. "A mess." She gave me a guilty look.

"She feels awful."

"I bet," I agreed, picking up my fork and nudging my mac and cheese with it. "She loves Maren."

"I mean about what she said to you," Larkin told me gently.

I flinched, remembering the barbs she had thrown my way. I knew it was done because she was upset and angry and lashing out, but it still had ripped the scabs off a few wounds that had barely started to heal.

"It's fine," I said, forcing a smile and looking Larkin in the eyes. "I know she didn't mean it."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "I would smack her if she wasn't so wrecked right now. What she said ... She didn't mean it, but it still sucks and was messed up."

"She was mad at Remy," I replied, still trying to shrug it off.

"Which doesn't excuse taking it out on you," Larkin pointed out.

"Hurting me hurt Remy, so ..." I trailed off, not wanting to rehash it.

Honestly, I was willing to let it go. Yes, it hurt. Yes, it was mean, but I loved Katy. I had lived most of my life isolated and alone until coming here. Katy was one of my best friends, and I wasn't ready to throw our friendship away on something she said when she was upset and lashing out.

Even if part of me was wondering if that's what she really thought of me.

"Still not okay," Larkin said firmly, not willing to concede the point. "And Katy knows it. She's scared and a mess over Maren, but she also thinks you hate her."

My head snapped up. "I don't hate her."

She smiled at me. "I know that, Skye. But she feels bad, and she's dealing with a lot. Plus, she's always been close to Remy, so him ordering her to stay behind hit her hard. She feels like he betrayed her."

"But he didn't," I insisted quickly. "I love Katy, too, but she's not

thinking clearly.”

Larkin held up her hands in surrender. “I don’t disagree. But the people she’s closest to are you, me, and Remy. And right now, I’m the only one she has to lean on.”

I set my fork down. “She didn’t come to classes again, did she?”

Larkin sighed and shook her head. “No. She hasn’t left the dorms at all. I’ve brought her some assignments she’s missed, but the teachers are giving her a lot of space.”

I looked around the half-full lunch room and exhaled hard. This semester was vastly different from my first one, and the cafeteria was the place that it reflected the most. So many empty chairs and quiet conversations instead of the crowded room and noisy teenagers.

“I should go talk to her,” I said after a pause.

Larkin’s head shot up. “Really?”

“I hate this weirdness between us,” I admitted.

She pressed her lips together. “I think it’s a good idea. I think it would be a better idea if Katy came to *you*, but I don’t think she will right now, and she needs her friends. I’ve never seen her like this before.”

I nodded, already having made up my mind and getting to my feet. I saw Ainsley heading in our direction and smiled at her before looking down at Larkin. “You good if I go?”

Sighing dramatically, she leaned back in her chair, head tossed back. “I suppose.” Her gaze drifted over my shoulder. “Maybe I’ll go sit with Ainsley and try to forget I haven’t spent any time with Rhodes in a few days.”

I let out a laugh, the knot of tension in my chest easing ever so slightly as I turned and headed out the door. I nodded to the table full of guys from our pack. Beyond them was a table of girls, including the three youngest females of our pack. Usually those girls would be holding court, giggling at the constant stares of guys around them—perks of being a vastly outnumbered gender—and turning bright red when a guy dared approach the table.

But now it was all hushed whispers and staring into half-touched lunch trays.

Shaking my head, I hurried out of the cafeteria and out the side door. When the door didn’t immediately close behind me, I turned and saw Will coming out behind me.

I paused at the base of the stairs. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Going to see Katy?” he asked, ignoring the question and coming down

the stairs to stand next to me.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. She could use a friend," Will said quietly, a breeze ruffling his dark blond hair.

"Yeah," I replied, still not sure why he was here. I knew he and Katy were friends but ...

Then it clicked.

I sighed, shifting my weight. "Remy?"

Will gave me a small smile, shrugging. "He asked me to keep an eye on you since he and Rhodes are out searching."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Honestly, I didn't mind Will, and Remy was so stressed, I was willing to deal with a bodyguard if it meant he had one less thing to worry about. But a heads up would have been nice.

We made our way across the nearly empty grounds to the girls' dorm, our boots crunching over ice and snow.

"Has there been any word on Maren?" Will asked, breaking the silence between us.

I shook my head. "No. Remy texted me a few minutes ago."

Will frowned. "Shit."

Yeah, that about summed up the situation.

We didn't speak anymore until we reached the dorm, and Will lingered at the base of the steps leading up to the glass front doors.

"I shouldn't be too long," I said quickly, wondering if he would have to stand sentry out here in the cold the whole time I was inside.

He was already pulling his phone from his pocket, the screen lit up as he used his thumb to unlock it. He leaned back against the cement wall and railing. "No worries."

"You can hang out in the commons," I offered, not wanting him to freeze. The main level had a huge common room with couches and chairs people could study or hangout in. And while technically guys weren't supposed to be in the girls' dorms, that rule had been trampled across more times than I could count.

Right now, the staff wasn't enforcing *any* rules. They seemed to be in the same survival mode we were.

Will flashed me a tight grin. "I'm good."

I went in the front door, bypassing the elevator bank and using the stairs to the right. Katy was on the third floor, and by the time I reached the

landing, I was at a loss for what to say.

Something dark kept prodding at a corner of my brain, wondering if what Katy had said was the truth. If when she saw me with Remy, all she saw was a girl who was doing whatever her boyfriend wanted.

My footsteps slowed as I reached Katy's door. Instead of lifting my hand to knock, I shoved it into the pocket of my coat.

This was stupid; I was being stupid.

"You hate me, don't you?"

My head jerked up, surprised at the muffled voice on the other side of the door.

"Katy?"

Something that sounded a lot like a forehead hit the other side of the door. "I'm such a freaking idiot, Skye. I'm the worst friend ever. I can't believe I said that crap to you."

"Um," I narrowed my eyes at the door, my nose wrinkling, "can you open the door?"

The handle turned and a single red-rimmed brown eye appeared in the crack. "It's okay. I hate me, too."

"Katy," I sighed, shaking my head.

"I'm a bitch. Like, a bigger bitch than even Sierra was. Or Sierra and Ainsley put together before Ainsley stopped being as much of a bitch." She was rambling, and getting ready to cry again.

"I don't hate you, Katy!" I said, almost throwing my arms out in exasperation. "You're one of my best friends—"

But then I had to throw my arms out to catch the trembling redhead that threw the door open and launched herself at me.

I caught her, staggering back a step and nearly losing my footing. As it was we still crashed into the wall behind me.

Katy's words and sobs all mixed together. "I'm so sorry. I'm the worst best friend ever!"

My arms came around her, hugging her, as her body shook.

As quick as my hands touched her back, Katy ripped free of me, stumbling back several steps. My heart wrenched in my chest. She looked like hell.

Her red hair was scraped back from her face into an oily ponytail, her clothes hanging off her body. Her pale skin was almost ashen and her dark eyes were ringed in red and wore heavy bruises under them. She clearly

hadn't been sleeping.

She folded her arms around her thin waist, ducking her chin to her chest. "Where is she, Skye? Where the hell could she be?"

I was at a loss. I had no idea what to say that could even begin to attempt something like comfort.

"Remy said there's no sign—"

My brows rose. "You talked to Remy? *When?*"

Katy's face flushed, fire in her eyes. "He's been texting me updates, but I haven't answered. I should be out there looking, too! Instead I'm *stuck* here." She lashed out, kicking the wall behind her.

"Okay," I said quickly, trying to pull her away from the wall and into the room before she could do any damage. I closed the door behind us and froze when I saw her room was trashed.

Her bed was an unmade tangle of sheets and blankets, but I could see all the skincare and makeup she loved to play with had been thrown and smashed against walls. Books had been hurled around the space, likely in a fit of rage when Remy ordered her to stay put.

"Jesus," I breathed, taking it all in.

"I redecorated," she deadpanned, turning away from me and climbing back into her bed.

I stepped over a smashed picture of the Holt family, wincing at the way Remy looked up at me. I perched on the edge of her bed.

"I really am sorry," Katy added meekly, not meeting my gaze.

"You were upset."

"I was a jerk."

That brought a ghost of a smile to my lips. "Okay. You were a jerk."

"Do you hate me? You *should* hate me." She bit her lower lip, worrying it between her teeth.

"I don't hate you, Katy," I told her honestly. "Not too crazy about what you said, but I don't hate you. I could never *hate* you."

"I didn't mean it," she said quickly, looking me in the eye. "I swear I didn't mean it. I was pissed at Remy and I knew the best way to hurt him was to ... hurt you. It sounds so much worse when I say it out loud."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

"But it was an asshole move, and I didn't mean it." She snorted. "You might be the only redeeming thing about my brother."

"You don't mean that."

Her eyes narrowed. “His girlfriend goes missing, and he goes after her immediately. *My* girlfriend goes missing, and I’m banished to my room?”

I tried to pick my words carefully, not wanting to rock the boat. “You know there’s more to it than that. He’s trying to do what’s best for the packs. And what’s best for Maren, by the way.”

“He’s *my* brother,” she hissed, slapping a hand against the mattress. “He should be on *my* side.”

“He *is* on your side, Katy,” I replied gently. “He hasn’t stopped searching for her since she went missing. I’ve barely seen him. He comes home and falls asleep after I go to bed, and he’s up and gone before I wake up. He’s killing himself trying to find her.”

She scoffed and looked away.

“Do you know why he had to go after me? When Cassian kidnapped me?”

She slowly blinked at me. “He went after you *because* Cassian kidnapped you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that. But right before that? He told me he was sending me back to Blackwater. He was making me leave.”

Uncertainty crept into her eyes. “He did?”

I nodded, remembering the stab of betrayal and panic I had felt when he calmly, stoically told me he was sending me away.

“For my own good,” I added, as much to myself as to Katy. Shaking myself out of the memory, I looked her in the eye. “I got pissed and yelled at him and took off.”

A single brow arched. “And got yourself kidnapped?”

“And I got myself kidnapped,” I echoed with a grimace, rolling my eyes. “Remy made the right call. I hated it, and I was so pissed at him. But he was trying to make an objective decision that was best for the pack because he’s the alpha.”

She stayed silent, mulling over what I was saying.

“I didn’t do what he said and I got hurt. I almost died,” I admitted, reaching over for her hand. “You’re his sister, Katy. He loves you, and he made a decision that he knew was for the best of the pack and you *and* Maren. But he’s in a crap position because he had to hurt you.”

Her gaze flicked to mine, her mouth in a tight line. “He’s still a jerk.”

I held my breath.

“But I get it,” she said softly. “I know I can be a pain in the ass. And I

probably would have fucked the whole search up. But sitting here? Doing nothing is killing me.”

“So, why don’t you come stay at the cabin?” I suggested, squeezing her fingers. “We can neurotically worry together. If you’re lucky, you can even pace the floors with me.”

A soft chuckle escaped her, but then she flinched like she remembered she wasn’t supposed to smile or laugh.

“It hasn’t snowed since she went missing,” Katy started slowly, her voice wooden. “They should have found her by now.”

Yeah, they should have.

“It’s a lot of area to cover,” I answered, but we both knew that was a flimsy excuse.

“What if they don’t find her? Or what if she’s ... I mean, if she ...” She broke off into a sob, leaning forward as my arms went around her.

“They’ll find her,” I whispered fiercely, needing to believe it to be true for Katy.

My phone went off in my pocket, the ringtone blaringly loud in the quiet space.

Katy and I jumped apart and I grappled for my phone, yanking it from my pocket. My eyes went to hers.

“It’s Remy.”

Her breath caught, her hands coming up to cover her mouth.

“Rem—” I started to answer.

“Where are you?” he demanded, his voice panicked and hard.

I frowned. “In the dorms. With Katy. Did you find—”

“I’m on my way back. Will is coming to get you. Don’t leave the cabin,” he ordered. I could hear people shouting behind him and my heart lurched.

“Did you find Maren?”

Katy’s cold hands grabbed my free hand, our eyes locking.

“No,” Remy bit out. A car door slammed and an engine roared to life.

“Fucking hurry up!” a voice snapped near him.

My eyes narrowed as I tried to place the voice. “Is that Rhodes?”

“We’re coming back,” he said sharply. “Get to the cabin and don’t fucking leave. Stay with Katy and Will until the others get to the cabin. Don’t leave.”

Fear crept up my spine. “Remy, what the hell is going on?”

“Another girl went missing,” he answered bitterly. “I’m on my way.”

The phone beeped as he ended the call. The phone slipped from my fingers and clattered to the floor as a fist pounded on the door.

“Skye!” Will yelled. “Katy! Let’s go.”

Katy was already shaking her head, her eyes terrified. “No. No way.”

I turned and yanked the door open for Will, who looked terrifyingly alert as his gaze swept over us.

“It’s true?” I asked.

Will nodded. “We gotta go. The others are meeting us at the cabin.”

My knees almost gave out as fear spiked sharp and frigid in my veins. “Larkin—”

“Is safe. Kyle and Konnor are bringing everyone else to the cabin,” Will replied curtly, his blue eyes hard chips of ice. “All of our pack is safe.”

“Who?” Katy demanded, shoving her arms through her coat as we followed him into the hall.

“Someone from the Makenzie pack is all we know right now,” he answered as we hit the stairs, our feet echoing a quick staccato as we hurried down the stairs.

We pushed open the doors to pandemonium in the courtyard as teachers and students tried to hurry to designated meeting spots. A few people had shifted and were already pawing the ground, noses in the air as they scented the shifting energy thickening around us.

We broke into a run, the three of us heading for the cabin as fast as we could. It took us a few minutes to get there and less than that for Larkin and the rest of the pack to arrive. The younger girls were borderline hysterical.

“What do we know?” I demanded as the twins led the pack to us.

Kyle’s eyes were hard as he looked at me. “Not a lot. Apparently Jayla was planning to meet the guy she had been hanging out with. He showed up where they were supposed to meet and ...” He glanced at the younger girls and dropped his voice. “He found blood.”

“Where were they meeting?”

Konnor frowned beside his brother. “Near the Makenzie pack cabin.” He jerked his head to the west.

I sucked in a deep breath. “Okay, the girls and I are going inside and locking all the doors. Freshman guys stay here with us,” I decided, looking at the four younger guys who looked equal parts scared and furious, and way too young to be dealing with this.

I turned to Will. “You take the rest and help them search.”

Will's jaw clenched. "Remy said to stay with you."

"Remy and the others and every available extra guard are currently miles away searching for Maren," I snapped. "If Jayla's bleeding there might be a way to track her before ... before we can't track her any more."

Will nodded. "You're sure?"

"It's what Remy would do," I replied, knowing in my bones it was the truth. "Go!"

Will spun on his heel, leading the guys away from us. They were already shedding their clothes as they walked around the side of the house.

One of the younger guys stepped up. "We can help search."

"I know," I answered, trying to remember his name.

"Martin," he offered.

"Martin. Right." I winced. I should have known that. "Sorry, Martin. I really suck at remembering names."

"We should help," he insisted, his jaw, still soft and round with boyish innocence, jutted out.

"You are helping," I replied quickly. "Remy would be livid if he knew all the guys left us." I swallowed that statement, making sure to look anywhere except at Katy. "We need protection while we wait."

That did the trick.

All four chests puffed up with prepubescent pride. They exchanged knowing glances and solemn nods.

"Then you girls should all get inside," Martin told me seriously, head held high.

I blinked slowly. What little monster had I just created?

"I mean, ma'am," he stammered, blinking furiously.

My jaw dropped, my head rearing back in shock. *Ma'am?*

Martin's cheeks turned bright red. He quickly turned away. "Let's set up a perimeter, guys." He stalked off with military purpose, his friends following quickly.

Ainsley let out a quick laugh, smothering it with her hands as quick as it came.

I turned and gave her a look.

"They're setting up a *perimeter*, ma'am," she said, eyes sparkling. With a jerk of her head, the younger girls followed her inside the cabin, leaving me alone with my best friends.

And Martin's fledgling military.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Katy murmured, her gaze locked on the mountains in the distance.

Larkin frowned. “What—”

“They would have found her by now,” Katy interrupted coldly. “At least found her body.”

Her dark eyes focused on me. “Whoever took Kit and Jayla took Maren.”

LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW WAS POINTLESS, BUT I COULDN'T SEEM TO STOP doing it. The skies had long since melted into darkness with no word as to what was going on. I had shifted a few hours ago when I snuck upstairs, needing an update, but Remy had nothing to tell me.

With miles stretched between us, I had been able to pick up a few fragmented thoughts and a lot of frustration mixed with a healthy dose of fear.

There was no sign of Jayla. The small blood trail had stopped a few yards up one of the mountains, crossing over a sluggishly moving creek heavily laden with ice. The scent vanished at the water.

I had shifted back and told everyone what I had gathered from Remy, which wasn't much. Ainsley had turned on a movie on the tv, the noise a buzzing, distant distraction for the younger girls, but no one was really paying attention. The frozen pizzas Larkin had made went untouched until I coerced the boys into coming inside.

They agreed it was just as easy to protect us inside where there was heat and food. After the food they had taken up positions in the living room on the couches and chairs. They had lasted until the early morning hours, one by one falling asleep.

Pale wisps of weak morning sunlight were turning the sky a mottled purple. I glanced at the microwave clock in the kitchen. It was just past seven in the morning.

They had been looking for Jayla for over fourteen hours. The more time slipped away, the heavier my heart got.

I exhaled, resting my forehead against the cold glass.

“I’m still mad at him,” Katy admitted, coming up behind me and leaning against the wall on the other side of the window.

My gaze went to her for a second. “I know.”

She looked out the window. “But if anyone can find her—can find *them*—it’s Remy. He won’t quit.”

The corner of my lips lifted. “He didn’t quit on me.”

“He loves you,” she replied easily. “But even if he didn’t, I know my brother. And he won’t stop. He’s kind of a badass that way.”

I arched a brow in surprise.

“Tell him I said that, and I’ll run your bras up the flagpole,” she added without heat, a tired smile soft on her mouth.

I hid a smile. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank God you two are speaking again,” Larkin muttered, coming up between us. She gave Katy a pointed look. “Did you grovel the way we talked about?”

Katy made a face before she tossed an amused look my way. “Not really. I mean, there were some tears. I admitted I was a bitch—”

“—which is nothing new,” Larkin added, snorting lightly.

She shrugged. “I mean, yeah. There was some minimal groveling.”

Larkin’s eyes narrowed. “There should have been a lot of groveling, Katherine.”

“You’ve been hanging out with Rhodes too much,” Katy retorted, shaking her head.

“And you need to not treat your friends like shit.” There was a subtle warning in Larkin’s tone, reminding me yet again that the meek girl I had met months ago was transitioning into a woman with a steel backbone.

“She apologized,” I told Larkin. “There were tears. Real ones.”

Larkin’s eyes rolled to the ceiling, a small smile on her lips. “So, we’re all good? Because I have a feeling a lot of things are going to change after this. I don’t like the idea of us being divided.”

Katy leaned her head on Larkin’s shoulder, reaching across her to grab my hand in hers. “We’re good.”

Unease twisted my stomach as I realized Larkin was right. Whatever was happening around here was getting worse, not better. Which meant things would change even more.

God, I was getting sick of change.

Movement out of the corner of my eye had me squinting into the shadows. “I think I saw something.”

Katy and Larkin straightened, looking out the window. The first rays of sunlight had barely touched the peaks of the mountains, but all the trees around us left the area around the cabin dark except for patches of yellow light from flood lights surrounding the cabin.

I glanced around the room and noted all of our guards were still asleep, as were the younger girls. Ainsley was still awake and playing a game on her phone as the credits of the movie started to roll.

“Stay here,” I said softly, moving away from the window as my wolf started to wake up.

“Skye—” Larkin started.

I held up a hand to silence her as I walked to the door quietly. My wolf was alert now, growling inside me and waiting for a fight. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, shaking off any exhaustion I had started to feel as the night dragged on.

My hand closed over the doorknob as someone knocked once. Twice.

“It’s Will,” a muffled voice called.

I jerked the door open, surprised to see Will standing there with several other pack members as Katy and Larkin joined me.

My heart surged into my throat. “Did they—”

He shook his head. “No trace of Jayla or whoever took her. There’s another storm coming in off the mountains. We had to come back before it hit and we got stuck out there.”

“Fuck,” Katy hissed, stalking away from the door to the kitchen. On the way by, she kicked one of the couches our guards slept on.

Martin jumped up, eyes wide and dark hair sticking up all over. His wide eyes landed squarely on me standing in front of the open door.

“You opened the door!” he shouted, waking up his friends.

“It’s Will.” I gestured to the shifter on the other side.

“But ... how did you know?”

“Because I told her who I was,” Will said dryly, giving me a strange look.

I shrugged. “Martin and the guys were keeping us safe.”

“By sleeping on the couch?” Konnor snorted, pushing past Will to come inside. He nodded at me and pointedly ignored Larkin.

Apparently he still wasn’t over her picking Rhodes just yet.

“I wasn’t sleeping—” Martin started to protest, looking to his friends for

support, but their eyes were firmly glued to the floor.

“Don’t worry,” Ainsley drawled from her couch. “If we were attacked by pillows, Martin had it handled.”

Martin flushed, embarrassed at being called out, especially in front of the older guys.

“Martin spent most of the night freezing his ass off with the other guys to keep us safe,” I reminded her, my voice sharp and hard.

Ainsley blinked and lowered her eyes. “You’re right. Sorry, Marty.”

“It’s Martin,” he huffed, ducking his head.

“Totally what I said.” Ainsley got off the couch and stood, stretching languidly. The younger girls were awake and watching everything with wide eyes, but so far they were quiet.

“Where’s Remy?” I demanded, giving Will my attention.

“With Rhodes. They called an emergency meeting. He said to tell you he’ll be back soon. We came to escort the others back to the dorms, but Remy said they’re free to stay here if they prefer.”

“Is it safe?” Bethany spoke up, swallowing visibly. “Shouldn’t we stay here again like last time?”

Will gave her a soft smile, nodding. “We’re setting up security on each floor and around the buildings. It will be the safest place on campus for all of you.”

“Okay,” she agreed in a tiny voice, kicking off the blanket she was huddled under and getting up. “Let’s go.”

The girls and Ainsley all pulled on their shoes and coats before tromping out into the cold with the others.

Katy came back towards us, her face a blank mask, but I could see a slight tremble in her fingers.

“Are you going?” I asked her.

She looked at me and then Larkin. “I think I’ll stay with you guys, if that’s okay.”

“Definitely okay,” I replied, reaching for her hand.

Martin hesitated as his friends followed the pack. “Maybe I should stay until Remy returns. To keep you safe.”

“I’m staying,” Will told him. “Remy asked the twins and I to stay until they get back.”

Martin looked at me, his eyes uncertain.

Smiling, I stepped forward. “You did good, Martin. Thanks for

everything, but go make sure the others get back okay and get some sleep. We'll probably need your help tomorrow, and you're no good to us dead on your feet."

"Yes, ma—"

I arched a brow. Were we doing that again?

"Skye," he finished quickly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Nodding, I closed the door behind him, listening to the sounds of the pack walking away in the snow before turning back to the five other shifters in the room.

"I guess now we wait," I murmured before heading to the couch and settling down to wait for Remy.



WE ALL LOOKED up as one when Remy opened the front door and stepped inside with Rhodes, closing the door with a firm slam that rattled the wall. His expression immediately had me on edge as I got to my feet.

His jaw was clenched, his eyes dark sparking fire as his gaze swept over all of us.

He looked like he had been dragged through hell the last few days. Dark stubble shadowed his hard jaw and there was a heaviness surrounding him, weighing him down. He had been awake and searching in the snow for over twenty-four hours straight.

"We're closing the school," he said suddenly, his lips barely moving as he ground out the words.

"What?" Larkin gasped, scrambling up beside me. Will, Kyle, and Konnor got to their feet silently, all wearing stunned expressions.

"Three girls have gone missing from campus now," he muttered, shaking his head as he started pulling off his coat. "We're too exposed out here. All the packs want everyone back on their own territory before someone else goes missing."

"So are you guys officially saying that whoever took the girls from campus also took Maren?" Will asked, his tone grave.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Rhodes replied with a heavy sigh, rubbing his forehead. His eyes went to Katy. "I'm sorry, Kit-Kat. We searched everywhere. There's no sign of her."

“And what about the search parties?” Katy demanded, hugging a pillow to her front as she stared up at her brother.

“They’re going to keep searching, but they want all students home,” Remy answered, his tone gentle as he spoke to her directly for the first time in days.

Katy flinched, her hackles instantly up as she stubbornly declared, “No. I’m not leaving.”

Remy growled, and I could sense his frustration mounting, compounded by his exhaustion. “It’s not a choice, Katy.”

“I’m not *leaving*,” she hissed, her eyes flashing as she challenged him. “Maren is still out there!”

“We don’t know where Maren is,” I said softly, stepping in before Remy snapped.

“She was last seen *here*,” Katy argued. “Somewhere between here and the airport, her ride—”

“But she could be anywhere now,” I replied with a heavy sigh, sitting back down beside her. “The odds of whoever took Maren keeping her in the same vicinity she was taken from...”

Katy looked up at the ceiling, clearly trying to reign in her emotions. “But there might be a clue to who took her and where! If we leave now, we’ll never find her!”

Remy looked at her, exhaustion lining his face. “We’re still leaving people here to keep looking, Katy. But we need to make sure everyone else is safe.”

I touched her shoulder. “They’re not giving up.”

She glared at me. “Would you leave if Remy was missing?” She whirled to stare at Remy. “Would you leave Skye here?”

Remy and I exchanged glances.

No, neither of us would leave the other behind. Maybe that made us giant hypocrites—okay, it *definitely* made us hypocrites—but I wasn’t going to lie to her. I wouldn’t leave Remy, and he wouldn’t leave me. But Katy was going to have to leave Maren.

I felt like an asshole, but we couldn’t stay here and risk more people going missing or getting hurt.

“Not willingly,” I admitted carefully. “But it doesn’t sound like we’re being given much of a choice here, Katy. They’re closing the school down.”

“Then I’ll stay here and look for Maren on my own,” she snapped.

Larkin sat back down beside Katy, wrapping an arm around her shoulders supportively, but I noticed she wasn't saying anything either.

"Do you honestly think Dad will just let you stay here?" Remy asked incredulously, staring down at his sister. "If I don't drag you back home, he sure as hell will. This isn't a negotiation, Katherine. Pack your stuff. They're closing the campus by the end of the week. Most of the packs, including ours, are heading home tomorrow."

I caught Rhodes wince behind Remy the same time Katy stiffened.

Katy's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "Well, I *have* to stay here, remember? You alpha-bullied me into not being able to leave the damn property!"

Remy's eyes flashed dangerously, a warning rumble vibrating in his chest. "Consider your ban lifted. Go pack your stuff and get ready to leave. This isn't up for debate."

"Rem—" I started, not wanting this to turn into another massive fight.

He held up a hand to cut me off, his expression furious as he glared at his sister. "I get you want to help, Katy, but *this* isn't helping. You being here will be one more person for us to worry about. What happens if someone takes *you*? Now instead of focusing on finding Maren, we'll be focused on finding you. It will take more attention off looking for Maren and the other girls. Stop acting like a little kid, and grow the fuck up."

Katy shot to her feet, shoving past me and thundering up the stairs. A second later a bedroom door slammed shut hard enough to rattle the walls.

A dull ache started behind my eyes. "Maybe there was a better way to say that?" I asked softly as I rubbed my forehead, shooting him an annoyed look.

"Maybe I'm tired of coddling her," Remy returned darkly before stalking to his office and closing the doors with a sharp bang.

Larkin got up and walked around me, sliding her arms around Rhodes' waist and leaning her head against his chest. She tipped her head up at him. "What can I do?"

His arms went around her and he kissed the tip of her nose. "I guess start packing. We don't know when or if we'll be coming back."

She nodded with a sigh, looking at me. "You okay here if we head back to the dorms to start packing and get the others moving?"

I nodded, not exactly loving the idea of being stuck in a cabin with feuding Holt siblings. I waited until they gathered their things and headed out the door before taking a deep breath and looking around. The tension in this

house was setting my wolf on edge.

This wasn't normal pack discord; two people I loved were fighting, and the fact that one of them was my mate only made everything more intense. I shot a glance at the stairs, wondering if I should talk to Katy, but opted to talk to Remy first.

I didn't bother knocking as I twisted open the knobs of the french doors to the study and stepped inside the room, closing the doors quietly behind me.

Of all the rooms in the cabin, this was one of my favorites. Remy had let me use it whenever I wanted, often curling up on the window seat with a book from his crazy packed shelves. I had only snuck in a few reading sessions with my Christmas ereader, and now I was sad I wouldn't have more days here.

I went silently to Remy, who stood brooding in front of the large windows that faced the woods behind the house. The woods the pack had run in. The woods that led to the ridge where our bond snapped into place.

A sharp pang hit me at the thought of leaving here and not coming back. I'd had so many firsts here. More good memories than bad. Granite Peak had become my home. It was the first place I was ever really accepted.

I wrapped my arms around his waist from behind, pressing my forehead to the center of his massive back, feeling the muscles ripple and rise as he simply breathed.

"It's the right call," I said softly, kissing one shoulder blade through the cotton of his Henley.

His hands came up and covered mine over his stomach. "I *hate* this," he whispered fiercely. "I don't want to leave here any more than Katy does, but it's what's safest for the packs. I know how she feels. Jesus, I thought I lost you for an afternoon. It's been almost a week since Maren went missing."

"We'll get her back," I swore.

"Will we?" He didn't sound so convinced and *that* shook me. I had never seen Remy as anything but confident and strong. "Maren's been missing for days, Skye. Kit's been missing longer than that, and now Jayla? Jayla's *fourteen*. What the fuck could they want with a kid?"

My arms tightened around him. I didn't have the words to answer his questions. Those were my questions, too.

"We have no idea who's behind this except that the Norwood and Long Mesa packs *might* be involved," he seethed, words spilled out faster as his anger flared brighter. "I don't want to leave either, but I can't risk a member

of *our* pack going missing next.”

His body gave a violent shudder, and I read his thoughts as easily as if we were in wolf form.

I can't risk you.

“Hey,” I said softly, waiting until he turned in my arms and was looking down at me. I slid my hands up his chest, over his shoulders, until I was cupping his face. “You’re making the right call. All the packs are.”

I swallowed as I continued, the words hard to get out. “GPA isn’t safe anymore.”

He still looked frustrated as hell, his dark eyes full of fury and anguish. “Maybe I could convince my dad and the others to only send the females back. The rest of us can stay here—”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly, shaking my head hard. “Remember the last time you tried sending me away to protect me?”

I meant the comment to come across as half-teasing, hoping to earn a smile and relieve some of the tension, but his expression turned thunderous and he pulled out of my hold, stepping back. The physical distance was like a punch to the chest.

“Rem,” I tried softly, pleading, “I was kidding.”

“You almost died, Skye,” he replied quietly, his gaze never wavering. “I can’t go through that again. Not with you, not with my sister...”

I closed the distance between us. “I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t mean it like that. I just hate the idea of you being anywhere but with me. You know that. We’re stronger together.”

He lifted a hand to my face, sweeping a thumb across my cheekbone as I leaned into his touch. “I know, and you’re right. I just hate feeling helpless.”

“You’re not helpless,” I returned firmly, “and going back to our own territory isn’t running away. It’s being smart. Until we know who the threat is, we can’t know what they’ll do next.”

He dropped his forehead to mine, his minty breath fanning across my lips. “I love you.”

My lips curved into a smile as I wound my arms around his neck, arching my chest to his. “Good. I love you, too.”

His mouth found mine in a slow, lingering kiss that was as much about comfort as it was passion. His lips fit perfectly to mine as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine in a slow dance that made my blood heat.

After several long beats, he pulled back and rested his forehead against mine. “I need to go talk to Katy.”

“I know,” I said softly, running my hands through the short hair at the nape of his neck. “Go talk to her, and then we’ll start packing everything up.”

With a nod, he moved away from me, but stopped when he was at the door.

“I’m sorry.” The apology was so quiet, I almost missed it.

I was still in a daydream, my fingertips pressed to the swollen skin of my lips where his mouth had just been.

“What?” I asked absently, turning to look at him.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep you safe here.”

I frowned, shaking my head slowly. Didn’t he get it? “Safe isn’t a place, Remy. It’s not this school, or in Blackwater, or any other place. Safe is *you*.”

His eyes did that melty thing I loved, going soft and warm as he studied me with a small smile that turned my knees to jelly before he ducked out of the room. I heard his feet on the stairs as he went upstairs, and I leaned back on the edge of his desk with a smile to myself.

A smile that quickly disappeared when I heard his heavy footfalls thumping violently back down the stairs.

I came out of his office and Remy nearly knocked me over, his dark eyes wild.

“What?” I demanded, grabbing his arm.

“She’s gone.”

“What?” I repeated, stunned. He couldn’t mean...

He slammed a fist into the wall, the drywall shattering under the force. Chunks exploded, a fine white dust filling the space between us. “Katy. She’s fucking *gone*.”

REMY REACHED BEHIND HIM AND FISTED HIS SHIRT, ALREADY TOEING OFF HIS boots. Every muscle in his body was tight, tense with anger and fear. He tossed his shirt on the ground.

“Call Rhodes,” he ordered me, heading for the back door. “Tell him to meet me. I’m going to head east—”

I already had my phone out and was furiously texting Rhodes *and* Larkin. Text bubbles immediately appeared followed by Rhodes saying they were on their way.

“Let me come with you,” I said, putting my phone on the counter.

He turned sharply, his dark brows knitted together. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! Katy’s my best friend.” Panic was clawing at me. The idea of sitting here and doing nothing made me crazy.

“Skye, we don’t have time to argue about this—”

“Katy is *missing*. It’s only been a few minutes so she can’t be far. Besides, you’re going to have to leave me alone in the cabin if you go after her.” Ugh, that was a low blow, but I hated the idea of pacing these floors *again*.

The muscles in his shoulder bunched, every single delicious ab tightening as he sucked in a sharp breath and realized he was screwed either way.

His nostrils flared. “Fine.”

He barely finished the word before I was moving past him, taking off my shirt. We finished stripping on the deck, not bothering to even glance at each other until we had shifted.

As soon as my paws touched the wood of the deck, I shook out my fur

and scented the incoming storm.

We don't have much time before the storm hits, Remy told me, a low growl in his throat. *Don't leave my side.*

I looked at him. *Let's go.*

He huffed out a bark that sounded like an agreement and took off to the right, leaping off the deck in a fluid motion and disappearing into the woods beyond the yard.

I scrambled off the deck, following him into the woods.

The wind gusted off the side of the mountain, lifting snow from the deep drifts and slapping it across our faces as we raced deeper into the wilderness.

I kept catching traces of Katy, but Remy seemed to have a lock on her scent. He barely paused or hesitated as he worked his way through the woods and over rocks.

A minute later we ran into a wall of snow. It came down heavy and thick and fast, nearly blinding us as Remy struggled to track Katy's scent over the fresh layer of white powder that was already covering her tracks.

Fuck!

He slid to a stop, pawing at the ground, his large head swinging around as he tried to find her scent.

A low whine in my throat, I nudged his shoulder with my nose. *Calm down*, I begged. *We'll find her.*

His head turned back to me, and I could see the desperation in his dark eyes.

A chorus of howls split the silence behind us. I knew those voices; Rhodes was coming along with a lot of our pack. Remy and I returned the howls on instinct, the sounds ripping from our throats in a beautiful harmony to let them know where we were.

This way, he told me, turning and lunging through some underbrush and chasing the fading scent of his sister.

We broke through the treeline into a clearing. My heart surged seeing Katy's reddish-brown wolf standing in the middle. As fast as relief swept through me, ice froze my blood when I realized she wasn't alone.

Two men stood on either side of her, caging her in with guns trained on her body. They were dressed in black from head to toe with black ski masks covering their faces, making it look like they should be running out of a bank instead of standing in the woods with a wolf. Tiny red dots were brilliantly bright against the white snow falling.

Katy was still on her feet, growling at them in a way that would have made most men—most *humans*—back away slowly so as not to piss off the big red wolf.

A gust of wind swept through the clearing, the scent on the air confirming what I already suspected. They were shifters.

Humans would have shot first, and asked questions later. These two seemed completely at ease with the wolf in front of them growling and snarling, her jaws snapping at air in a desperate warning.

Everything slowed around me, except Remy.

He didn't break stride, running full speed at the guy on the left and launching into the air, his black fur a deadly shadow that landed on the man. The gun arced wide, a stray shot rang out as the man landed under Remy.

The other guy swung his gun at Remy's head, the laser pointer landing on the white star above his eyes.

My legs were already moving, a snarl ripping from my throat as I tried to intercept the bullet meant for him.

I landed hard on the man, knocking him to the frozen ground with a vicious snap of my teeth. I tasted blood in my mouth, that all-too-familiar coppery tang sliding down my throat as my teeth sank into the muscle and bone of his shoulder.

He swung out blindly with a shout, the butt of the gun landing across my nose so hard my eyes watered, but I didn't let go.

Katy jumped forward, her mouth on the wrist above the hand that held the rifle. Another shot cracked the sky as the second bullet fired, this one buried deep in the snow.

The man under us screamed, his free arm uselessly throwing wild punches with his only uninjured arm, but Katy only bit down harder until she tore her mouth away. A spray of blood coated the snow red. He landed one last punch to my throat, dislodging me.

I huffed out a cough, more annoyed than hurt, as the man scrambled back from us. He cradled his injured arm to his chest and used his free hand to pull out a handgun holstered at his waist. He leveled the gun first at Katy and then me.

Remy was there suddenly, his massive body between us and the man. I glanced back at the other guy he had brought down, but that guy wasn't moving. His motionless body was limp in the snow.

The guy with the gun trained on us awkwardly crawled back until he hit a

tree. He used the tree for leverage to haul himself to his feet.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*” he swore, his blue eyes huge behind his mask as he looked at us and then his friend. He aimed the gun at Remy and a warning growl rumbled out of me.

The gun moved to me, but Remy moved in front of me, blocking me.

“Don’t fucking come any closer!” the man shouted, staggering several steps to the side.

My heart pounded viciously in my ribcage. If he stumbled and went down, he could hit one of us with an accidental shot. Remy’s fear mingled with my own, the bond linking us vibrant and charged as our emotions tangled together.

Thankfully the man stayed upright until he made it to where a pair of snowmobiles were stashed behind a wide evergreen. He kept the gun on us as he got onto the seat and started the engine.

“Don’t fucking think about following me!” he warned. He jerked his head back to his friend. “*Fuck!*”

Giving the snowmobile some gas, he lowered the gun so he could steer with his arm and vanished around a corner.

Remy moved to chase him, but I quickly moved in front of him.

He reared back, a warning growl aimed at me in his throat. *Get out of the way, Skye.*

I dropped my front legs, ducking my head in submission. *He’s gone, and the storm is coming faster. We need to get back.*

Indecision warred in his eyes. The feral, wolf part of him wanted to hunt the man who threatened us. The rational, human side of him knew that getting stuck on this mountain, exposed, could be suicide.

With a huff, he gave a sharp nod and turned away from me to stand in front of Katy.

Katy dropped to her belly, nose to the ground, a high pitched whine coming from her and she crawled to her alpha.

He snarled at her, his teeth snapped until she rolled over in the snow and exposed her stomach in submission.

She had fucked up. Big time.

And we all could have died because of it.

A low groan filled the air and all of our heads turned to see the other man rolling to his knees.

Without thinking, he pulled the ski mask from his head and tossed it to

the ground, his blond hair dark and matted with sweat.

Another moan and he turned, seeing us standing behind him. His gray eyes were bloodshot and pained as he looked at us.

Forgetting about Katy for the moment, Remy issued him a warning growl. I prayed the idiot would be smart and stay put.

The man slowly shook his head, on his knees in the snow before us.

“For what it’s worth,” he started with a gravelly voice, “I’m sorry. We didn’t have a choice.”

Before we could react, he pulled a gun from the holster strapped to his thigh, aimed it at his temple and pulled the trigger.

I flinched back, crimson staining the snow in a grotesque arc above where he fell lifeless, eyes open and unseeing as they stared at me.

Oh, my God. I whimpered and backed away.

Christ, Remy hissed, shaking his head and moving back. His body bumped into mine, and I leaned into him, needing his warmth as my blood ran cold.

Katy was still on the ground, her entire body trembling.

Remy stepped away from me and went to her, nudging her with his nose until she got to her feet, tail firmly tucked between her legs and ears flat against her head. She kept her head down, following Remy as he turned.

Let’s go, he told me.

I kept glancing back as we left the clearing. The dark figure was already covered in a layer of snow, but my eyes kept replaying his final words. The anguish in his eyes when he leveled the gun at himself.

A shudder tore through my body. I changed my focus to following Remy, his black coat starkly visible through the heavily falling snow around us.

We met up with Rhodes and the others on our way back to the cabin. The only sounds were the whispers of our bodies moving through the snow. Everything else was blessedly, cursedly, silent.

I PULLED MY LAST SHIRT OFF THE HANGER IN MY NOW EMPTY CLOSET AND folded it before tossing it into the open suitcase on the floor. It hadn't taken me long to pack - I didn't have a lot of things. There wasn't a room filled with possessions I had accumulated over a lifetime or even four years at GPA.

My life consisted of clothes that were only a few months old, some basic toiletries, my ereader and a couple pairs of shoes. Everything fit into a large suitcase.

A soft knock at the door made me turn, my heart skipping a beat at the sight of Remy filling the doorway.

"Hey," he said, his deep voice like gravel as his chocolate eyes swept down me before landing on my suitcase.

"Hi," I replied as my gaze moved over him. He looked utterly exhausted. "How did it go?"

Once they got back, Remy and Katy had jumped onto a video chat with their parents. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I came upstairs to pack. I still had heard when Mallory yelled at her daughter through the screen for being so reckless.

He folded his arms across his broad chest, leaning his head against the frame. "Will took Katy back to the dorms to pack. My parents are furious. I think they would both be driving down to pick her up themselves if the storm wasn't so bad."

I looked back out the window. The snow hadn't let up since we had come back almost an hour earlier, and the weather reports said it would likely keep

coming down until later on in the evening.

He pushed off the doorframe, kicking the door shut before crossing the room. He stopped in front of me, fury in his eyes as his hand came up and tenderly cradled my jaw.

I made a face at him, ignoring the pull of the bruised skin over my left cheek. "It looks worse than it feels."

I could practically hear his molars grinding together. Dropping his hand, he walked to the bed and sat down on the edge. After a second, he exhaled loudly, bracing his arms on either side of his body and dropping his chin to his chest.

I moved silently to him, maneuvering myself easily between his legs and tangling my fingers in his thick hair.

His arms came around me, hugging me tightly as he pressed his face against my chest, his cheek resting above where my heart beat.

"How's Katy?" I asked, still stroking his hair.

Pulling back slightly, he looked up at me through a fringe of dark lashes. "Not great. She knows she messed up and feels bad."

My lips turned down. "And how are *you*?"

He blinked once, his expression a forced sort of relaxed that I didn't buy for a second. "I'm fine."

I tilted my head to the side. "Just fine?"

He sighed, shaking his head slightly. "I keep seeing those guns. And you and Katy ... I haven't been that scared since I watched you tackle Cassian off that damn cliff."

My lips thinned at his admission. The echoing thrum of adrenaline filled my veins as I remembered staring at the gun. "I was scared, too."

He snorted derisively. "I never should have taken you with me."

My hand curled around his hair, pulling his head back slightly to look at me. "Don't do that. I pushed to go with you."

He frowned at me, his eyes lingering on the bruise. "It's my job to keep you safe."

"And it's my job to keep *you* safe," I countered heatedly. "I get that you're the alpha, Rem. I love that. I love *you*. But that doesn't mean you have to do it all alone."

His hands tightened around my waist. "That was close. Too close."

I smoothed a hand over his brow. "I'm safe, Katy's safe, and you're safe. Our pack is safe. That's all that matters."

“For now.”

I tried to ignore the darkness seeping into his tone. Instead I ran my fingers through his dark hair again. “Do you want me to help you pack your clothes?”

He hesitated, and my gut clenched. “What?”

His dark eyes met mine, sadness and regret swirling in them. “I’m not going back with you guys.”

My eyes went wide as panic slammed into me. “Remy—”

His hand caught my wrist, bringing my fingers to his mouth where he kissed them gently. “I need to figure out who we ran into in the woods. I’ll get you guys onto the plane tomorrow, then I’ll hang back for a day or two and see what I can find out.”

I didn’t want to be *that* girl, but I could feel the tears crowding behind my eyes. I dropped my head back, blinking hard as I stared at the ceiling. I wanted to fight him, to beg him to come with us or let me stay behind, but I knew it would be pointless.

Perks of falling for an alpha.

I sighed slowly, trying to think rationally. “Okay.”

His eyes went soft, his expression somber. “I’m sorry, babe.”

I sniffled. Freaking sniffled, but steeled my spine and met his gaze. “I get it. Do you think those guys were cops? Part of the search party?”

He gave me a knowing look. “That guy wouldn’t have killed himself if he was just a cop, baby. And he definitely wouldn’t have talked to us.” He took a deep breath, expression guarded. “He also wouldn’t have had a sled with restraints on the back of the snowmobile.”

I felt my eyes get big and round. How had I missed that?

My stomach pitched anxiously. “Those guys were ... They were going to take Katy? Like the others?”

He gave me a slow nod. “That’s my guess. I need to get back up there as soon as the storm clears to see if I can find anything we can use to track them.”

I moved forward, straddling his lap and winding my arms around his neck so we were almost eye-level.

“Okay,” I started quietly, “then you stay. We’ll be safe back in Blackwater, and you’ll meet me there in a few days. But you need to keep Rhodes with you. I don’t want you out here without someone watching your back.”

“Dante and Ryder are sticking around for a few more days,” he told me. “Rhodes needs to make sure the pack gets back home safe.”

“And that’s awesome, but Dante and Ryder are here for Maren. I need someone who is here for *you*. Will, Larkin, and I can get everyone back to Blackwater, but I won’t leave without knowing you have someone here who will look out for you.”

An amused smile teased his mouth, a sliver of light in all the dark surrounding us lately. “You’re aware I can take care of myself, right?”

I arched a brow. “I’m fully aware that my mate is an alpha with all sorts of skills that could dismember someone in multiple ways. But you’re *not* bulletproof. If those guys are bringing guns into the equation, I need to know you’re safe. Please.”

“Okay. Rhodes stays with me,” he finally agreed. “He’s going to hate leaving Larkin.”

“Rhodes is your beta and your best friend. Your brother,” I countered fiercely. “He’ll want to stay with you.”

His eyes closed as I leaned my forehead to his. After a second, he tilted his head up, his lips searching for mine.

One hand slid up my back, anchoring me to him as the other hand came up to cradle my jaw and angle my face where he wanted me.

His tongue teased my mouth open, sweeping inside with deep strokes as he groaned. The hand on my back pressed my front to his and then skated down my spine and slipped under my shirt. The touch of his hand to my skin made me shiver even as flames licked through my blood.

He broke the kiss, his lips moving to my jaw. “This okay?”

I moaned, grinding my hips against his. “Yeah.”

In a fluid movement, Remy rolled us, flipping me onto my back as he hovered over me, his hands braced on either side of me. “Still okay?”

The look in his eyes, all need and lust and want, was like a drug. God, I wanted more. I hooked a leg around the back of his knees and pulled him closer.

Instead of dropping his weight onto me the way I craved, he lowered himself with a deliberate slowness until his nose brushed against mine.

The smile on his lips stopped my heart for a second.

“Hey,” he greeted, his warm voice like honey as he kissed the corner of my mouth.

With a frustrated whimper, I reached up and wrapped my hands around

his shoulders, trying to bring him down. But Remy was solid muscle and not moving until he was good and ready.

A smug smirk kicked up the corner of his mouth, and my body flushed as his gaze traveled down the length of me.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” he whispered, his tone almost reverent as he lifted a hand to my face and traced the curve of my jaw.

I swallowed hard around the sudden emotion clogging my throat.

His lips found the other corner of my lips, gently whispering a kiss against them. “I love you, Skye.” A hand slipped under the hem of my shirt, splaying across my stomach.

“I love you,” I answered, my body arching up to meet him. I loved saying those three words just as much as I liked hearing them.

His mouth crashed into mine, no longer teasing and playing. His kiss was full of hunger and need. He didn’t simply coax my lips open; he demanded every part of me yield to him, starting with my mouth.

My lips parted on a gasp that he took as an invitation to invade. His tongue stroked against mine, exploring and licking until we both were breathless.

“Remy.” I choked out his name, my head falling back as his lips moved down the column of my throat.

The hand that had rested dormant against my stomach slowly came to life, teasing the waistband of my jeans.

“Still okay?” he asked, his fingertips just barely grazing my skin.

I lifted up onto my elbows and scooted back until I was full on the bed. I licked my lips slowly. Deliberately. “Could be better.”

His eyes went dark, carnal, as he crawled over my body. His mouth caught mine again in a dizzying kiss that made my elbows give out and my body fall into the mattress. His mouth chased me down, his lips searing against mine as his body lowered onto me. I groaned at the delicious pressure of him pressing me into the bed.

A hand found the bottom of my shirt again and Remy tore his lips from mine. His dark eyes were twin flames, searing me as they heated with every inch of skin he exposed.

He peeled my shirt up and over my head slowly, his eyes hungrily savoring every inch of skin he revealed until my shirt was gone. His eyes stayed on mine as his hand settled between the valley of my chest, pressed down on top of where my heart was beating for him. He grinned, the smile

more wolf than man, and slowly undid the front closure. The soft cotton fell away, my breasts falling free of their confinement.

My pulse quickened, my breathing getting faster. I felt open and exposed and vulnerable.

As if reading my mind, Remy reached out and threaded one hand in mine. He squeezed until I looked up and met his gaze. The emotions I saw swirling there—love, desire, need—stole my breath for all the right reasons.

I focused on that connection, that tether between us.

He eased onto his side, his long body pressed to my side as he let go of my hand and rested his fingers against my ribcage.

“Still with me?” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. His teeth lightly nipped the spot he had kissed, the sting a welcome shock to my system.

I nodded, swallowing hard again as my pulse skyrocketed.

“Words, babe,” he said, his lips finding my collarbone as his knuckles brushed against the underside of my breast. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I’m ... good,” I finished with a gasp as he ghosted a hand around my nipple. I arched into his touch, but his hand was already gone.

“Good, huh?” he echoed as he kissed his way to the valley between my breasts. “I think we can do better than good.”

I barely had time to register his words before he closed a mouth over my nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth.

I grabbed the back of his head with one hand, my other hand grabbing blindly for the quilt on the bed as my back arched off the mattress. His teeth caught and tugged the peak at the last second, the sensation zinging down my body until my toes curled.

My hand fisted in his hair as he switched attention to my other breast, his mouth greedily sucking the tight bud between his lips and licking it with his tongue.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, a steady pulse of need throbbing between my legs. I pressed my thighs together, trying to ease the pressure, but that didn’t help at all.

I whimpered against Remy, my body hot and aching as I arched into him, needing more. More pressure, more touches, more *Remy*.

His head came up, and I barely caught my breath before his lips were back on mine. The cool air tightened my nipples, my breathy moan turning into a ragged cry when his fingers pinched down on one peak.

The hand that had been toying with me slid down my stomach, his fingertips again teasing the edge of my jeans until I lifted my hips.

Remy lifted his head, stopping all of his movements until he had my attention. “Still okay?” His voice was rough and gravelly, and it made my core clench in anticipation.

“More,” I demanded breathlessly, lifting my hips to encourage him.

A slow smirk teased his mouth as his finger deftly undid the button of my jeans before sliding the metal teeth of the zipper down. His fingers brushed against the cotton of my panties.

His dark eyes held mine. “Still with me?”

I nodded soundlessly, but found my words when he frowned and hesitated. “Yeah.” I barely recognized my own voice.

A single finger traced across my center, and my entire body shuddered at the sensation. Every nerve came alive, all synapses firing at once.

His throat worked as he swallowed. “God, you’re fucking *soaked*, babe.”

I flushed at his words, biting my lower lip between my teeth as he grazed the center of my panties again.

His eyes glowed, molten and entranced, as he slid his hand further into my jeans and cupped me between my legs.

My eyes slid shut, the pleasure so exquisite that I needed a minute to keep from grinding against his hand like a bitch in heat. He started to move his hand until I grabbed him by the wrist, the pleasure so sharp it bordered on pain.

He went completely still above me. “Do you want me to stop?”

My eyes flew open. “Not a chance. Just ... give me a second?”

He nodded slowly before dropping his head and kissing me slowly. He eased my mouth open, his kiss gentle and deep. After a few seconds, I lifted my hips and let his wrist go. Not sure what to do, I dropped my hand by my side, again grabbing the quilt in a tight fist.

“Hey.” Remy nudged my jaw with his nose. “Look at me.”

I lifted my eyes to his.

“We can stop. No pressure, baby.”

Funny because pressure was the only thing I was feeling, but not where I wanted it.

“Don’t stop,” I said softly, my eyes pleading with him to understand the thoughts that I couldn’t form into words. This was all new, all different, but I wanted this. I wanted him.

His eyes flared a second before his mouth landed on mine once more, everything about the kiss was possessive. He used the kiss to claim, but there was nothing left to conquer.

Every piece of me belonged to Remy.

His hand slipped inside my panties, and I felt one finger glide through the wetness gathering between my legs.

He groaned into my mouth. “Fuck,” he whispered.

The finger teased the sides of my clit, stroking around the bundle of nerves that was literally throbbing with need.

I was about to demand something—*anything*—to ease the building ache in me when he slid his finger inside of me just as his thumb pressed down on my clit.

Fire licked through my veins, my blood heating as my body ignited under his touch.

The slight stretch as his finger worked inside me barely registered as a blip. My mind was reeling from the sensations of his thumb stroking and pressing and teasing while his finger pumped into me gently.

He growled low in his chest, the sound appreciative and hungry. “So damn tight, babe.”

My eyes closed once again as I let the feelings wash over me, sweeping away all the worry and doubt of the last week.

He eased a second finger into me, and I welcomed the slow burning stretch of my body accommodating him. Yielding to him.

He changed the angle of his hand, his fingers curling inside of me and rubbing some magical spot I had no idea existed outside of books as the heel of his hand ground down against my clit.

I cried out, arching my body in time with the thrusts of his hand, chasing a high that was familiar and foreign all at the same time.

“That’s my girl,” he praised, kissing my jaw. “Come for me, babe.”

His fingers swept against that place deep inside me as his hand pressed firmly on my clit. My body hovered on the edge of some giant precipice before I went over and completely shattered. My body shook behind him as my climax rolled over and through me, tearing me apart and knitting me back together.

He slowed his hand but kept pumping into me gently, teasing out the edge of my climax. Rippling aftershocks from my orgasm left me dizzy and gasping, my hips jerkily trying to find the rhythm they had lost as I came

down from the high.

One last shudder trembled through me as Remy withdrew his hand from me.

My breath caught as I watched him bring his fingers to his mouth and suck them clean. My jaw dropped open. Part of me wanted to hide from embarrassment, but I was too turned on to really care.

The grin he flashed me was one hundred percent satisfied male.

“You taste fucking incredible.”

My stomach fluttered, my cheeks heated. I opened my mouth, but couldn’t speak.

Remy took advantage, leaning forward to kiss me. I could faintly taste myself on his tongue, which was definitely more erotic than I thought it would be. After a minute of his tongue twisting and tangling with mine, I felt those same nerve endings coming alive again.

My wolf hummed happily in my chest, ready for another round with our mate.

I lifted up onto an elbow, cupping his jaw with my free hand and feeling the impressive erection pressing into my hip.

Pulling my head back, I licked my lips, my gaze dropping to where he pressed into me. “Can—”

“No,” he cut me off.

My brows went into my hairline. “What?”

He looked at me, the passion fading and the exhaustion I had seen when he first came into the room back with a vengeance. “Can ... Can I just lay here with you?”

He was tired and drained, his eyelids already drooping. It had been a shit week for all of us, but especially for him. He hadn’t stopped going in days.

“That sounds perfect,” I admitted hoarsely, kissing his jaw and then his lips.

He climbed off the bed and pulled his shirt over his head. He was all tan skin stretched over contoured muscles that rippled with every single movement.

I freaking loved this view.

He quickly shucked his jeans, clearly not embarrassed by the prominent ridge outlined in his dark boxer briefs as he turned off the light by the bedside table.

I stood up and let my bra fall off the rest of the way before shimmying

out of my own jeans and leaving them on the floor. I slipped back into the bed, under sheets and into his massive embrace in just my underwear.

Remy pulled me against him, my back to his chest. With a contented sigh, I snuggled back into him. I felt the press of his arousal against the small of my back, but there was no panic swelling in my chest.

His arms came around me, one arm pillowing my head and his other hand curled possessively around my breast. Still, no fear. No worry.

Just Remy surrounding me as he fell asleep. It only took a few minutes for the even sounds of his breathing to lull me into my own dreamworld.

THERE WAS AN ARMY WAITING FOR US AT THE AIRPORT WHEN WE LANDED IN Washington the next afternoon.

Gabe had chartered a private plane for us to come back from Montana once the storm had lifted and the roads cleared. All of the faculty and half of the extra shifters he sent to patrol returned with us. The rest stayed with Remy and Rhodes in Montana.

Remy promised he would be back in Blackwater within forty-eight hours, but I was already feeling the separation. My wolf paced inside me, a caged animal with shot nerves.

I knew exactly how she felt.

The two hour flight had been hell to sit through. I couldn't keep from fidgeting, anxiety growing with every minute that pulled me further away from Remy.

By the time the plane landed, I was a mess. Larkin actually moved to put a seat between us after I kicked her in the leg for the fifth time from crossing and uncrossing my legs. Katy was sitting across from me, but she hadn't really spoken except when the plane was about to take off.

In a quiet, reserved, and very un-Katylike manner, she had apologized to the pack for her foolish actions before taking a window seat and staring out it for the next few hours.

If leaving Remy was hell on me, I knew it was killing her to leave Maren.

But I couldn't bring myself to try and cheer her up. When I looked at her, I saw the gun being pointed at Remy's head. I saw the man shoot himself, blood spraying across the white snow. My stomach cramped thinking of all

the potentially catastrophic what-ifs.

I touched the pendant around my neck as I got off the plane and headed down the stairs to the tarmac. The crescent moon and star symbol that represented the Holts and our pack was my anchor to Remy right now.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I wanted to shift. I knew that it was highly unlikely our mate bond would connect over hundreds of miles, but I needed to try.

A fleet of black SUVs waited for us several yards away with a veritable horde of men gathered around the vehicles. Gabe stood at the front of the group of men flanking him, black aviator shades hiding his eyes from the setting sunlight.

We moved towards him as a unit. When we were a few feet away, Katy dropped her backpack onto the tarmac and took off running, launching herself into her dad's arms with a sob.

He caught her easily, hugging her tightly against him and whispering something in her ear that had her nodding. He set her down, and she moved back a few steps as we closed the remaining distance.

Surprisingly, Gabe stepped forward and pulled me into a hug. I hugged him back, tears threatening as an onslaught of emotions swept through me.

"Shh," he murmured. "It's okay, sweetheart."

I stepped back from him and looked over to see Larkin was hugging her dad. He finished hugging her, but kept an arm around her shoulders to keep her close.

Gabe sighed softly as he looked at the pack. "Welcome home, everyone."

The pack murmured back a subdued greeting.

Gabe gestured to the SUVs. "We'll be taking all of you home. Once you've arrived, settle in. We're working on having the school ready to accept you as students in a few days. Faculty has already been briefed, but we know you'll all need a few days to adjust."

He took a deep breath, and I could feel his eyes studying every single one of us behind his sunglasses.

"I know this has been a hard few days," he said gently, reaching over and taking Katy's hand in his. "I promise we're working to get to the bottom of it. We've set up some new rules we'll need you to follow. Your parents will discuss them with you when you get home."

He jerked his head to the right and I noticed Michael, one of his betas and one of the first people to welcome me to the pack. Michael gave me a warm

smile.

“Michael has your car assignments. All your luggage will be delivered to your homes once it’s been removed from the plane. Welcome home.”

I went to move towards the line forming in front of Michael, but Gabe reached out and snagged my wrist.

“You’re coming with us, Skye,” he told me. “I promised Remy and your mom I’d bring you home.”

I lifted my head to catch Larkin’s eyes. She smiled at me as she followed her father to a car.

“Thanks,” I told Gabe as I turned back to him.

He guided us to the first SUV, nodding to the three men waiting by it. Two got into the front seats, the third climbing into the last row of seating. I bit my lip when I saw the flash of a holstered gun at his side.

Katy moved and got into the last row of seating with him, leaving Gabe and I in the middle. As soon as the doors shut, the SUV took off out of the airport terminal.

I had my phone out before we cleared the gates.

SKYE: *We landed. Everyone is safe. Your dad met us. I’m in a car with him and Katy.*

I bit my lower lip and hesitated for a second.

SKYE: *Stay safe. I love you.*

I held my phone in my hands for a few minutes, waiting—*praying*—for a reply, but nothing came. Odds were he was up on the mountain with zero cell service.

Reluctantly I hit the button to put my phone in sleep mode and dropped it onto my lap. When I looked up and around, Gabe’s eyes were on me.

He reached across the empty seat between us and covered my hand with his. “Thank you. Remy and Katy both told us how you helped find her and take down those men. You saved both of their lives, Skye. That’s a debt I can’t repay.”

My brow furrowed. “You don’t owe me anything.” I glanced back at Katy, who was watching us with a wary expression.

“They’re family,” I told Gabe, turning back to him. “My family.” Saving them wasn’t just an option for me. It was the only decision I would ever make.

He smiled widely at me, the grin a slightly weathered version of the ones Remy frequently tossed my way.

My hands fisted as my heart pulsed heavily in my chest. Damn, I missed him.

Gabe pointed a finger at me. “You’re still one of my favorite kids. Maybe my most favorite.”

It was an ongoing joke in the Holt family that Gabe frequently changed his favorite child depending on the day or what the kid did. Usually it was whichever child caused the least amount of trouble that day.

He and Mallory accepted me into their family as Remy’s mate with zero prompting. I wasn’t just Remy’s girlfriend or Katy’s friend, but they made me feel like family.

We *were* family.

I smiled at him announcing me the new favorite, but I couldn’t miss the way Katy’s breath caught behind us.

Judging by the way Gabe’s mouth tightened, he didn’t miss it either.

“I’m sorry,” Katy whispered, sniffing.

I turned, stunned to see her in tears behind us. She blinked once and they fell down her pale cheeks, shattering soundlessly on her pale skin.

The shifter next to her slid further to the side, clearly not sure what to do with an emotional, crying teenage girl. His eyes darted from her to her father until he finally settled for looking out the window, his body stiff and rigid.

Gabe reached a hand out and hooked it around the back of her neck, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Look at me, Katherine.”

Her brown eyes met his slowly, a ragged sob catching in her throat. “I’m so sorry, Dad. I messed up.”

“Yes, you did,” he replied, not unkindly. “And trust me, your mother and I have a nice, long conversation planned for this evening to discuss what happened. But for now, you’re safe. You’re *all* safe, and that’s what matters.”

“Maren isn’t safe.” She closed her eyes, breaking down and resting her head on the top of our row of seats.

Gabe shifted, pressing his lips to the top of her hair. “I promise we’re doing everything to find her, sweetheart. No one is forgetting Maren just because we closed the school.”

“But *why*?” Katy half-demanded, half-begged. “Why are girls going missing? Don’t you know anything?”

“Nothing definitive,” Gabe replied softly, stroking her hair. His gaze caught mine, and I looked away.

Cassian had let a few details slip when he kidnapped me. Enough that we

knew my old pack had something to do with the missing women, but it wasn't much to go on. I had only told Gabe and Remy, and Gabe asked me to keep what I knew quiet while he and a few people he trusted looked into it.

"We have to find them. Dad, I can't ... I can't stand this. They could be doing *anything*—"

"You can't think like that," he cut her off firmly. "You'll go crazy imagining all the worst case scenarios, Kit-Kat. You need to stay positive and focused—that's what Maren needs from you. That's what we *all* need from you."

With a sniffle, Katy lifted her head and gave him a nod. "Okay."

Her eyes cut to me, and she snorted. "Are you sick of me apologizing yet?"

A small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. "Are you sick of acting like a brat yet?"

She choked on a laugh. "Yeah. I think so."

"Then we're good," I replied softly, reaching over to wipe the last tear from her cheek.

I jumped as my phone chimed in my lap. In my rush to turn the damn thing on, I almost dropped it.

I exhaled hard, relief making me lightheaded when I saw who it was from.

REMY: *Good. Call you tonight. I love you.*

"He's okay?" Gabe asked.

I looked up, blinking back a sudden rush of tears that threatened and cleared my throat. "He's good. He said he would call later."

Gabe nodded thoughtfully. "He'll be back soon."

"Not soon enough," I muttered, unable to catch the words before I said them.

Gabe chuckled beside me. "I know how you feel."

If anyone would know, it would be Gabe. He and Mallory had probably experienced the same issues when they were separated for too long.

Everything in me felt pulled tight, like a rubber band about to snap under the strain. My nerves were frayed and raw, my wolf was frustrated, and I wasn't much better. Even now I couldn't stop picking at the hem of my shirt or bouncing my knee.

"Is it always going to be like this?"

His mouth flattened. "Honestly? To a degree, yes. But you and Remy ...

There's something different about you two."

That caught my attention, and clearly Katy's too.

"What do you mean?" she asked, leaning forward between us.

Gabe looked at each of us. "You two bonded a lot faster, and younger, than most. There hasn't been a couple your age that bonded in ... a long time. I don't even know how long. Plus the bond between you two is strong. Maybe the strongest I've seen in a long time."

Katy looked at me. "You guys act a lot like my parents."

"But Mal and I have been bonded for years. The wolf link Skye and Remy have? It's like everything is on steroids with these two. It takes most bonded pairs *years* to be able to communicate verbally through that connection."

"Years?" I repeated. The first night we bonded, that night in the woods, I heard Remy's voice in my head as clear as could be.

Gabe nodded. "It usually starts slow; picking up on the other's feelings or emotions. Like an impression. Then basic words. Sentences come later. It's like a toddler learning to talk. It's a process."

"Whoa," Katy murmured, shooting me a knowing stare. "You guys are geniuses."

"Ha ha," I deadpanned, rolling my eyes.

Gabe gave me a once over. "Even your healing is faster than most shifters. That fall you took last year should have killed you."

My stomach dipped dangerously as I remembered how close I had come to dying.

"Something in you kept fighting." Gabe shrugged. "Probably the same thing that kept Remy in wolf form by your side for weeks. It definitely helped you heal faster."

"So, we're not normal," I said slowly. Because of course. Nothing in my life was ever normal.

"Normal is relative," Gabe replied with a fleeting smile. "We don't know that much about true bonded mates. They're getting rarer and rarer as the population dwindles."

Normal might be relative, but God, I could use some normal.

MOM WAS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE APARTMENT COMPLEX WHERE OUR HOME was when the car pulled up. Her face broke into a gorgeous smile and she clapped her gloved hands together, the pom on the top of her knit beanie bouncing as she literally jumped up and down.

I was unbuckled and out of the car before all four tires came to a stop. My feet hit the ground and I was swept up in her arms.

“You’re back!” she cried happily, rocking us back and forth. After a second she pulled back, her gloved hands warm against my cheeks as she studied me.

A soft sigh escaped her. “Have you talked to Remy since you landed?”

Mom and I had endured literal hell together and that made us closer than most teenagers were with their parents. She knew how I felt about Remy, and was even supportive of us being together.

Scratch that.

She was supportive of anything that made me happy after a lifetime of, well, *hell*.

And Remy definitely made me smile ... when he wasn’t hundreds of miles away, potentially unearthing dangerous things that could get him hurt.

My wolf whined inside of me, and I literally had to shake myself out of that thought-spiral before I drove myself crazy.

“He texted me when we were on our way here.”

“Any idea when he’ll be back?” She smoothed my hair away from my face and looked over my shoulder where Gabe had gotten out of the car.

“Soon,” Gabe replied firmly. “I told him to check a few things out and get

back here. I want the entire pack home and safe.”

Lips pressed into a thin line, Mom stepped away from me and gave the Alpha her full attention. “Do you know anything yet?”

“Nothing concrete,” Gabe admitted. “We’re working a few angles.”

“But nothing you can share with the pack,” Mom finished with a frown. “People are getting anxious, Gabe. And anxious wolves aren’t a good thing. We had to break up another fight at the cafe today.”

My jaw dropped. “A fight?”

Gabe grimaced. “I’m sorry, Addie. I’ll increase patrols to the downtown area.”

Mom managed a cafe in the heart of Blackwater, something she absolutely loved. But Blackwater was a relatively peaceful pack and town. So much so that we didn’t hesitate to let normals (aka humans) come through and visit the town. Backpackers in particular loved the town nestled into the side of the mountains.

Gabe rubbed the back of his neck. “Since you work with a lot of the tourists, you should know we’re considering closing the borders and keeping the humans out.”

“Can you do that?” I asked, stunned.

Gabe nodded. “We can, and we will.”

“But won’t people talk?”

“We won’t go on a full lockdown unless absolutely necessary. But we can deny wildlife permits and close the trails. That will cut down on the human presence significantly. Luckily it’s winter so not many hikers are around.”

“But spring is a few weeks away,” Mom reminded him with a frown. “A lot of the local businesses have come to rely on the added income from tourists.”

“I know. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, we need to circle the wagons until we know exactly what we’re dealing with.” Gabe gave her a long look. “And the offer stands, Addie. Anytime.”

Mom nodded, forcing a smile. “Thanks, Gabe. I appreciate it.”

Clearly I was missing something.

“What—”

Mom turned and grabbed my hand. “Let’s get you inside and settled, okay?”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I looked back at Gabe. “Thanks again for the ride.”

Gabe gave me a quick hug. “Anytime, sweetheart. Your things should be

here within the hour. They finished unloading the plane a little while ago. We'll see you soon."

I waved to Katy when he opened the door. The SUV pulled away within seconds of Gabe closing the door.

"What was that about?" I demanded.

"What was what about?" Mom wrinkled her nose. "How do you feel about lasagna for dinner?" She turned and headed into the apartment complex.

"You know I love anything with pasta and cheese," I admitted, following her. "But what did Gabe mean? What offer?"

Mom pressed the button for the elevator and frowned at me. "Gabe and Mallory offered to let us move in with them. Just until things settle down."

I was still picking my jaw up off the floor when I followed Mom into the elevator.

"Move *in*?"

She finally met my eyes. "Yes. Gabe, and Remy, thought we might be nervous being on our own. They offered to let us stay with them until things calm down."

"Remy never mentioned it to me," I replied, a little surprised but at the same time not really. I hesitated, peeking over at her. "Are we safe here?"

Mom gave me a tight lipped smile and nodded. "Yeah, baby. Gabe has really locked down our borders. We're safe inside Blackwater. A bunny tripped one of the sensors they set up last week and was taken down by three guards."

I giggled, unable to get that imagery out of my head.

She bit her lower lip. "Honey, I understand if you want to go and stay with the Holts."

The elevator doors opened, and Mom stepped out before I could reply.

"You don't want to?" I pressed, joining her in the hallway.

She sighed, her shoulders rising and falling as she started to shake her head. "Gabe and Mallory are wonderful."

"But?" I arched a brow expectantly.

"But being back in an Alpha house," she cleared her throat, rubbing the scar on her shoulder absently, "or *living* in one ... It brings up a lot of memories I'm not ready for right now."

My heart twisted in my chest. "Mom."

She backed against the wall with a watery smile, waving me off. "It's my

issue, baby. If you want to go stay with them, you absolutely should. Remy's your mate, and I get it. I would never try to keep you guys apart."

Remy was my mate, but she was also my mother.

Slowly, I reached out and took her hand in mine. "I'm not leaving you here by yourself."

She grimaced, but I could see the flicker of hope in her green eyes. "I know you love Remy. I get it if you would rather be with him."

"I do love him. So much," I agreed, my heart practically tripling in size just thinking of him. "Remy and I are going to be together for the rest of our lives. For right now, I think I should stay with you."

"Really?"

I nodded, smiling. "Yeah."

Mom gave me a fierce grin and threw an arm around my shoulders as she hugged me to her side. "You're pretty amazing, honey."

With a laugh, I hooked an arm around her waist. "Tell me something I don't know." I knew it was the right call, but part of me was a little bummed that I no longer had Remy right down the hall from me.

I stifled a snort because that was a lie. Most nights we slept in his bed. Sleeping alone was definitely going to be an adjustment.

"Before we go in," Mom started, covering my hand when I reached for the doorknob, "there's something else I need to talk to you about."

"Okay," I said slowly, unease already starting to settle in my gut as I looked at the door and then at her. "What's going on?"

"Zara and Bella asked if they could join us for dinner. They're waiting inside," Mom explained quietly.

Zara, my mom's best friend and my uncle's mate as well as the person who helped us escape. And Bella, my cousin who had been gang raped by Cassian and his friends and was slowly starting to rebuild her life. When I had left from winter break, Bella was just starting to heal.

"Bella's been asking about you," Mom finished. She spread her hands wide helplessly. "Bella hasn't left their place in weeks. If it was going to get her out of the house ... I couldn't say no to Zara."

Now *that* was a surprise. My cousin and I had never been close when we lived in Long Mesa. We had maybe had a couple of conversations since she and her mom came to Blackwater seeking sanctuary.

"Why?" The word escaped me before I could censor myself.

Mom's lips pressed together. "Honestly? I think because she's seen that

you didn't let what happened to you before define you. She needs to see another survivor living and thriving to give herself something to hope for."

"What we went through ... Mom, it's not the same thing," I said quickly, shaking my head. "Cassian and his friends did stuff to me, but things never went *that* far."

Fury flashed in her eyes, and then regret. Her jaw clenched. "I know, baby."

With a heavy sigh, I reached out and opened the door.

Bella was sitting at the barstool on the small counter that bridged the galley kitchen and tiny dining room as Zara set a tray of lasagna on the stovetop.

Bella's green eyes lifted when she saw me, but that was the only acknowledgement I got before she looked away, focusing on the paperback in front of her.

Zara tossed the oven mitts on the counter and came forward, sweeping me into a giant hug. "Welcome home, Skye."

"Thanks, Aunt Zara," I replied, hugging her back.

When Zara pulled back, I could see the shiny, raised scar on her temple. A permanent mark courtesy of my uncle for something she did that pissed him off.

"Dinner's ready," she told us, turning as Mom closed the front door to go back into the kitchen.

I took a step towards the hall. "I'm going to put my backpack in my room."

I didn't wait for anyone to answer me as I headed for my room at the end of the hallway. The door was already open and I smiled seeing my mom had clearly been in here.

Clean sheets were on the bed, there was a soft fragrance from a candle burning on my desk, and every surface was completely void of dust.

Mom had turned into a bit of a neat freak since we relocated packs.

I dropped my backpack next to my desk as my phone went off in my pocket. As fast as I could, I dug it out of my pocket and unlocked the screen.

REMY: *Make it home ok?*

A soft smile tugged at my lips, my heart warming.

SKYE: *Yeah. Mom invited Zara and Bella over for dinner. We're about to eat now.*

I sighed, hesitating a second before I typed out another text.

SKYE: *Mom told me about your dad's offer to come stay with you guys. We're going to stay in our place. Is that okay?*

REMY: *As long as I still get to see you.*

I grinned, tucking my chin to my chest.

SKYE: *Definitely*

REMY: *I'll call you later, k?*

SKYE: *Sounds perfect*

Text bubbles appeared for a brief second before his message joined the text conversation.

REMY: *I love you.*

My eyes slid shut for a second, my entire being centering around those three words. I took a deep breath and typed my reply.

SKYE: *I love you. Be safe.*

REMY: *Always*

“Is that your ... mate?”

I nearly dropped the phone as I whirled around. My wide eyes settled on Bella.

“Hey. I didn't hear you,” I said, putting the phone on the corner of my desk.

Bella looked better than the last time I had seen her, but definitely a lot thinner and more fragile than when she had been the reigning princess of Long Mesa.

She arched a single brow. “I get that a lot.” Her eyes moved to the phone. “That's him?”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. That's Remy.”

Bella frowned, her pretty mouth pressed into a thin line. “Mom said that you're bonded to him?”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath.

A bitter look passed briefly over her face. “Good for you.”

“How have you been?” I asked suddenly, trying to shift the topic.

A blank look settled on her face. “Since being raped by a guy obsessed with you and then passed around like a joint to all of his friends? Since having my father turn his back on me? Since losing my pack?”

My mouth went dry. “Bella, I didn't mean—”

“I know,” she cut me off with a frustrated sigh. “I get it a lot, you know? The looks. The whispers. I just wish someone would come out and say it instead of politely dancing around what happened.” She walked over and sat

down on my bed.

“Do people know what happened?” I asked softly.

A dark look passed her face. “A few. I mean, my dad is an Alpha. The fact that Mom and I left caused a lot of speculation. Mostly it’s the rumors that I hear pieces of.”

I tried to pick my words carefully. “My mom told me that you’re being homeschooled the rest of the semester?”

Bella snorted delicately and picked at the hem of her sweater. “Yeah. Which adds another layer of mystery to the new girl. I just ... I miss the way things used to be, you know?”

I flinched back.

No, I didn’t know. And I sure as hell didn’t want things to go back.

Bella’s green eyes went wide. “Crap. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just ... I mean, we didn’t have the same experiences in Long Mesa.”

Bitterness filled my mouth, the taste acidic and metallic. “No, I guess we didn’t.”

She ducked her head. “I’m sorry. I feel like you’re the only one who kind of gets what happened to me. I mean, I know what happened to me isn’t what happened to you. At least you got out in time.”

“You mean because I wasn’t raped?” I replied coldly, folding my arms over my chest to keep from showing her how much my hands shook. “You mean because I only dealt with seventeen years of being treated like shit, listening to and watching people I loved be forced to do unspeakable things? The whole time knowing there was a literal clock over my head until it was my turn?”

Bella’s face went ashen. She fidgeted, twisting her fingers together. “I didn’t—”

Rage flushed through me, heating my blood. “I’m sorry for what happened to you, Bella. I really am. And maybe I’m luckier than you because things never went *that* far. But things went a hell of a lot further than they ever should have. I was a *kid*. I went through hell every single day.”

She got to her feet, her hands up in surrender. “All I’m trying to say is our situations were similar.”

I stayed silent, not trusting myself to say something I would regret. I could feel my wolf pushing against me, expressing her unhappiness.

She rubbed the side of her face absently. “I just miss how it used to be. My old life was ... I just miss it.”

My entire body shook, the leash I had my wolf on was dangerously close to slipping through my grasp. The last few days had been a cycle of never ending drama and stress, and now she was separated from her mate. The animal caged inside of me needed an out.

“What you went through was awful,” I ground out through clenched teeth. “But if you think I’m going to reminisce about the days when things were better, I’m *not* that girl. While you were going to the mall and being treated like a princess, I was listening to my mother be violated every single day. You and your *friends* were hanging out while I was literally running for my life.”

I watched her visibly swallow.

“And since you want to remember days gone by, don’t think I don’t remember every time you walked in on your *boyfriend* holding me down, terrorizing me, or threatening me. You saw it, Bella, and you didn’t do a damn thing to stop it. No one did.”

A ragged sob at the door caught my attention, my head swinging towards it. I winced when I saw my mom standing there, tears falling hard and fast down her cheeks. Zara was behind her, just as pale as her daughter.

After a heavy second, Zara cleared her throat. “Bella, I think we should go.”

“No,” I cut her off, realizing I sounded like a colossal bitch, but still having way too many emotions roiling around inside of me. “I need to go for a run.”

“Honey, I don’t think you should go out there like this,” Mom whispered. I gave her a dark look. “You said it’s safe if I stay in Blackwater.”

“It is,” she said softly, “but you’re upset. I think you should stay here.”

That wasn’t an option. In a few seconds I would lose the battle I was currently in to hold my wolf back.

“I’ll only be a few minutes, and I’ll stay near town, well inside the borders. But I can’t stay in *here*.” I didn’t wait for their answer, but thankfully they moved out of the way as I headed for the door.

I paused in front of Mom, forcing my lips to smile. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes, tops.”

It took minutes for me to exit the apartment and run down the fire escape. Thankfully no one was behind the building. I had my clothes off and shifted in seconds, the transition one of the fastest I’d ever had.

Once all four feet were on the ground, some of the tension leaked away. I

let my wolf take over, running for the trees a few hundred yards away.

There were obvious patrols, both in human and wolf form, as I ran into the forest. Once I disappeared into the treeline, I slowed down and reached out, feeling for Remy, needing our connection to reassure me.

But all I got was empty silence.

THE DOOR TO MY ROOM OPENED AND A SECOND LATER, MOM'S HEAD POKED in. Her expression softened when she saw me laying in bed, still awake despite saying I was going to bed almost eight hours ago.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asked, her voice quiet in the dimness of the room.

"No," I admitted, flopping onto my back with a sigh.

After coming home from my run, Mom and I ate in silence. Bella and Zara were gone by the time I returned. I headed to my room and put away my things that had arrived from school, killing time until I could talk to Remy.

He called, but only to say he was going into a meeting. The conversation lasted fifty-eight seconds according to the log on my cell phone.

I tried watching tv, reading, and sleeping but my brain was too preoccupied and anxious to let me do anything except stare at my ceiling and replay memories I would rather not think about, including how I lashed out at Bella last night.

She didn't deserve a lot of the shit I had said, and I owed her an apology.

Mom pushed the door open a little more and glanced down at her watch. "Want me to call Zoe and see if she can cover me?"

Mom was supposed to open the cafe at six, and it was after five now. Calling Zoe meant things definitely wouldn't open on time, plus Zoe was pregnant and needed her rest.

"No, don't do that. I'm fine."

"I'll be home by dinner," she offered with a smile. "If you're bored, you can always come hang out at the cafe."

I smiled at that. “Thanks. I think I’ll call Larkin when it’s not the buttcrack of dawn. I’ll hang out with her and Katy.”

Mom nodded, her ponytail bobbing. “Sounds good, honey. Call me and let me know if you’re going out, though, okay?”

“I will,” I promised.

She started to close the door. “And try to get some sleep.”

I couldn’t suppress my yawn. “I’ll try.”

She closed my door, and I listened to her footsteps fade as she walked down the hall. A few minutes later the front door opened and closed.

With a groan, I rolled onto my side, my back to the door.

God, I wanted to sleep. I wanted to escape into that nothingness void where time flew by.

I pulled the collar of my shirt up over my nose and inhaled deeply, letting the scent of Remy steady me.

I had grabbed his shirt on a whim when I packed and pulled it on last night before I climbed into bed. If I couldn’t sleep with him, at least I could keep his scent with me.

My wolf sighed a rumble of approval, both of our frayed nerves calmed by the familiar scent of pine and earth.

I forced my eyes to close, blanking out my mind to try and find sleep yet again. I pulled the flannel sheets and comforter around my shoulders, burrowing into the little cocoon I created in my bed.

My bedroom door opened behind me.

“What did you forget?” I asked Mom, not bothering to roll over now that I found a comfortable position.

Maybe I would actually fall asleep.

The bed dipped as she sat down next to me.

I rolled over. “Mom, seriously, I’m fi—”

The words died, my eyes going wide as my jaw dropped.

Remy arched his brows down at me, a teasing smile on his lips.

“Definitely not your mom, babe,” he told me with a grin as he reached out and traced the bridge of my nose with a calloused finger.

I sat up, shoving the covers away and wrapping my arms around his neck. I pressed my nose to his throat, inhaling deeply and realizing the shirt I had on was a pale comparison to the actual scent of him in my arms.

Remy’s arms came around me, lifting me up and settling me on his lap so I was straddling him. I hadn’t bothered with shorts or pants when I got into

bed, and the intimate position exposed the entire length of my legs.

I picked up my head, my hands coming around to frame his face. The dark stubble on his jaw rubbed against my palms.

“You’re really here?” I breathed.

He raised a hand to cradle my jaw, the warmth of his skin pressing to mine sending a shiver skittering down my spine.

“I’m really here,” he promised, his nose brushing mine as he lowered his head and sealed his mouth over mine.

I gasped into his mouth, my chest arching into him as my tongue met his stroke for stroke. Fire ignited in my belly, the flames spreading through my veins until I was ready to combust.

He took his time reacquainting himself with my mouth, his tongue licking and exploring, tasting and driving me crazy. His lips moved unhurriedly against mine, his teeth nibbling on my lower lip as he kissed me.

My head dropped back on a ragged breath, and he moved his assault from my mouth to my jaw. My throat, and then lower.

A low groan fell from my lips as he suckled the tender flesh on the side of my neck. I felt his lips curve into a wicked grin as his tongue soothed over the heated skin.

His hand slid up my spine, tracing the ridges and dips of my bones, smoothing over the muscles until his fingers tangled in my hair.

The hand by my knee teased the exposed skin of my thigh, dragging up and down, but always stopping when he hit the hem of the shirt I wore. *His* shirt.

Heat pooled lower in my belly, my center clenching as I unconsciously rolled my hips to his.

Now Remy was the one who groaned. The guttural sound low sent shivers racing across my skin.

“God, you feel amazing,” he murmured, his eyes hooded and molten as he watched me.

I ground my hips down once more, my eyes fluttering shut for a second as my center came into contact with the hard ridge in his jeans. I bit down on my lip to stifle the cry at the sharp pleasure. I repeated the action, my movements bordering on edgy and almost animalistic.

My wolf growled inside of me, desperate for *more*.

His hand again trailed up my thigh ... and then retreated.

I whimpered, my thighs tightening against him as I pressed against him

again.

“Skye—”

“Touch me,” I begged, needing something. Needing more. Every nerve came alive, sparking and searching for his touch.

I wasn’t even sure if it was me or my wolf dictating things right now. All I knew was I needed a lot more than I was getting at the moment to put out the inferno blazing through me.

I leaned forward, my mouth landing hot and open against his throat. My teeth scraped against the soft skin that joined his neck and massive shoulder.

That snapped whatever tether of self-control Remy had.

He flipped me onto my back, his hips settled between my legs in a way that felt so fucking perfect, but so fucking wrong.

There were too many layers of clothes separating us.

My hand blindly groped for the front of his jeans, and he hissed out a sharp breath when I brushed against the hard length of him.

“Fuck, Skye,” he whispered.

Yeah, that’s the general idea.

“Okay,” I agreed with a grin, reaching for him again.

His hand caught mine, stopping me. “Wait.”

Wait.

Wait?

My head fell back against the pillows. “What’s wrong?”

He winced, his eyes squeezing shut for a second like he was in pain.

And, judging by the impressive hard on he currently had pressing against his jeans, he very well might have been.

“This ... this isn’t what I came here for,” he finally ground out, opening his eyes.

My eyes narrowed a second before I offered what I hoped was a seductive sort of smile. “Then consider it an added bonus.”

He huffed out a strangled chuckle. “I didn’t come here for ...”

He trailed off, and something that looked like a faint blush tinged his cheeks.

My lips curved into a wicked smile. “A hook up?”

He chuckled warmly, pressing a chaste kiss to my forehead. “Yeah.”

“That’s why it’s an added bonus,” I repeated, kissing the underside of his jaw.

He groaned, the sound rumbling out of him in a way that curled my toes.

“Babe, we have to stop ... or I might not be able to. And as much as I want you? I don’t want to be too fucking exhausted to spend hours memorizing every single thing about you the first time I’m inside you.”

My cheeks heated as I looked up at him through my lashes. “Oh.”

His eyes went soft and melty as he smoothed my hair away from my face. “Can I just stay here with you for awhile?”

Now that the haze of lust was clearing, I could see the exhaustion on his face. Dark circles pressed hard under his eyes, the lines around his smiling lips were deeper than usual.

A loud yawn pulled my mouth apart before I could stop it.

“Maybe I’m not the only tired one,” he teased.

“I didn’t sleep last night,” I admitted.

He grinned. “Miss me?”

“That,” I agreed with a laugh, but then sobered. “But I also kind of yelled at Bella.”

His brows rose and he shifted over me, rolling over to lay alongside me, but twisting our bodies so we were still facing each other. The leg pressed between mine stirred something in me that I wanted to explore when we both weren’t ready to pass out.

“You yelled at Bella?” He propped his head up in his hand, his bicep straining against the short sleeve of his tee.

I reached up and traced the firm skin there. “Yeah. It was stupid, and I sounded like a psychotic bitch.”

His dark brows snapped together. “Somehow I doubt that.”

My fingertip trailed over the edge of his shirt. “She said something about how she missed the good times from Long Mesa. I not-so-gently reminded her I didn’t have those same memories.”

His mouth flattened. “I’m still not seeing how you did anything wrong, babe.”

I searched his eyes with mine. “I said some shit I shouldn’t have. About Bella. And Cassian.”

Fury flared bright in his eyes for a second at the mention of Cassian.

“I don’t know, Rem,” I said slowly, shaking my head. “I just feel so ... out of control all the time anymore. Like all of my emotions are more volatile than usual.”

His hand settled on my hip, his thumb gently moving in a soothing circle. “I think we’ve all been on edge lately.”

“It’s more than that,” I insisted. “I actually wanted to talk to Elias about it, but he never came back from winter break and then the school closed ...”

“So, talk to me,” he replied simply, zero judgement in his eyes.

“It’s kind of hard to talk about you *to* you,” I muttered before I could think to censor myself.

His eyes narrowed. “What does *that* mean?”

I moved my hand to his chest, feeling it thump steadily and knowing that every beat of my own heart matched his perfectly.

“It’s nothing *bad*,” I tried to explain. “I just feel ... I can’t explain it. Like the bond is getting more intense? Or like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting to fall over the edge.”

He frowned at me. “And is that a bad thing?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I love you. Maybe it’s because I grew up having no idea that bonds like this existed? I mean, it’s not like I watched normal couples or mates when I was growing up. It was always ... violent or a last resort or forced. Love was never a factor.”

“I never thought of it like that,” he answered after a beat. “I had my parents. And even now, if something feels off or I have questions, especially about the bond, I can ask them. They’ve been through it.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I can’t exactly ask my mom about this stuff. I don’t want her to think I blame her for anything.”

“You can ask *me*,” he said gently. “We’ll figure it out together.”

I nodded slowly, that answer giving me a small sense of peace.

“Speaking of together,” I said, changing the subject, “why are we together right now?”

A smirk caught his mouth. He leaned forward and kissed me way too fast for my liking. “Because I love you, and I wanted to see you.”

This boy.

“Good answer,” I teased. “But did you figure anything out?”

He sighed, his expression falling. “Not much. Nothing substantial. We were able to get a serial number off the snowmobile of the guy who ... didn’t make it. We traced the sale back to a distributor near the Norwood territory, but the company who bought it is a shell company.”

“Great. What about the guy?”

“No ID, no way of identifying him,” Remy said with a grimace. “He was definitely a shifter, and the rifle he had aimed at Katy was full of tranqs.”

“So, they were going to take her,” I whispered.

He exhaled hard and nodded. “Yeah. We couldn’t figure out where his friend escaped to. By the time the storm cleared and we got back up the mountain, the trail was completely covered. But Ryder’s pretty sure the gasoline he smelled where Maren went missing is the same kind that was in the snowmobile left behind.”

“It was the same guys.” My stomach dipped realizing how close we had come to losing Katy.

“Looks like it,” he replied, shaking his head. “We all finished up last night. There was another storm coming in, so Rhodes and I decided to leave last night and try to beat it.”

“That sounds reckless,” I chided.

He grinned. “Maybe, but we didn’t crash. And if we would’ve waited for our flight to be rescheduled or the roads to be cleared, I wouldn’t be back until next week.”

He reached out, his arm coming around my back and pulling me close. He dipped his head and inhaled deeply.

“*That* wasn’t an option,” he murmured against me. “We got into town about an hour ago. I gave my dad the rundown and headed over here. Your mom let me in as she was leaving.”

“I missed you,” I said softly, touching his jaw.

His eyes slid shut as he nuzzled into my touch. “I missed you, too.”

I yawned again, and Remy turned me in his arms, pulling my back flush to his chest. One arm slid under my pillow, and the other arm banded around my waist, anchoring me to him.

Finally, I was able to fall asleep.

AFTER SPENDING THE WEEKEND HOME—BECAUSE I LOVED SAYING THAT I HAD a *home*—it was a bit of a shock to start school all over. The weekend hanging out with my friends had been great, even if Katy was still pretty subdued. I had gone to bed dorkishly excited to go to a new school.

Rhodes joked I was channeling my inner Larkin.

Morning came way too soon for me, the sun prying its fingers through my blinds to wake me up. All I wanted to do was roll over and snuggle back into the cocoon of pillows and blankets, until I remembered why I had gone to bed so giddy in the first place.

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel terrified at the idea of the first day of school in a new place. I was actually looking forward to being with my pack, and seeing my friends. That helped shake off the last traces of sleepiness weighing me down.

Kicking off my blankets, I quickly stood up and surveyed the mess that was my room. I had gotten seriously into prepping for school last night, going so far as to pick out a couple outfits (because a girl needed options) and get my backpack ready.

And maybe pre-sharpening almost a dozen pencils.

But I definitely needed a shower first.

I opened my door and froze, not expecting to see my mom standing on the other side, hovering at the door like she had been about to knock.

“Mom?” I arched a brow.

She flashed a too-bright smile, her green eyes glittering with energy. “Hey, sweetheart. I was thinking pancakes for breakfast? Or waffles?”

I blinked slowly, suddenly not sure if I was still in bed dreaming.

She frowned when I didn't answer, the smooth skin of her forehead furrowed in thought. "Maybe an omelet? I have sausage and bacon, or I can do a veggie one."

My head tilted to the side. "I can have cereal." I liked cereal, actually.

Correction: I liked cereal that hadn't expired months before I ate it.

My former pack had only given us expired boxes with stale cereal inside, the texture more chewy than crunchy.

One of my favorite discoveries had been the cereal aisle when I went on a trip to the grocery store. I had set a personal goal to try every kind of cereal, and so far I was twelve kinds into my goal.

I definitely erred toward the more sugary side, but mostly I loved the crisp crunch when I bit down. Larkin had gotten me to try adding milk to my cereal once, but I nearly choked as the cereal went from fresh to a soggy, mushy mess.

I almost gagged thinking about the way it sat in my mouth like someone had already chewed it up for me. Blech.

"Cereal is so ... plain," Mom replied with a shrug, dismissing the idea. "Oh! I've gotten pretty good at crepes."

I leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, trying not to laugh. "Okay, what's going on?"

Mom looked down, her expression turning sheepish. "It's your first day of school. Sort of. I've never been able to make you a big breakfast before sending you off to school, so I thought it would be nice."

My lips parted in surprise. "Mom—"

She quickly waved me off. "It was stupid. I know you're not a little kid, but ... I guess I wanted to give you one first that you should have had growing up. Like a normal, family meal before your first day of school."

Pressing my lips into a line, I felt the hot sting of tears prick the backs of my eyes. "Honestly? I would love whatever you make, as long as you make it and have breakfast with me."

She blinked once at me a second before a grin split her gorgeous face. "Deal. And then I can drive you to school?"

"Actually, Remy was going to pick me up," I admitted.

"Oh, don't make him go out of his way. Besides, I can even walk you to your first class," Mom added. She lifted a hand to my cheek. "Don't want my baby to get lost on her first day."

My heart stuttered for a second before I caught the teasing glint in her eye. I rolled my eyes. “Ha ha.”

She reached out, running her hands through my hair. “Maybe we should braid your hair, too. Want me to pick out your outfit?”

I batted her hand away with a laugh. “You’re hysterical.”

She winked at me and turned for the kitchen, her long blond hair cascading over a shoulder. “Breakfast in twenty. Move your butt.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned and headed for the bathroom. By the time I emerged from my shower in a cloud of steam, I could smell breakfast. The enticing scent pulled me down the hallway and into the kitchen where I sank into a table at our small breakfast nook.

Mom turned from the stove, passing me a giant plate of waffles.

“Uh, mom,” I started, eyeing the massive stack with hungry and concerned eyes. “There’s no way we can eat all of these.”

Without missing a beat, she crossed the small kitchen towards the front door. Like it had been rehearsed, a knock sounded a second before she swung open the door.

I nearly dropped the plate I was holding onto the table when Remy stepped inside the apartment, flashing my mom a grin.

“Hi, Ms. Markham,” he greeted warmly a second before his eyes found me. His gaze swept over me, heated and heating.

“Remy,” Mom replied, her tone amused. She looked back at me. “I thought I would invite Remy to breakfast, too.” Her lips curved devilishly as she realized I still hadn’t spoken. “Unless you would rather him not be here.”

Catching onto her teasing, Remy moved back and reopened the door. “I should probably go.” His dark eyes were dancing as he grinned at me. “I’ll see you at school, Skye.”

“No!” I said quickly, almost knocking over my glass of juice.

They both laughed, and while I knew it was at my expense, there was something decidedly awesome about watching my mom and boyfriend getting along. These were the two most important people in my life; I needed them to like each other.

Remy closed the door and kicked off his boots. They were disturbingly huge next to my sneakers and Mom’s non-slip shoes she used for work.

Mom headed back to the stove as Remy came over to join me. He paused by my chair, his hand finding the back of my neck and twisting in my damp hair. Curling it around his fist, he gently tugged my head back so he had

access to my mouth.

The second his lips touched mine, flames licked along my veins, heating my blood. I managed to snag a finger on the front pocket of his jeans, but he had already stepped back and ended the kiss.

Mom turned and frowned at me in exasperation. “Skye, let the poor boy sit down and eat.”

She had completely missed his quick assault on my mouth—and my senses.

Rolling my eyes, I let Remy go. He chuckled and sat in the chair next to me. Setting a plate of bacon on the table, Mom finally joined us, sitting across.

The table was small and usually only sat Mom and myself, which meant Remy’s massive frame was tucked close to me. Close enough that he was easily able to rest his left hand on my thigh while he lifted his own glass of juice.

“This looks great, Ms. Markham,” he started. “Thanks.”

“You can call me Addie, Remy,” she answered with a genuine smile. “Ms. Markham reminds me of ...” She flinched and I knew she was thinking of her own mother when her lips pressed together. As fast as she was caught in a memory she shook it off. “Just call me Addie.”

I knew Remy hadn’t missed her flashback, and I had told him enough of my crazy grandparents that he could easily read between the lines, but he also wasn’t going to make my mom anymore uncomfortable.

“Okay,” he agreed easily. “Thanks for breakfast, Addie.”

“You’re welcome.” Smiling, she started layering butter onto her waffle.

Remy’s hand squeezed my thigh for a second and then his hand was above the table, holding a knife as he cut into his own food.

As if on autopilot, I crossed my legs, my left hooking over the right so my toes brushed against the stiff denim of his jeans. A small dimple on his mouth was the only sign he noticed I shifted so we were still touching.

My appetite was almost completely gone, and now my entire body was humming with awareness of how close he was. It felt like anytime Remy was near, everything in me wanted to be near him or touching him. It was becoming an addiction that I couldn’t shake.

“Is something wrong with your food?” Mom asked.

Blinking I realized she and Remy were both watching me.

“Just ... thinking about the first day,” I managed, picking up a piece of

bacon and mechanically starting the chew.

Her green eyes narrowed, her hands settling into her lap.

She definitely was putting on her ‘Mom face.’

Shit.

“Honey, it’s natural to be nervous all things considered,” she said slowly and carefully, her eyes darting from me to Remy and back as she tried to avoid the landmines that were buried in my past.

I swallowed roughly, a partially chewed piece of bacon scraping down the inside of my throat. “No, really, I’m fine.”

Now Mom was openly exchanging looks with Remy.

Since when did my mother and Remy communicate with just looks? First joking and now nonverbal cues?

Irrational irritation spiked in me, my wolf not giving a shit that I was currently jealous of my *mother*.

“What’s with the looks?” I demanded, my tone definitely sharper than I intended.

Remy’s hand dropped back to my thigh, his thumb stroking against my jeans in a soothing rhythm. “Babe, we know that going to school with your pack is a touchy subject.”

Speaking of touchy, I could use a little more touch a little higher up the inside of my leg.

Whoa.

Whoa.

Where the hell had *that* come from? I was sitting at a table with my *Mom*. My mom, who I was currently annoyed at because she was getting along too well with my boyfriend?

Mate, a voice hissed inside of me. A voice that sounded a lot like my pissed off wolf.

Closing my eyes for a second, I shoved down the anger simmering and the prickly awareness that my mate was near me. Touching me.

Heat flashed over me, my senses suddenly consumed with the very male, very warm body of Remy brushing against me.

“Skye,” he said softly, curiously.

The deep timbre of his voice, the way it rumbled in his chest as he stroked my leg was my undoing.

“Excuse me,” I said quickly, standing up so fast I banged my knee on the table leg as I twisted to get up.

“Skye!” Mom called after me.

“I’m fine,” I answered back, heading out of the kitchen in what was nearly a sprint. “Just give me a second.”

I made it to my bedroom and slammed the door shut, leaning against it as blood roared in my ears and my heart thundered in my chest.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Pressing a hand to my chest, I tried to calm myself. Tried to calm the beast pitching a tantrum that would make a toddler proud.

Minutes ticked by. With each minute that passed I became all the more embarrassed by my reaction.

Had I really just jumped up and ran from my mom and Remy like a little kid? Was I actually pissed off at my mom for trying to have a good relationship with Remy? And was I really so completely incapable of controlling my hormones that I needed to physically remove myself from the area Remy was?

Heat crept up my neck, flushing my cheeks for a whole new reason.

This was quite possibly the most mortifying moment of my life.

A soft knock on my door brought a fresh new wave of humiliation.

I wasn’t sure who I wanted on the other side of that door. I owed a massive explanation to both of them, but I wasn’t even sure I understood what was going on with me.

I had suppressed the wolf side of me for so long, that maybe unleashing her the way I had a few months ago triggered some latent wolfish puberty I had skipped past.

This felt like a hell of a lot more than an out of control, hormonal outburst of a young shifter.

“Honey, please open the door.”

Mom.

Relief swamped me. I turned and opened the door quickly and my stomach dropped.

Mom was there, and so was Remy. Their twin expressions of worry hit me like a physical blow.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized quickly.

Remy reached out and pulled me in, hugging me tightly against his broad chest. His lips pressed softly, briefly, to the side of my neck.

“It’s fine, babe,” he told me, pulling back and tucking a chunk of hair behind my ear. He met my eyes, his clear gaze sharp and probing as he

looked at me with a lot of love and a healthy dose of alpha wolf.

“I don’t know what happened back there,” I whispered, looking from him to my mom.

Mom’s lips were pressed into a thin line. She hugged her arms around herself as she watched me, those emerald eyes eerily observant. “I think I do.”

“You do?” I echoed weakly.

Sighing, she looked down at our feet. “I messed up, baby.”

That caught my attention. “How did you mess up? Breakfast was awesome. I’m the one—”

She held up a hand. “Skye, this has nothing to do with breakfast and everything with me being a shitty mom.”

My jaw dropped. “Mom!”

Remy came around behind me, his presence at my back a grounding reassurance that I wasn’t alone. One hand rested on my hip, the light touch centering me.

Mom leaned against the wall across from my door, looking so much older than her thirty-six years. “Honey, the things you saw growing up ... the things that happened to you ...” She let out a long breath and looked up at the ceiling. “I should have taken you away from there long before last year.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and Remy’s hand tightened on my waist. “I thought we covered this awhile ago, Mom. I don’t blame you.”

“Maybe I still blame myself, honey,” she admitted softly. “At least you had a new environment at Granite Peak,” she went on, shaking her head, “but now it’s like being back ... there. Of course you’re going to feel overwhelmed.”

“Mom, that’s not ... I don’t ...”

I had no idea how to explain myself without revealing the real cause of my freak out a few minutes earlier. It had nothing to do with my past or Long Mesa and everything to do with the fact that I felt like I was losing my mind.

Especially where Remy was concerned.

“I don’t blame you,” I said finally. “And I’m really okay. It’s just ... nerves. But I’m going to walk into that school with Remy, Larkin, Katy, Rhodes ... all of my friends. *My pack*. I’m not alone anymore, Mom.”

She nodded at me slowly, but I could still see the swell of tears gathering at her lashes. One blink and they would fall.

Remy shifted closer behind me, his chest brushing against my back. I

leaned into the familiar, sheltering warmth of him. His hands settling on me, his strength at my back, was the calming agent I needed.

“Skye isn’t alone anymore, Addie,” he said softly but firmly. “I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“I know,” she replied, gratitude in her voice. “I’m glad she has you now. But it doesn’t change the fact that I failed her for most of her life.”

I opened my mouth to tell her she was wrong, but Remy cut me off.

“Maybe,” he agreed gently, “but you were as much a victim as Skye was. At least Skye had you looking out for her. You didn’t have your mom or anyone looking out for you. I think we can all agree that you did the best you could, and you got her out when it counted.”

Mom pressed a hand over her mouth, trapping a strangled sob there. The tears spilled over.

Remy’s hand slid around my hip and splayed flat against my stomach, his arm tight around me.

“Thank you for saving Skye,” he told her. “You saved my mate, and that’s a debt I’ll never be able to repay.”

“Take care of our girl,” Mom told him, her voice surprisingly fierce, “and we’ll call it even.”

“Always,” he vowed, loosening his hold on me so I could step forward and pull my mom into my arms.

Mom broke down, crying against me. Remy slipped around from behind me, briefly resting a hand on my mom’s back and meeting my eyes over her shoulder.

His eyes flickered to the front door down the hall, and I nodded in reply. I would meet him there in a minute, but right now Mom and I needed this moment alone together to heal a few of the scars that were still bleeding.

He gave me a tight smile, his dark eyes full of compassion and love as he stepped away and headed for the front door to give us privacy.

After several long minutes, her tears quieted and she pulled back. She wiped at the damp spot on my shoulder. “Dammit, you’ll need to change. I messed up your shirt.”

“It’ll dry,” I replied, not really giving a damn about my shirt.

She glanced back down the hallway before giving me a watery smile. “You’ve got a pretty amazing guy there.”

Warmth spread in my chest, but I tried to play it off with a shrug. “I guess I’ll keep him for now.”

That caused her to chuckle, which made me smile.

“I can stay home if you want,” I offered quietly. “We can hang out and talk or whatever.”

She reached up, cupping my cheek with a soft hand. “My beautiful, brave girl,” she murmured, her bright green eyes mirroring mine. “I do think we need to talk more. We haven’t really talked about what happened in Long Mesa much, and I don’t think it’s helping either of us by burying everything.”

As much as I wanted to never think about what happened back in that hellhole, I knew she was right. Remy had been telling me for a while now that suppressing things wasn’t healthy.

“I agree,” I answered.

“But for today? You need to go to school and have the best first day of your life.” She smiled at me, her petite nose wrinkling. “And then I want to hear all about it tonight.”

“Sounds great, Mom.”

She reached over and kissed my cheek. “Now go before I change my mind and decide to never let you leave my sight again.”

With a laugh, I ducked away and headed for my room. I grabbed my backpack from the floor and headed for the front door. I breezed through the kitchen where Mom was cleaning up our mostly untouched breakfast. I snagged a couple of waffles and wrapped them in a paper towel.

“Bye, Mom.”

“Have a good day, honey.”

We grinned at each other, loving this small little slice of normal.

The smile was still on my lips when I turned to see Remy waiting for me at the front door. He opened the door for me and we walked out into the hallway.

As soon as the door closed, I spun and wrapped my arms around his neck. His arms came around me in a hug that left me feeling loved and safe.

“I love you,” I said, pulling back so I could look into his eyes when I said it.

His gaze dropping to my lips for a second was the only warning I got before his mouth crashed down onto mine. His lips coaxed mine open, his tongue stroking into my mouth, exploring and caressing as his hands framed my face.

Breathless and dizzy, I stepped back.

“I love you, too,” he replied, lacing his fingers with mine and tugging me

down the hall.

FOR THE NEXT MONTH, NORMAL WAS EXACTLY WHAT I GOT. OR AT LEAST something that was sort of like normal for me.

I went to school, did my homework, hung out with my friends, managed to steal a few moments with Remy, and even started working part time at the diner with my mom. Winter slush started to melt into little patches of green. I hung out with Larkin, and sometimes Katy. The more time that slipped by with Maren being gone, the more withdrawn Katy became, which I knew had Remy and his parents worried.

Carving out time with Remy had proven tricky, especially now that we didn't live under the same roof. He still came and picked me up for school every morning, and we had almost every class together, but evenings and weekends usually involved him and his father prepping for the upcoming Spring Summit meeting that was scheduled in a couple weeks.

I wasn't looking forward to Remy being in Wyoming, where the meeting was being held this year, for two weeks. Especially since my birthday fell in the middle of the event. But at least he would come home and be free for the rest of the year. We could celebrate when he got home, finish out our senior year, and focus on college for the fall.

I still couldn't believe I had sent off my college applications the week before. What was once a completely unrealistic dream was now becoming a very definite reality.

I closed my English Lit book the same time the front door closed, signaling Mom was home from her Friday day shift, which was a freaking relief, because I was more than ready to go. I shoved the book away and got

to my feet, fully prepared to ignore the looming midterms until Sunday when I got back home.

The Holts had invited us for dinner at their house, and I was planning on having a sleepover with Katy tonight ... which basically translated to a sleepover with Remy. There was a scheduled pack run for Saturday night, which I was looking forward to. Aside from a few shifts here and there, my wolf hadn't gotten out much, and I definitely hadn't been able to run with Remy.

Gabe had called a pack council meeting for today, which meant Remy wasn't in school as he, his father and the council prepped for the upcoming Summit and their absences from the pack.

Mallory was supposed to go with them, but she wasn't sure about leaving Katy in charge of the twins right now considering Katy wasn't exactly in the best headspace.

"Skye, I'm home!" Mom yelled. I heard the jingle of keys hitting the kitchen counter.

I was already headed into the hallway. "Great, I'm ready to go."

Mom stopped in the middle of the kitchen and shook her head. "Am I allowed to shower first?"

My wolf whined impatiently inside me, and I felt her exasperation on a soul deep level. We hadn't seen or talked to Remy in almost two days now outside of a couple text messages.

I sighed. "I guess."

"Gee, thanks," Mom said, her voice thick with sarcasm as she walked by me. "Maybe you can keep studying while I'm getting ready?"

Now I groaned. "I've been studying since I got home from school."

"And another thirty minutes won't kill you," she retorted over her shoulder as she headed for the bathroom between our bedrooms.

"*Thirty* minutes?" I whined. Yes, a full blown whine of teenage angst at being denied being with my boyfriend for another half an hour.

She paused outside the bathroom and threw me a look. "I guess I could always call Mallory and tell her that tonight isn't a good night—"

"No, no," I quickly interrupted, heading for my bedroom to unearth the book I had just vowed not to touch until Sunday. "I'll wait."

With a smirk, Mom closed the bathroom door and a few seconds later the shower started.

I managed to read exactly one paragraph in the thirty-two minutes she

took to get ready. I loved English and books and reading in general. I was even considering becoming an English teacher when I went to college because I was so passionate about reading.

But I had also come to realize that the fastest way to stamp out any form of love of reading on a teenager was forcing them to read classical literature.

School had been a pretty lax term in Long Mesa. Honestly, it was more like self-learning than being taught. The teachers were untrained, worn down, or afraid of Cassian and his friends. Sometimes a combination of all three. It didn't make for the best instructors.

I had taught myself to love books with a limited library selection at the school. I had read every book in there, and saved every tattered book that was tossed into the garbage can by Mrs. Lewis, our librarian/English teacher/History teacher. Those books I took home and tried to patch back together for my own collection.

Long Mesa didn't have a library outside of the school, and if any shifters in the pack read books, they definitely weren't donated to the omega house. I cobbled together my own library and hoarded them in my room, those fictional worlds often my only escape.

Blackwater had its own town library outside of the school. There were programs designed to encourage children and adults to read, plus I had the e-reader that Remy had gifted me. I adored my books.

But I did *not* adore reading a lot of the required books for classes, even if I did relate to Hester Prynne on a lot of levels.

First thing I would change if I became a teacher was the reading curriculum.

My mate, however, was a different story. He loved the classics, as was evident by the worn copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* he set down on the front steps as we pulled up in front of the Alpha house.

He walked through the pickup soccer game his twin brothers, Dax and Sam, had going on and was opening my door before Mom had the car in park. A second later he reached in and pulled me from the car, tucking me into his arms before Mom could kill the ignition.

"You're late," he muttered, inhaling my scent with his nose pressed to my throat.

"Mom took forever to get ready," I lamented, loud enough for her to hear while I wrapped my arms around his neck. I leaned my head back and tossed a grin her way.

She closed her door as Remy lifted his head and gave her a smile.

“Hey, Addie,” he greeted.

“Remy,” she replied wryly, rolling her eyes. “I’m assuming your parents are inside?”

“Mom’s in the kitchen. Dad’s on the deck with the grill,” he confirmed.

I lifted my brows. “Is that safe?”

One thing Gabriel Holt and I had in common was neither of us could cook. Gabe was frequently ordered out of the kitchen by his mate.

Remy smirked at me. “I unhooked the gas. He has no idea. I told Mom I would handle the grill tonight.”

“Smart,” Mom added with a laugh. She gave us a wave and walked around the soccer game to head inside.

Remy’s arms tightened around me as he lifted me off my feet in a giant hug a second before claiming my mouth with his.

My lips fell open, helpless against his assault on my mouth until the identical sounds of his brothers gagging brought me back to the present.

He exhaled through his nose as he set me back on my feet. He anchored an arm around my waist, pinning us front to front. This close I could see the golden flecks in his dark eyes as they glittered with laughter and annoyance.

“Remind me to banish my brothers when I’m Alpha,” he told me, making his tone loud enough for them to hear.

I glanced over his shoulder to where their gagging had turned to laughter. “Nah. They’re your brothers. We can’t banish them.”

Dax smirked at us, tossing the soccer ball in the air before catching it.

“But they would make incredible deltas,” I added.

Dax’s smile dropped, his mouth going slack. Sam blinked and looked from his twin to me.

Deltas weren’t something we’d had in Long Mesa. I had learned since joining Blackwater that only larger packs had them since they were a bit of a rarity.

Deltas traditionally were higher up than regular pack members, but not at the level of a beta. Deltas usually served the Alpha family in some way either within the pack or in the Alpha house. Some were bodyguards, drivers, or staff that helped with the upkeep and running of the Alpha household or assisting betas.

“You wouldn’t,” Dax muttered, but there was uncertainty in his tone. If not for Remy, Dax would likely be Alpha after Gabe. He was definitely beta

material, as was his twin. Deltas were more submissive than betas, and the Holt twins were definitely not the submissive types.

Hell, no one in the Holt family could be called submissive.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Remy shot back, glancing back at his brothers and giving them a pointed glare.

Silently fuming, the twins turned as a unit and stalked away towards the back of the house.

Remy turned to me with a wicked grin. He licked his lips slowly, the movement drawing my eyes back to his full mouth. “Now where were we?”

He lowered his head, but I turned my head at the last second so his lips landed on my cheek.

“You were about to tell me how Katy is,” I replied, ignoring the heat wave that swept my body as his mouth simply moved across my cheek to my throat.

He frowned against me, growling softly. “No, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t going to mention my sister *at all* for the next ten minutes.”

My brows rose. “Ten whole minutes, huh?”

His head snapped up. Something dark and seductive flashed in his eyes that had me biting my lower lip. My stomach clenched in anticipation, suddenly forgetting I had a best friend who I needed to check on.

“There’s parents around so ten minutes is probably all we’ll get,” he told me, his voice more husky. A hand slipped under the back of my shirt, the rough texture of his calloused hands stroking the small of my back. “But tonight ...”

I shivered in his arms as his mouth kissed across my jaw. His teeth nipped lightly at my neck, scraping against my skin. After placing several hot, open mouthed kisses along my neck, he pulled back and hesitated by my lips.

With a sharp breath, I rolled to my tiptoes and pressed my mouth to his, needing to taste his lips on mine. I could feel him smiling against me for a brief second, letting me be the one to initiate contact, before he demanded control of the kiss, tangling a hand in my hair and tilting my head just where he wanted for the best access.

I moaned softly into his mouth as I completely gave in to his kiss, forgetting Katy entirely.

I was a shitty friend.

Someone coughed behind us. I opened my eyes and pulled away to see Katy standing there in torn jeans and a flannel shirt, her long red hair pulled

up in a ponytail and brows arched expectantly.

Okay, I was also a *busted* friend.

“Hey,” I said lamely, offering a wiggle of my fingers from where they were perched on Remy’s broad shoulders. I could feel my cheeks turning red.

“Can you stop molesting my friend now?” Katy directed the question at her brother.

“Can you stop interrupting me with *my* girlfriend?” he countered with a grimace.

She gave him a saccharine sweet smile. “I would, but Dad asked me to come out and get you. He can’t get the grill to turn on. I guess you’ll have to unhand my best friend now.”

“You guys realize I’m standing right here, don’t you?” I finally chimed in, my voice thick with sarcasm.

Remy’s eyes turned to me. “Definitely hadn’t forgotten that.” He finished the sentence by dragging his knuckles along my spine as he pulled his hand out from under my shirt.

I bit back a groan of protest when he stepped away from me and headed for the house. Remy must have read my mind because he glanced back over his shoulder before opening the front door.

The heated look in his gaze almost had me sprinting to haul him ... somewhere with a lot less people.

Another emphatic cough from Katy pulled my attention off of him.

I scowled at Katy. “Thanks.”

“For protecting your virtue? You’re welcome,” she replied smartly, a smirk on her lips.

“How do you know my virtue isn’t long gone?” I challenged.

She gave me a blank stare. “Is it?”

“No,” I huffed, the lack of time Remy and I had spent together provided little time for more than kissing. Something my wolf and I were both getting frustrated by.

“See?” She smiled. “I saved you.”

I couldn’t even really be mad because for a second, I saw the sparkle of the old Katy. The Katy I hadn’t seen in weeks, since before Maren disappeared.

As quickly as that flash appeared, Katy shut it down and headed back towards the house.

“How are you?” I asked, following her to the porch and settling beside

her on the wooden stairs. I absently picked up Remy's discarded book and fingered through the worn pages before settling it back on the step beside me.

"You mean since my girlfriend was kidnapped, and I have no idea where she is, what is being done to her, or if she's even alive?" Katy deadpanned. She rested her arms over her knees. "I'm great."

I reached over and touched her ankle. "Hey. I didn't mean it like that."

She sighed heavily. "I know. It's weird because I have moments when it's almost like I ... forget," she admitted, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "Dax says something stupid or Dad makes a corny joke, and I start to laugh. Then I remember that Maren is still *gone*, and we have no idea where she is."

"I know you love Maren," I started slowly, trying to choose my words carefully, "but she wouldn't expect you to stop living. And she definitely wouldn't want you to stop being happy."

"Could you be happy if Remy was gone?"

The idea was so abhorrent that I jerked away from her. Ice water filled my veins at the thought. I would have a better chance breathing through concrete.

"Exactly."

Now it was my turn to heave out a sigh. "Sorry."

Katy leaned her shoulder against me, dropping her head against my shoulder. "What sucks is, I know you're right. Maren wouldn't want me to be depressed or angry. I mean, I definitely wouldn't want *her* to be moping around."

I rested my cheek against the top of her head. "Easier said than done, huh?"

"Way easier," she muttered.

"I'm here for whatever you need," I promised, threading our fingers together and squeezing her hand.

"Unless my brother steals you first?" she retorted with a small smile.

"I'm here for *you* tonight," I replied formally, "not Remy."

"Right," she drawled slowly. "So, you'll be sleeping in my room and not sneaking into his?"

"Absolutely," I answered with a decisive nod.

A small giggle escaped her. "Still scared of being caught by my parents?"

"Oh no," I replied quickly, lifting my head. "I'm scared of your parents catching us and telling my *mom*."

Her shoulders shook with silent laughter. I smiled and laughed with her as

the door opened behind us.

“Hey, um, you guys might want to come in,” Sam said, sticking his head out the door.

We both turned to look at him.

Sam was usually the more relaxed, easygoing twin, but right now he looked tense and ... angry.

“What’s going on?” Katy asked as we got to our feet.

Sam hesitated. “Just come in here.”

I shot Katy a puzzled look as we headed inside.

Once inside it was clear that Sam wasn’t the only tense one. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen, and every pair of eyes swung towards us as we walked in.

No, swung towards *me*.

I looked at Remy first, then Mom, and finally Gabe. Each expression was more severe than the last.

Worry started to creep in, fisting a cold hand around my heart and squeezing.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I barely managed to get the words out of my dry throat. I shifted my attention back to Remy. I could feel the waves of rage radiating off of him.

Jaw clenched, Gabe exhaled hard, but met my gaze. “I just got a phone call from one of the Council members leading the Summit. Your uncle has filed a formal grievance with the pack.”

My jaw dropped. “What kind of grievance?”

“He’s claiming that Blackwater kidnapped you, your mother, Zara, and Bella. He’s filed a petition to be heard by the Council to have the four of you returned to Long Mesa.”

EVERYONE WAS STARING AT ME, THEIR EXPRESSIONS A MIX OF HORRIFIED concern and fury as the news that my uncle had decided to lodge a formal complaint with the Council sank in.

A slow shudder rippled through my bones as I realized this meant that there would be an inquest, and there was also now a chance I would have to return to Long Mesa.

Everything in me slowly went numb.

Killing Cassian hadn't ended whatever twisted past I had with Long Mesa. Linden would never let us go, and now that he had lost his wife and daughter, he likely looked like an even bigger idiot than when his sister and niece managed to get away.

I shoved down the wave of nausea threatening me and focused on the people standing around me.

The people that I loved and who loved me back.

The people Linden would target to hurt me.

Panic swelled at the idea of being taken away from here. Of being taken away from my family.

My hands started to shake as the sudden urge to shift came hard and fast. My wolf wanted out. We both needed to run.

Almost as if he knew where my thoughts had veered, Remy closed the distance between us and pulled me into his arms.

Safe. We're safe, my wolf sighed. The burning sense of terror slowly seeped away as Remy crushed us against him.

I wound my arms around his back, my fingers fisting in the material of

his shirt as I buried my face against the hard wall of his chest. I focused on inhaling his scent, letting the thundering of my heart beats slow and sync with his.

I lost track of the moments we stood there together. After a while, I looked up.

Mallory had moved next to my mother and had wrapped an arm around her shoulders, supporting her. Gabe looked calmly at us all, but I could see a muscle ticking in his jaw. The same tell Remy had when he was holding back anger.

Dax, Sam, and Katy all seemed content with openly showing their anger in matching expressions of rage.

This was my family.

“Does Aunt Zara know?” I asked woodenly, looking over at Gabe.

He pressed his lips together. “I called Michael. He’s telling Zara and Zoe both what’s happening.”

“So, what now?” I asked. I let go of Remy, but he simply maneuvered me in front of him, wrapping his arms around my chest and anchoring me to him.

Mom drew in a deep, shaky breath. “We’ll all need to write formal statements to the Council and detail why we left.”

Gabe rubbed his jaw, nodding, but still not happy.

“Can we write letters, too?” Sam offered.

Gabe gave him a supportive smile. “It’s not a bad idea. We can also have members of the pack who are willing to document what an asset you have all been to Blackwater.”

“But you don’t think it’s enough,” Mallory said softly, reading her husband easily.

“No,” he admitted, frustration lacing his words. “I think we’ll need someone who can come and be a witness. The Council will have questions. If we want to shut down Linden once and for all, we’ll need someone to give a detailed account in person of what happened. Of the practices Long Mesa uses as pack law.”

“Zara can’t leave Bella,” Mom said softly. “Bella is still too fragile, and if the Council decides in Linden’s favor, whoever witnesses will have to go with him immediately.”

I lifted my hands, wrapping icy fingers around Remy’s forearms as my legs went wobbly.

Mom swallowed and raised her chin a notch, her eyes meeting mine. “It

has to be me.”

All the air rushed out of my body. I was dizzy as it occurred to me that I could lose Mom.

She was doing a good job of hiding it, but I could see the terror in her eyes. The hell I had endured for almost eighteen years didn't match what she had survived. And at the heart of it, everything she went through was because her family had abandoned and betrayed her. At least I'd had Mom on my side.

No one had protected her.

“This is bullshit!” Katy exploded, pacing to the sink. She whirled around, dark eyes wild as she looked at all of us before landing on her dad. “Shifters switch packs all the time!”

“You're right,” Gabe agreed evenly. “But there are channels and processes in place for changing packs. Unfortunately none of those were observed here. Linden is within his rights as Alpha to demand them to return.”

My stomach swooped precariously. A full body tremor rocked me, and I felt Remy tense behind me.

“You mean because they're females and basically broodmares to be whored around,” Katy spat bitterly.

“Katy,” Mallory said sharply, her eyes flickering to the twins.

I wasn't sure how much Dax and Sam knew about what happened in Long Mesa, but I doubted it was all the details everyone else in the room knew.

Sam grabbed his twin's sleeve and tugged. “I think that's code for we need to go.”

Dax frowned. “What?”

“Why don't you guys go back outside,” Gabe told them, his request definitely more of an order than a question.

“We want to help,” Dax argued.

“I know,” Gabe agreed with a grim smile. “But right now I need you to both go outside while we talk about this.”

“Let's go, dude,” Sam said as he headed for the door. He paused and met my gaze. “You're one of us, Skye. They can't take you away.”

A sudden lump of emotion formed in my throat. I struggled to swallow around it.

“Thanks, Sam,” I managed.

Dax looked at Remy instead of me as he followed his twin out. “If you want me to drive down to Long Mesa and kick their asses with you, I’m in.”

That brought a smile to my lips that lingered even as the boys left the room. Seconds later the front door opened and closed.

“I’m surprised Linden is doing this,” Mallory finally said, shaking her head. “He has to know we would fight it. Doesn’t he see that all he will do is shed light on the darkest facets of his pack?”

“This isn’t just about four female shifters leaving his pack. His sister and niece escaped,” Mom countered. “His wife and daughter deserted him. He sent his successor back to retrieve Skye and he not only failed, but died in the attempt. He has to be feeling the pressure from the pack.”

I closed my eyes, the memory of killing Cassian still fresh in my mind. I turned and pressed my face into Remy’s shoulder, and he kissed the top of my head.

“I agree,” Gabe replied, folding his arms over his chest. “Linden is trying to reestablish his dominance before his status as Alpha is challenged.”

“By letting the shifter world know about the shit that he lets go down on his watch?” Katy snorted derisively.

“He’s not the only type of shifter who thinks the way he does,” Remy said, his voice a deep rumble sending vibrations through my back.

Katy rolled her eyes. “Trust me, we’re well aware that some packs see females as property that can be sold and traded like a bag of sugar. But what that guy has done is so far past fucked up—”

“Language,” Mallory chided offhandedly, but she didn’t seem too upset that Katy was swearing a blue streak.

“She’s not wrong,” Gabe told his wife with a shrug. “Linden and his pack *are* fucked up. The problem is, it looks like he’s been getting other packs on board with his way of thinking.”

“Wait—what?” The words tumbled out of me. “What does that mean?”

Remy’s arms tightened around me for a second. In the moment of silence that lingered, I sensed he and Gabe were trying to figure out how to explain.

“We’ve been doing some looking into the Long Mesa pack,” Remy started, turning me around so he could see my eyes.

I stepped back, and his hands slid down my shoulders and grabbed my hands between us. “You’ve *what*?”

“After what happened at Granite Peak with Cassian and Trace, we started wondering exactly how connected the packs were. It seems your grandfather

had been working on alliances with packs across the US and parts of Canada and Mexico. A lot of them have taken to ... adopting some of the ways of the Long Mesa pack.”

“You mean the omegas?” I whispered, horrified.

Remy nodded slowly, his dark eyes unreadable.

“You ... you never mentioned any of this,” I muttered, taking another step back and out of his hold. I ran a shaky hand across my face.

He let me go without a fight. “I know. I should have.”

“We haven’t told anyone,” Gabe added firmly. “We decided not to mention it until we knew how many packs Linden was allied with. Only a few packs know about our suspicions, and we’ve kept it quiet while we’ve looked into it.”

Gabe looked at Mallory, his mouth flattened into a grim line. “Norwood has been funding a lot of their expansion techniques. Damien’s involved in this in every way, Mal.”

Damien Valois. Trace’s father and the Norwood Alpha.

Because of freaking course.

Mallory paled, looking away. “God dammit, Damien,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I thought we were past this.”

“Damien will never be past it,” Gabe replied darkly, his blue gaze electric as he watched his mate. “He’ll never be over losing *you*.”

“But joining Long Mesa because of a grudge he started decades ago? Funding and encouraging their depravity?” Mallory swept a hand out. “This is way past a childhood crush gone wrong, Gabe.”

“He was in love with you,” Gabe ground out.

“He was a fool,” Mallory retorted, dark eyes glittering. “And he’s an even bigger fool now for allying his pack with Long Mesa.”

I lifted my eyes to Remy’s. There was something more he wasn’t saying. Something dark swirling behind his gaze.

“You’ve been trying to figure out who else is helping them kidnap the females,” I finally said, the truth dawning slowly.

Remy nodded slowly. “We don’t have all the proof we need yet. We’re working on getting as many facts as we can before we go to the Council. Because of what Cassian told you, we know Norwood is involved, but there has to be more than that.”

Gabe cleared his throat, drawing my attention. “What Linden is doing in Long Mesa is the tip of the iceberg, but he definitely isn’t the one in charge.

For a while we thought it was the Norwood pack. We've had both packs monitored by a few people we know. Linden has made several trips to New York, and Damien has been seen in New Mexico."

"They're working together?" I demanded.

"We don't have concrete proof," Remy replied honestly. "But it looks like it, yeah. We figured out Norwood was involved since the girls on campus went missing after they left. It makes sense that Norwood would use what they know about the campus to help the kidnapers get in and out. The only thing that doesn't make sense is that females were going missing last year before anything happened at GPA."

"Except the ones who went missing from school are a lot younger," I pointed out. "Before this, it was adults. Why are they taking kids?"

Gabe sighed and shook his head. "Honestly? It looks like female shifters have been going missing longer than we originally knew about. This may have been going on for years, and it looks like several packs are involved. Allies of Norwood and Long Mesa, most likely. But there still seems to be a piece of the puzzle we're missing."

Remy nodded at his dad. "We've been working with our own allies. Trying to figure out what it all means, but we keep hitting walls."

"You never said anything," I murmured, feeling a little stung that Remy hadn't said anything to me about any of this.

His lips thinned. "I know. I didn't want to bring up Long Mesa until I knew more. I wish you could completely forget about them all together, Skye."

"So, those assholes took Maren?" Katy snapped, cutting off our conversation. "Is that where she is?"

"We don't know that," Gabe replied firmly. "We believe Norwood and Long Mesa have had a hand in arranging the abductions, but we don't have proof, and we don't know why."

Mom gave me a terrified look. "Forced matings?"

I curled my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. "Maybe."

"If they were forcing mates to be together, we would have seen some of them by now," Mallory argued.

"But no one can place any of the missing women with either pack," Remy muttered darkly. "It's like they disappear. There's no trace. They're just gone."

"They can't just disappear," Katy said, her voice shaking. She stalked

across the room to stand in front of her father. “Who took Maren?”

He settled his hands on her shoulders. “We don’t know, sweetheart. But I promise we’re working on it as fast we can.”

She waved a hand wildly. “Then go demand the Norwood Alpha tell you who it is! Tell the Council so they can order him to tell you!”

“It’s not that simple, Katy. Damien Valois is smart and connected. He’s been careful. We don’t have any concrete proof, and we need it if we’re going to lay a claim like that at his feet.”

She wrenched out of his hold. “Yes, it is! You can make them give her back, Daddy!”

Mallory stepped up and tried pulling Katy into her arms, but Katy wasn’t having any of it.

“No!” she yelled, pulling away from her mother.

“Honey, if we tip our hand too soon, there’s a chance they’ll cut all their losses and cover their tracks. We can’t make any accusations until we have absolute proof. No one wants Damien to go down more than I do.” Gabe was infinitely patient as he tried to explain what was happening to his daughter, but his expression darkened as he talked. “We need to bring an airtight case to the Council.”

... but Katy didn’t seem to get that or care.

“That’s *bullshit!*” Katy yelled at him. She swept a hand backwards, knocking over a couple of wine glasses. They shattered on the floor.

The soft tinkle of glass shards skittering across the floor stunned all of us.

Remy sucked in a sharp breath behind me, and I watched as Gabe’s eyes narrowed darkly. Everything in the room seemed to pause.

Gabe exhaled slowly, clearly trying to rein in his temper. “Since you can’t act like an adult, Katherine, I think it’s time you left the room.” His tone was eerily calm as he spoke, but I could see the underlying power he was holding back.

Katy was yelling at her dad, but he was also her Alpha. And she was going into seriously dangerous territory.

Instead of backing down, she doubled down. “You can’t make me—”

Gabe’s shoulders straightened, everything about him suddenly hard and immovable. On instinct, I dropped my eyes in submission and noted my mom had done the exact same. Even Mallory was watching her mate and daughter with a guarded expression.

Our wolves inherently recognized the look of a pissed off Alpha pushed

too far.

Katy ducked her head. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"I wasn't asking. Go upstairs. *Now.*"

With an audible swallow, Katy spun on her heel and headed for the back staircase without a word.

Gabe watched her go, his body barely moving as he breathed and tried to reign in his wolf. It wasn't until Mallory slid her hand into his and leaned against him that the tension leached from his body. He absently kissed the top of her head.

He was the Alpha, but his mate calmed him. Their bond was something he needed and relied on.

It was the same way I relied on Remy when things went to hell, or the way I seemed to soothe him.

"It should be me," I blurted out as the idea came to me all at once.

Everyone turned and looked at me with varying levels of confusion.

"I should be the one to go to the Summit," I explained. "I'm the one who should talk to the Council."

"Skye, no," Mom said quickly.

"Not a chance," Remy replied fiercely. "No way are you going near your uncle."

I shook my head firmly. "No, it makes the most sense."

Mom came over to me. "Honey, I'm your mother. It's my job to protect you. If Linden wins, that means I'll have to go back to Long Mesa with him. If you're here, Gabe and the pack will protect you or hide you."

I reached out for her hand. "Mom, it has to be me."

Her lips pressed together. "Skye—"

"Listen to me," I cut in. "Remy is my mate. We're bonded. A mate's claim is higher than a pack's claim." I struggled to remember what I had learned last semester in our Shifter History class. They had gone over Pack Laws.

Unsurprisingly, Long Mesa violated more than a few.

But even they weren't above a mate's claim. Mates, true bonded mates, were too rare in our world. The Council would never approve separating mates.

I smiled slowly. "They *can't* take me away from Remy. The Council will never agree to it. Linden can't make me go with him."

I felt Remy move behind me, his body brushing against mine as I looked

over Mom's shoulder to Gabe and Mallory.

"Right?" I asked, my eyes locking on our Alpha for support. "Mom could be taken back. They won't separate me from my mate."

Gabe blinked and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "That's ... actually a really good point." He glanced down at Mallory. "It might just be our shot at getting the Council to listen."

"I don't like it," Remy snapped. "It puts Skye at risk. No way."

I sighed and looked at him. "They won't touch me if I'm with you. It makes the most sense."

I was right, and he knew it. But he sure as hell wasn't happy about it.

"You realize that means you'll have to face down your uncle, right?" he pressed. "You'll have to tell a room full of Alphas, in detail, what he did to you and your mom. What happened to Bella and Zara, and what happened with Cassian."

Raising a hand, I cradled his cheek. "I know you're trying to get me to change my mind, and I love you for wanting to protect me, but this is the only way, Rem. Besides, I'm not ashamed to tell my story. I'm not afraid to tell everyone what my uncle did to me. What Cassian did. People need to know the truth."

A slow grin crept over my face as I imagined Linden's face when I outed him to the community. "I can't wait to see the look on my uncle's face when he realizes he's lost."

Remy growled low in his throat. "I don't want you anywhere near him."

"But you'll be with me," I countered, lifting a hand to his jaw. "You won't let him hurt me."

His dark eyes looked over my shoulder at his father. He absolutely hated this idea.

"She's right, son," Gabe told him. "I don't like it any more than you do, but Skye is the only one we know they can't force to go back. She's your mate. That holds a lot of weight with the Council."

Mom touched my back, making me turn to look at her.

She reached up, smoothing a hand across my hair. "Honey, no. You need to stay here where it's safe."

"No," I replied gently. "It's time I told Linden to go to hell. I'm done being afraid of him. If I go, I can prove we weren't kidnapped or whatever. I can prove that we're happy here."

Tears filled her green eyes. "It's my job to protect *you*, remember?"

“You did that,” I answered honestly. “You got me out of there. Now it’s my turn to protect you, Mom. To protect all of us.”

She shook her head. “I still don’t like it.”

“Gabe and Remy will be with me,” I pointed out. “You know they won’t let anything happen to me.”

“You have my word, Addie,” Gabe vowed. “Your brother won’t hurt her.”

With a shaky breath, Mom rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “You’re not going to back down on this, are you?”

“No,” I answered honestly.

“Fine. Go and tell them the truth. *Our* truth,” Mom whispered. She dropped her gaze to mine, her expression fierce. “But you stay with Gabe and Remy. You don’t go off on your own. The Council may accept Remy is your mate, but I know my brother. Don’t underestimate him or his cruelty.”

I forced myself to relax so she wouldn’t see the trembling of my hands. “I know, Mom. I’ve got this.”

Now I looked back at Remy, who had been silent for most of this. I knew he hated the idea more than my mom did.

“I don’t like this either,” he said coldly, eyes flashing. “You can stay here. Hell, we can video chat all of you in for the Council to question. No one needs to go.”

“I need to go for me, Rem,” I replied, reaching for him and tangling our fingers together. “I need to end this with my uncle once and for all. I need to show him that he didn’t win. Besides, if you put us on a video chat, he’ll probably argue we’re being forced to say whatever you want.”

He hissed out a breath and looked away. “I still don’t like it.”

“I know. But I need you to trust me, okay?”

His gaze snapped back to mine, the muscle in his jaw ticking as he ground his molars. After a heavy pause, he squeezed my hand. “Okay.”

DINNER WAS A VERY SUBDUED MEAL, AND HARDLY ANYONE SPOKE. KATY never came back down.

I had offered half-heartedly to come home with Mom after dinner ended, but she told me to stay. She was going over to Zara's to talk to her best friend and would likely stay there for the night. That was a relief; I wasn't crazy about Mom going home alone tonight to overthink me going to the Summit.

I wanted to talk to Remy about the Summit, but he and his father needed to get back on a conference call with some of the other Alphas they knew to discuss Linden's accusations and the new plan involving me going to the Summit.

While Mallory and the twins cleaned up, I carried a plate of food and a drink upstairs to Katy's room.

I didn't bother knocking when I came in, kicking the door shut behind me with my foot.

Katy's room was one of my favorite spaces ever.

The room was on the bigger side. There was a queen bed tucked into one corner that allowed for a small sitting area by a large window that looked out over the backyard. She only had one bookcase that mostly held picture frames and some bins full of currently unopened cosmetics with a handful of actual books on the shelves. She had a gorgeous white vanity against another wall that was a mess of brushes and other makeup items I was clueless about.

But there were little Katy touches everywhere that made this place special. An entire wall was dedicated to pictures of Katy, her family, and friends. I loved seeing the innocent childish faces of Katy, Remy, Rhodes,

and Larkin when they were growing up. There was a picture of Katy and Remy holding the newborn twins, Katy and her mom in the kitchen, Katy with her dad by the lake ...

I especially loved that now there were pictures of me woven into the story being told on that wall. There was a shot of Katy, Larkin and I hanging out together, another one of Remy and I from this past Christmas, and there was a large photo of me with the entire Holt family at the Christmas tree lighting ceremony.

I reached up and fingered the necklace Remy had given me that night. The charm of the crescent moon and embedded diamond that looked like a star was a symbol of their family.

Our family.

Katy was curled up on the overstuffed armchair facing the window as I came in.

Setting her food down on the small end table beside the chair, I sat down on the loveseat across from her.

“I keep making a mess of everything, don’t I?” she finally asked, looking up at me with sad brown eyes.

I pulled my legs up under me. “We all know you’re worried about Maren, but you have to know that we want her back as much as you do. If there was even a tiny chance your Dad knew where Maren was, don’t you think he would do everything in his power to get her back?”

She scrubbed a hand over her face. “I can’t stand this, Skye. I feel like everything is so out of control, and there isn’t a damn thing I can do.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered.

“God, I am the worst friend,” she lamented, her head dropping back. “Seriously, why do you even put up with me?”

I made a face. “Mostly because you’re my boyfriend’s sister, and you’re a good excuse to spend the night with him.”

She hurled an aptly named throw pillow at me with a short laugh. “Jerk.”

I caught the pillow easily and grinned, happy to see her smile even if only for a second.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “You have to be sick of hearing me say that.”

“Katy, you’re one of my best friends.” I wrinkled my nose. “You’re one of my *only* friends,” I amended.

That earned a small smile.

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through,” I went on. “I know you’re struggling, but maybe try letting us in instead of shutting everyone out? You barely talk at school, and Remy has told me your parents are worried. He’s worried, too.”

She sighed deeply. “I know. I just ... I feel so damn helpless, Skye. And when I think about what they could be doing to her ...”

A sick feeling washed over me. I swallowed down the wave of bile rising in my throat.

“Do you think that my dad is right? That your uncle might have something to do with this?”

My eyes slid shut for a second. “My uncle is a monster. So yeah, he’s probably involved in something as morally wrong and disgusting as kidnapping women. Cassian admitted the pack was involved when we were up on the ridge in the fall.”

“Do you think your uncle has her?” Her breathing hitched. “Do you think they’re doing to Maren what happened to you and your mom?” Her voice was so small I almost didn’t hear it.

All the air left my lungs in a rush as her words sank in.

No wonder she had been so depressed and angry lately. If her thoughts were plagued by visions of her girlfriend being violated and ripped apart on a daily basis, I could easily see why Katy was a wreck.

My hands curled into fists, the surge of nausea almost too much for me to hold back. A cold sweat broke out on my back.

“I don’t know.” The whispered admission hung between us for several silent moments.

“But,” I finally added, trying to find a glimmer of hope, “from what your dad and Remy said, this has been going on for awhile. Females started going missing when I was still in Long Mesa, and none of them ever ended up where I did.”

A small spark of light entered her sad eyes as she watched me.

I tried to pick my words carefully. “I don’t think they’re at Long Mesa. It’s not a big enough place to hide a bunch of missing people. I don’t think Maren is there.”

She let out a shuddered breath and swiped at the tears that fell. “Thanks, Skye.”

“I promise I’ll find out as much as I can about her at the Summit,” I swore.

Her head snapped up. “You’re going to the Summit?”

I swallowed and nodded slowly. “Yeah. It makes more sense for me to go than my mom. Remy and I are mates. They won’t make me go back with my uncle.”

Her lips opened into a perfect circle. “But that means you’ll have to tell them ... everything. You’ll have to see them again.”

I held her gaze even though I wanted to look away. “I know.”

“Are you ready for that?”

“I don’t know if it’s something I’ll ever be ready for,” I replied honestly, “but it’s something I need to do. Maybe it’ll be cathartic or something.”

Katy unfurled her body from her chair and crossed the carpet to me, squeezing onto the loveseat with me and wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “I wish I could come with you. I could ask Dad. He might let me come along for moral support.”

I leaned into her comfort, resting my head against her. “No offense, honey, but after that stunt down in the kitchen? Odds are that will be a big, fat no.”

She snorted. “I really am a fuck up.”

“But you’re *our* fuck up,” I replied lightly, smiling. “And we love you.”

She giggled quietly and snuggled into my side. We both looked up as someone knocked on her door, opening it a few inches.

“Is it safe to come in?” Remy asked from the other side.

“Yeah,” Katy said.

Remy entered the room and stopped, smiling and shaking his head in amusement when he saw us curled up together.

“I hate to interrupt, but Dad wants you in his office, Katy.”

She grimaced and looked at me. “Guess that’s my next stop on the apology tour.”

“Guess so,” I murmured, watching her get up.

Katy started across the room and paused in front of Remy before throwing her arms around his shoulders.

With a warm chuckle, he hugged her back, his gaze meeting mine over her shoulder. I smiled at the relief in his eyes.

He and Katy had always been close, and I knew he hated the distance between them.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a pain in the ass,” she said so quietly I almost missed it. “I know you’re doing your best, and I haven’t made it easy.”

“I promise we’re doing everything we can to get Maren back,” he promised when she pulled away.

Katy wiped at her eyes. “I know. I love you, big brother.”

“Love you, too, Kit-Kat,” he replied.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “How mad is Dad?”

“Mad,” he answered truthfully. “But he knows why you’re upset. We love Maren, too.”

She looked back at me. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it,” I called as she walked out of the room.

Remy pressed his lips into a thin line and walked to me, holding out a hand. “Come with me?”

I didn’t hesitate to put my hand in his, letting him tug me to my feet and lead me out of Katy’s room and across the hall to his. He closed the door behind us.

I took in a deep breath, my senses overwhelmed by the scent of Remy everywhere.

He came up behind me, his chest brushing my back. I waited for him to touch me, reach for me, and he didn’t disappoint.

His hands settled briefly on my hips before sliding around and hugging my middle, pulling my back flush to his front. A second later I felt his lips feather across my neck. With a content sigh, I leaned back into him with my eyes closed.

All the stress and worry slowly trickled away as time stood still.

When it was just us like this, I could forget the rest of the world outside the door that was waiting to tear us apart.

Then again, the world never seemed quite as scary when Remy had my back.

With a reluctant sigh, I turned in his arms and looked up at him. “Are we going to talk about this?”

“This?” he echoed, a small crease forming between his eyes.

“Me going to the Summit to testify,” I clarified, waiting for the argument.

His mouth flattened. “Is there anything I can say that will get you to change your mind and stay here?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

He lowered his forehead to mine and sighed. “Skye, I know I can’t change your mind. And as much as I want to protect you, I also know that you need to do this for yourself and your mom.”

Hope fluttered in my chest.

“If it were up to me, you would never see your uncle or anyone from that pack ever again,” he continued. “I never want you to have to think about that shit again. But you and my dad are right—you’re the most logical choice to testify. Even if I absolutely hate the idea.”

I tipped my head back, shaking my hair out of my eyes so I could see him. “The idea of seeing my uncle again makes me sick.”

Anger flashed in his eyes for a second before he reigned in his emotions.

“The idea of telling a roomful of strangers about all the depraved things that happened in that pack on a daily basis makes me want to literally throw up.” I took a deep breath, shaking off the wave of nausea that surged inside my stomach.

“When I left Long Mesa six months ago, I was scared and broken. And then I came here and I found *you*.” I reached between us, tracing his jaw as he smiled softly. “You gave me the strength I needed to heal. The only reason I’m strong enough to go to the Summit and testify is because of you, Remy.”

He shook his head slowly. “You really don’t get it, do you, babe?” He whispered the question softly as he grazed his knuckles against my cheek.

“Get what?”

He flattened his hand against my chest above my heart. “Skye, you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met. If you need my support, you have it. Always. I love you, and I’ll be with you every step of the way, but your strength is your own,” he told me as his lips curved into a wicked grin, “and God help your uncle.”

I pulled his mouth down to mine, gasping as his lips claimed mine in a kiss that curled my toes.

He pulled away with a groan after a minute. “Katy will be back up here any minute.”

My wolf whined, and I almost did, too. “So, lock the door,” I suggested with a smile.

His head fell back with a laugh. “I learned years ago that something like a locked door doesn’t keep Katy out for long. If anything she sees it as a challenge.”

“Maybe I can sneak in here after she goes to bed.”

He smirked at me. “You’re welcome in my bed anytime you want, babe.”

I couldn’t stop the blush that heated my cheeks, even as my body tingled with awareness. “I miss sleeping with you.”

He groaned again, kissing my temple and letting me go to put distance between us. "I feel the same way."

I rolled my neck, trying to get my hormones and my wolf under control. "I'm guessing you'll be busy during most of the Summit, so we won't see each other much."

Remy paused and gave me an odd look.

"What?"

"We're mates," he told me slowly.

"Is that what this is?" I teased, gesturing to the space between us with a laugh. "I'm fully aware that we're mates. I thought you knew that, too."

"I know that," he said with a huff, "but you're testifying at the Summit on the basis that we're bonded mates. That means ..." He trailed off, his jaw clenching in thought as he looked away.

"That means what?" I asked after a long pause, tilting my head to the side.

He was still quiet as he watched me with an unreadable expression. "The Council will be watching everything we do."

I shrugged. "We have nothing to hide."

He blinked, the odd look from his face clearing. "You're right. It's just ..."

"Just what?" I asked when he didn't elaborate.

He smiled, but it looked forced. "I guess I never imagined our first vacation being a Summit for you to testify against your uncle."

Hope sparked in my heart. "Maybe this summer we can take a trip. Just us."

He nodded with a small smile that warmed every cell in me. "Yeah. Once we get through this."

"We *will* get through this," I told him firmly.

We had to.

"I know," he replied, shaking off the last of his visible worries with a grin. "Besides, it'll be nice having my roommate back."

"Roommate, huh?" I asked, arching a brow as I folded my arms under my chest. "Is that all I am?"

He crossed the room to me in two steps, his long legs easily eating up the distance between us. His hand snaked out and came around my back, pulling me flush against him.

"Skye," he started slowly, using his other hand to cradle the back of my

head as he looked into my eyes, “you are everything.”

“KNOCK, KNOCK,” MOM SAID, HER KNUCKLES RAPPING LIGHTLY ON MY bedroom door.

I turned from where I was folding my shirt to see her leaning against the doorway watching me. I tried not to frown when I saw the same tightness around her eyes and mouth that had taken up permanent residence the last two weeks since I announced I was going to the Summit.

“Hey,” I said with a smile, finishing folding the shirt and laying it into the open suitcase on my bed.

Her gaze drifted to the suitcase before landing on me. “Anything you need me to get you?”

I surveyed the stacks of clothes, toiletries, and random other items around me. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure?” She pressed, coming into my room. “Toothbrush? Sweater? Plane ticket to Paris?”

I gave her a look as she sat down in my desk chair.

She splayed her hands wide with a shrug. “Can’t blame a Mom for trying.”

I finished putting the last set of clothes in my suitcase and zipped it shut before sitting on the edge of the bed. “I know you’re worried, but it’s going to be fine, Mom.”

With a sigh, she leaned back. “I still think it should be me going.”

“You know why it has to be me,” I countered, really not wanting to rehash the same argument we had been having for the last week.

If Mom wasn’t coming up with last minute Mother-Daughter activities,

she was trying to not-so-subtly change my mind about going to the Summit. It had been the same routine for the last two weeks, but she had definitely ramped up the guilt trip and side comments the last three days.

She heaved another heavy sigh. “I do know, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Mom, we’ve gone over this,” I said for the twentieth time in the last twenty hours, “I’m going to testify to the Shifter Council what happened. You, Bella, and Aunt Zara have already written and recorded formal statements. Even Zoe gave her statement.”

I reached out and took her hand. “I won’t take any chances. I’ll be with Remy the *entire* time.”

Now she frowned for a whole new reason. “Skye, I think maybe we should talk about that.”

My lips curved into what I hoped was a teasing smile. “No offense, Mom, but I think I have the birds and the bees talk handled.”

Her mouth flattened. “You definitely aren’t a bird or a bee, sweetheart.”

A blush crept over my cheeks. “Okay, truth? Remy and I have never ... I mean we haven’t actually ...”

Oh. God, please don’t make me say it.

She blinked slowly. “You two haven’t had sex?”

My face was on fire. Actual flames were exploding from my cheeks. “No.”

“Oh.” She didn’t seem overly surprised, but there was a small glint of relief hiding in her emerald eyes.

“It’s ... Remy knows about the omega house. He’s never pressured me. In fact, kind of the opposite,” I admitted. “I think he knows my introduction to sex wasn’t normal, so we’ve taken things slow.”

Really slow, I wanted to add, barely able to not roll my eyes.

Mom flinched back, looking away but not before I saw the anger and hurt flash in her eyes.

“Mom, I don’t blame you,” I reminded her quickly.

“I blame me, baby,” she muttered, lifting a hand to absently rub the scar where her neck curved into her shoulder.

Like all omegas from our pack, Mom bore the scars from her years spent being abused. Shifters didn’t scar easily due to our faster healing rates, but wounds with significant damage left scars.

Mom and I both had our fair share, but she had more visible ones.

Her palm settled over the scar as she lifted her eyes to me. “I’m so glad that you and Remy found each other. I’m so thankful that he’s patient and kind and understanding.”

I frowned slightly. “Sometimes I wish he would be a little *less* patient and kind and understanding.”

Her only response was to raise her eyebrows as she waited for me to elaborate.

I swallowed back the fresh wave of embarrassment. “Remy and I are mates, Mom. We spent part of the semester living together, and I feel like ... I mean, I want ...”

“You want a more physical relationship?”

I couldn’t meet her gaze as I nodded.

She exhaled a long breath. “Skye, you have your entire lives to have a physical relationship. For what it’s worth, I think you and Remy are smart by taking things slowly. You can’t ignore the things you’ve witnessed and endured yourself, baby. I know when hormones are involved, you may not think about it in the moment, but I don’t ever want you to have regrets about being with Remy.”

Something about her tone caught my attention. “Do you have regrets?”

“What?”

“Mom, I’ve done the math,” I said softly. “I figured your first time was with my dad.”

It made sense. Most females didn’t go into their first fertility cycle until they were twenty. Mom was supposed to be married six months before she turned twenty to ensure the likelihood of having a child her first cycle.

Unfortunately she had gotten pregnant when she was nineteen. Talk about bad luck.

She jerked away from me, getting to her feet and pacing across the room. “Skye—”

“I know you don’t want to talk about him,” I cut her off with a huff. “But do you regret being with him?”

She looked absently out the window, her hand again reached up to massage her neck. “I regret a lot of things,” she said quietly. “Your father ... Honey, it never would have worked. And yes, my first time was with him.”

I stayed quiet for a moment, but finally my curiosity got the better of me. “Was he someone from our—from Long Mesa?”

Her jaw clenched. “Skye.”

I got up off the bed, but didn't approach her. "Mom, please. I'll be eighteen in a few days. Don't you think it's time to tell me something—*anything*—about him?"

She turned and looked back at me, her expression conflicted. "No," she finally said. "He wasn't someone from that pack. He was ... " She sighed, and I had the distinct impression she was sad.

Her hand went to her neck again, rubbing absently. It was her go-to tell when she was anxious. She had done it as long as I could remember.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, swallowing my disappointment. "Forget I said anything." I turned and took my ereader off the charger to put into my backpack.

"Skye."

I turned slowly, stunned and guilty when I saw tears glistening in her eyes.

"You're right," she said slowly. "You're almost an adult, and you deserve to know."

Hope surged in my chest, my breath catching.

She held up a shaking hand. "But, can we talk about this when you come home? I need some time to gather my thoughts and ... prepare myself."

I frowned. "I don't want you to be upset, Mom."

"Baby, I buried a lot of memories of your father," she whispered, shaking her head. "It was the only way to survive what happened. I'll tell you everything when you come home. Deal?"

"Deal," I agreed, crossing the room to hug her.

She rocked us until someone knocked at the front door.

I turned and looked at my clock. "That's weird. Remy said he wouldn't be here for another hour."

"Okay, don't be mad," Mom said with a slight grimace. "Zara wanted to come by and talk to you before you left."

"Why would that make me mad?"

"Because Bella also wants to talk to you," she finished in a rush. "She showed up with her mom. I can tell her you don't want to talk to her."

I hadn't spoken to Bella since that night in my room weeks earlier. We both had said a lot of nasty shit I didn't really want to rehash.

Mom touched my shoulder briefly as she headed for my door. "It's your choice, love."

"No, it's fine," I agreed with a shrug. "There might be something she

wants me to say to the Council on her behalf.”

Mom smiled at me. “I love you, my amazing daughter.”

“Love you more,” I muttered, unable to hide my own grin.

“Love you most!” she called as she headed for the front door to let them in.

I was inventorying the backpack I would use as my carryon when Aunt Zara stepped into the room.

“May I come in?” she asked, her voice a soft whisper.

“Of course,” I said, returning the hug she offered.

She released me and surveyed the suitcase and backpack. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Yeah,” I said with a tight smile.

She looked at me for a second before her face crumpled. “I’m so sorry, honey. I’m so sorry you have to do this.”

“Aunt Z,” I said softly, reaching out for her, but she backed away.

“I could kill him,” she whispered fiercely, turning to me with wet eyes. “I *hate* him. The only thing he ever gave me is Bella, and look how he *destroyed* her. How he ruined your mother and you.”

“He isn’t getting away with this,” I said firmly, lifting my chin. “He’s not going to get away with what they did to any of us. I promise, we’ll be safe.”

“You are so much like your mother,” Aunt Zara said in wonder, looking at me. “I never had her strength.”

“You saved my life,” I countered. “You saved us both.”

“But not soon enough,” she murmured. “Make them pay. Tell the world what they’ve done. But, sweetheart, be careful. Your uncle is a dangerous man with a lot of friends who think like he does.”

A ghost of a smile drifted across my lips. “I have friends, too.”

“I know,” she replied, finally smiling as well. “Your mate is pretty incredible, from what I’ve seen, and his father even more. I wish Long Mesa had an Alpha like we have here.”

“I’m glad we didn’t,” I said bluntly. “I hate what each of us went through. What ... Maisie and Shane *died* for. But all of that brought me here. I found friends, and a family, and my mate. I would take a lifetime of Linden and Cassian if Remy was waiting for me at the end.”

She cupped my jaw. “Yeah, you’re definitely your mother’s daughter.” She leaned in and kissed my forehead.

“Did your mother tell you Bella wanted to speak to you?”

“Yeah,” I replied, trying to stay indifferent. “You can send her in.”

“Okay,” Aunt Zara answered. “Stay safe, sweetheart.”

“You, too,” I said with a tight smile.

Aunt Zara left and Bella appeared in the doorway a second later, her eyes downcast. A small tremor rippled through her body.

I took a deep breath. “So, I was kind of a bitch last time we talked.”

Her head snapped up, her big green eyes staring at me.

Crap, she was scared of me. Actually *scared*.

I cleared my throat with a weak smile. “Okay, more like the last time I *yelled* at you. Not my finest hour.”

She edged into my room. “I wasn’t exactly the most understanding person either.” Another step forward. “I’m sorry for what I said. I was out of line.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Thank you,” she repeated, slowly blinking. “Not just for the apology, but for going and talking to the Council. I ... I couldn’t do that.”

“Uh, sure. You’re welcome,” I stammered. I tried to shrug it off. “I’m just going to tell them the truth.”

And maybe punch your dad if I get the chance.

Bella sank into the chair at my desk, her hands clasped on the lap as she stared at them. “I miss him.”

Every muscle in my body went tense.

“My dad,” she clarified, with a whisper. A teardrop fell and splashed against the dark skin of her hands. “He wasn’t always this monster, you know? He was ... my *dad*. I thought he loved me.”

Well, shit.

“Bella,” I started, but I had no idea how to follow up that beginning.

“I know he’s evil. What he did to you, and your mom and the other omegas? That’s just evil, Skye.” She lifted a shaking hand to wipe at her eyes. “He’s a bad person.”

I felt the familiar sting of my own tears and tried to blink them back.

“But I can remember him sitting down to help me with homework, or taking me to a movie,” she went on quietly, “and he wasn’t evil then. Or was he? I feel like I don’t know what to think anymore. I knew he hit my mom sometimes, but he always said she deserved it, and I guess I believed that, too. Even when he locked her up, he said it was because she broke pack law by helping you escape. He said she was a traitor, and I *believed him*. How stupid was I?”

She looked up at me, and my heart broke for her.

She was as shattered as a person could get. She had been betrayed by her father, the man she thought would always love and protect her.

“The night that Cass—that *they* attacked me,” she ground out through clenched teeth, “He came home, and saw me lying where they left me. It hurt so much, I couldn’t move. I expected my dad to raise hell. To kill them all. Or, I don’t know ... Help me?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, unable to imagine going to the person you thought loved you for help and being turned away.

“He just ... looked at me,” she said, almost in a daze. “He just stared at me, watched me crying and bleeding. And then he told me to go upstairs and clean up.”

I stepped forward and knelt at her feet, wanting to touch her and offer comfort, but not sure she would let me.

“I tried to tell him what they did, and he said he needed to make a phone call.” She grabbed my hand suddenly. “A fucking phone call, Skye. Who does that?”

“I’m sorry.” They were the only words I could give, and they weren’t enough. They weren’t nearly enough to undo that trauma.

“I *hate* him.” She sucked in a wobbly breath, fresh tears falling. “But I also remember loving him.”

The grip she had on my wrist turned bruising. “How do you do it?” she asked, begging. “How did you move on? Because I can’t. I’ve tried, but I *can’t*.”

A gut wrenching sob ripped from her body as she folded over, sobbing with her head against my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her.

“Tell me how I can move on,” she pleaded against my neck. “You did it—how did you do it?”

I leaned back, freeing my hands to frame her face so she would look at me. “I didn’t do it alone. I had a lot of help.”

I wiped away a tear with my thumb. “You have people who will help you, Bella. *I’ll* help you. Your mom, my mom, Zoe, Michael ... You have an entire pack that will help you. You aren’t alone.”

She swallowed audibly, looking wildly around the room. “But every time I leave the house, I can feel their stares. I jump when people laugh too loudly, I scream if someone slams a door. I’m a *mess*.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “I’ve been there, and it gets better. But it takes

time. A lot of time.”

“The idea of letting anyone *touch* me ...” She shuddered violently.

“Trust me, I *know*,” I told her, letting her face go and reaching for her hands. “But look. You’re letting *me* touch you.”

She frowned at our hands. “It’s not the same as ... I mean, you have Remy, and I’ve seen you guys together.”

“It’s not the same,” I agreed, “but it’s a start. And Remy is patient with me, but there have been a lot of times that it hasn’t been easy on us. It’s also helped letting people in. Larkin, Katy, Rhodes, and a few other people I trust. It helps to talk about it with them.”

She threaded her fingers with mine. “I’m a mess. I’m a broken mess. How can I look at any of these people in the eye when they know who I am?”

I smiled. “Remy told me when I first came to the pack that what I was before didn’t define who I was now.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I know it is.” I squeezed her hand. “You went through hell, Bella, but you survived. No one will ever judge you for being a survivor. Not in this pack, and not in this family.”

“How do you not hate me?” she asked. “If I were you, I would absolutely hate me.”

That answer was easier. “Because I’m tired of being angry all the time. There are enough people for me to hate without you being on the list.”

I caught the time on the clock behind her. Remy would be here in minutes.

I gave her a smirk. “Now I’m going to go tell the Council all the fucked up shit that happened to us so it never happens to another shifter ever again.”

Bella finally smiled back at me. “Sounds like a great plan.”

“WE’LL BEGIN PRE-FLIGHT CHECKS MOMENTARILY, SIR,” THE FLIGHT attendant advised Gabe as we settled into our seats on the private jet the pack owned. The last time I had been on the plane had been when we were flying home from GPA.

I snuggled closer into Remy’s side when he flipped up the armrest separating our seats. The red and black flannel he threw on over a white T-shirt felt soft under my cheek, and I rested against him. My fingers lifted to absently trace the corded muscles of his forearm where he rolled the sleeves up, and his familiar pine and earth scent filled my nostrils until my wolf and I were both ready for a nap.

Last time I boarded a flight on this plane, I had left him behind. This time we were together.

Gabe looked up from his seat across the aisle, setting the paper he was reading to the side. “Thank you, Frank.” He checked his watch. “Is their flight still on time?”

“Ahead of schedule, actually,” Frank said with a small smile that made twin dimples appear. “They should be landing any moment. They’ll arrive before we finish pre-flight procedures. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.” Gabe nodded and turned back to his papers as Frank headed towards the cockpit.

“Others?” I asked, lifting my chin and looking curiously at Remy. Not that having more people on the plane was a bad thing; there was plenty of space.

The Blackwater plane could comfortably seat twenty-four. It had two sets

of four chairs with a table between them, a few sets of two chairs, a long couch with tables at each end. Gabe was sitting on the couch, papers spread out in front of him at one of the tables. There was also a small private seating area tucked in the back of the plane past the galley.

Remy gave me a smile. “Dad talked to Luke, Tate’s dad, last night. They’re flying here and hitching a ride with us to the Summit. It’ll give us all a chance to talk before we’re onsite.”

The Summit was held annually at a small, remote resort in Wyoming. It was supposed to be super upscale, and catered only to the elite of the elite during normal seasons. It shut down to the public every year for the Summit.

The resort was across nearly seventy acres of mountains, rivers, and forest, and the main building and private cabins were built around a large lake with breathtaking views. It was the perfect spot for rich people looking to vacation somewhere quiet ... or wolves to be completely hidden for two weeks of pack warfare.

The location also wasn’t on any specific pack land, so there were no issues of territorial claims, but having that many Alphas in one space, albeit a large space, was always a tense experience.

At least, that’s what Katy had told me.

“So, walk me through the Council again,” I started slowly, trying to remember all the prep Katy and Mallory had drilled into my head the last two weeks while Remy and Gabe prepared for meetings and the inquisition.

“There’s five full members and two alternates,” Remy reminded me patiently.

“And they all come from super small packs, right?”

He nodded. “Exactly. It’s the only way to avoid bigger packs from having complete control.”

“Like Blackwater?” I teased.

He leveled a look at me. “Like Norwood.”

My stomach dropped. “Trace will be there, won’t he?”

He gave me a slow nod, reaching over to brush some hair from my face. “Yeah, but don’t worry about it. He won’t bother you.”

“I’m more worried about him bothering *you*,” I replied pointedly. Trace had spent the better part of last semester trying to get Remy to react in a way that could get Remy, and Blackwater, in trouble with the Shifter Council.

He gave me a tight lipped smile. “I promise I’ll steer clear of him as much as I can.”

My eyes narrowed, and I pointed a finger at him. “You better.”

He leaned forward, nipping the tip of my finger before I could pull away. I swallowed, my gaze reflexively looking at his dad, who thankfully seemed oblivious.

“Remy,” I hissed, elbowing his side and blatantly ignoring the way my blood warmed.

He grinned unabashedly. “What?”

Before I could think of an appropriate response, a man stepped onto the plane, his large form filling the doorway, almost blocking out all the sunlight before he stepped into the cabin of the plane. Dante followed him a second later and then—

“Tate!” I cried, surprised and happy at the same time.

She gave me a small wave from behind Dante. If I couldn’t have Katy or Larkin with me on this trip, Tate was definitely the next best person.

The larger man, Luke I assumed, sat on the other side of the couch from Gabe, facing the other Alpha. His gray eyes looked at us all, missing nothing. The perpetual scowl on his face made me sink back into my chair a bit, and I remembered Tate saying how he completely terrified her birth parents into peeing their pants.

I could see that.

“Luke,” Gabe greeted warmly, extending a hand.

Luke shook it with a grin, his grim face suddenly brighter and more welcoming. “Gabe.”

Dante slid into his seat across from Remy, facing us. “Hey, man. How’s it going, Skye?”

“Hey!” I answered, standing up to hug Tate before she sat down next to Dante.

Tate looked wide-eyed around the cabin of the plane. “Whoa. This is nice.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked her. “I thought women mostly avoided the Summit.”

According to Mallory, females rarely went to the Summit unless for a specific purpose, like how I was testifying. Otherwise they were mostly arm candy that the pack Alpha liked to show off. A trophy to be displayed amongst peers since not all of them would have a wife or a mate.

Somehow I didn’t see Luke or Dante parading Tate around like a shiny medal.

She gave me a tight lipped smile that didn't reach her eyes. "With everything going on, Dad and Dante didn't want to leave me in Brooks Ridge."

Dante closed a possessive hand around the inside of her thigh. "She's humoring us."

The way Tate leaned against him said there wasn't anywhere she would rather be.

"Dad told me that you're going to testify in front of the Council," she said softly, her eyes sympathetic as she looked at me. "How are you feeling about that?"

"Fine."

Terrified.

I swallowed past the panic clawing at my throat and reached up fingering the charm on the necklace at my throat.

"You're a brave girl," Luke said, his gruff voice softened by the kindness in his gray eyes. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Thank you," I said hesitantly, lowering my hand back to my lap.

"You sure you're ready for this? I've met your uncle," Luke continued, his cold gray eyes assessing me as he spoke. "He's a prick."

The laugh that escaped me was a surprise. "He really is."

Luke's eyes narrowed. "But he also isn't stupid. I've already sworn a promise to your Alpha and your mate," his head inclined to Gabe and then Remy, "but our pack will do everything in our power to protect you. I promise."

"We both do," Dante agreed with a grim nod.

"Thank you," I repeated, this time my words more sincere and resolved. "I appreciate that."

"There is one thing we just found out," Gabe said slowly, catching my attention.

Remy's hand found mine and squeezed.

"The heir that your uncle is bringing to replace Cassian," Gabe went on, his mouth flattening.

He didn't need to tell me I already knew. Hell, in some ways I was surprised he had never challenged Cassian himself.

"Preston Loomis," I guessed woodenly.

"You know him, I take it."

I swallowed. "Yeah. I know him."

I felt a small tremor run through Remy as his anger mounted. I leaned my shoulder into his body, trying to reassure him through touch that I was still here and whole.

“Yeah,” I replied with a small nod. “He was Cassian’s best friend. They did everything together.”

I felt Remy exhale hard beside me, his gaze locked on the ceiling for a second while he got his rage under control.

“I hate to ask, but is there anything you can tell us about him?” Gabe leaned forward, the kindness in his eyes staggering.

I wondered, not for the first time, what it would have been like to grow up with a dad like Gabriel Holt.

“He’s nothing like Cassian,” I said quietly, trying to compartmentalize my memories of Preston Loomis clinically.

“You mean ‘cause Cassian’s dead?” Luke leaned back with a smug smile. My jaw dropped in shock.

“Dad!” Tate groaned, dropping her head into her palm.

“What?” Luke shrugged innocently. “He is, and I’m assumin’ this Preston dickhead is amongst the livin’. That’s a mighty big difference of status.”

I giggled, some of the tension loosening in my chest. “Yeah, there’s that.”

“Jesus, Luke,” Gabe huffed, but even he was fighting a smile.

“What? Your girl should be proud of what she did up on that mountain.” Luke grinned at me, the movement making him infinitely more approachable. “Didn’t quite stick the landing, but she’s young and can learn.”

Remy’s shoulders shook with silent laughter. He leaned over and kissed the side of my head.

“Sorry,” I told Luke with a smile, “I promised Remy no more jumping off cliffs.”

Luke shrugged his massive shoulders once again. “I suppose that’s for the best.”

Sighing to myself, I tangled my fingers with Remy’s, watching how his larger hand engulfed my smaller one, as I tried to get my thoughts in order.

“Preston is the youngest son of Allan Loomis, Linden’s beta,” I finally said in a low voice, unable to tear my gaze anywhere except from where it rested on our hands.

“He had an older brother, Dane,” I continued, wincing, “but Dane’s dead.”

Because I ripped out his throat.

My wolf rumbled her approval even as my stomach soured over the recollection of all that blood. I tried to shake off the lingering wisps of memories that threatened to drag me under.

“Cassian was at least somewhat rational. Preston isn’t. He’s ... what’s worse than batshit crazy with a side of homicidal maniac?”

“So, he ain’t gonna be fun to deal with,” Luke surmised, rubbing his jaw.

Remy’s hand tightened around mine, reassuring and grounding.

“Do you think he’ll be a problem for *you*?” Dante asked me pointedly.

I lifted my gaze to him and didn’t blink. “I’m the one who killed his brother and his best friend.”

Dante’s eyes went wide for a second, and Luke muttered a dark curse.

Again, Remy squeezed my hand. I had the feeling he was fighting the urge to pull me onto his lap.

Or maybe I was the one who wanted to scramble onto his lap, bury my face in his neck, and try to forget all the shit that was going on around us.

“That would tend to make a person a bit angry,” Luke finally said. “But I’m guessin’ you had an appropriate reason for doing what you done?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“Then it makes no difference to us,” Luke said with finality.

“Exactly,” Gabe agreed firmly, his eyes meeting mine. “Both of our packs are with you.”

“I take it there was no way you and your mom coulda gone through proper channels to change packs?” Luke pressed. “Waited for a transfer?”

“They didn’t have that option,” Remy answered for me.

Tate leaned around Dante. “Daddy, I told you—”

Luke held up a hand. “I know you did, sweetheart, but the questions I’m askin’ ain’t anything that the Council won’t ask. If anything they’ll be worse. Are you ready to relive the worst moments of your life, Skye? You ready to share those details with total strangers who are looking to catch you in a lie? Men who respect and trust Linden Markham? See him as a friend and an equal?”

I couldn’t suppress my shudder. Remy’s chest rumbled beside me, his low growl a warning that Luke was on thin ice.

“He’s right, son,” Gabe reminded us, trying to diffuse the tension. “Luke isn’t asking or saying anything the Council won’t. And unlike Luke, the Council isn’t necessarily on our side.”

“Yeah,” I said, wishing my voice hadn’t come out so strangled. I cleared

my throat and tried again, meeting his steel gray gaze. “Yes. I can handle it.”

“Your uncle has a lot of allies at the Summit,” Dante added quietly. “The Southern and Mexican packs are almost all aligned with him in some way. Because of what happened we know he also has an alliance with Norwood, which brings a whole other set of packs into their alliance.”

“So, you’re saying this is pointless?” I asked, my body growing cold. “It’s us against all of them?”

“No,” Remy said fiercely, turning to look at me. “The majority of the Alphas are good men who want to uphold the sanctity of pack law. But we can’t underestimate your uncle. He doesn’t play fair, babe, and that puts us at a disadvantage.”

Gabe smiled at me. “And we have plenty of our own allies.”

“Gabe mentioned that Cassian told you Long Mesa was working with Norwood to kidnap females,” Luke began, his tone gruff and growly in a way that made me never want to piss him off.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. He mentioned it when we were on the mountain before ...”

“Before your swan dive,” Luke supplied with a brief flash of a smirk. “Any particulars?”

“A lot of that day is still a blur,” I admitted. The fall and resulting three week coma had jumbled and distorted some of my memories. “I know Cassian said that they were going to visit where some of the females were being held, but that could have been anywhere between Montana and New Mexico.”

“And you couldn’t find out much from those hunters you found in the woods?” Luke directed the question at Remy.

Remy shook his head. “No. They didn’t have ID, the vehicles they used were traced back to a dealership near the Norwood territory, but that’s all circumstantial.”

Luke looked impressed. “Someone remembers his SAT words.”

Tate sighed and shook her head in amusement, giving me a weak smile before leaning against Dante.

“Still, I have a few friends in the area. Lone wolves that aren’t fans of Damien Valois. I’m waiting to hear back on a few things. Hopefully they can reach me out here before any formal motions are granted,” Luke muttered.

I caught a glimpse of Gabe and blinked. For the first time since I had met Gabe, I could see his anger simmering under the surface. It was well

controlled, but it was there in the flash of his blue eyes and the way his jaw clenched.

Once upon a time, Damien had made a play for Mallory. I couldn't image Gabe feeling overly friendly towards the guy who tried to steal his mate. And that was completely disregarding the fact that Damien's son had broken Katy's leg last semester.

Luke exchanged a long, indecipherable look with Gabe. After a moment, the storm clouds cleared from Gabe's face and he was back in control.

Frank appeared at the front of the plane, heading down the aisle. He gave Luke a polite nod first, then Dante, and then Tate, before turning to look at Gabe.

"Sir, we're ready for departure if you are."

Gabe's eyes jumped across the aisle to me. "You sure you're ready for this, sweetheart?"

I focused on the steady rise and fall of Remy's chest beside me, my ears faintly picking up the rhythmic sound of his heart beating.

"Yeah," I said, my smile genuine and not forced. I squeezed Remy's arm and felt his fingers return the pressure. "Let's do this."

THE FLIGHT FROM THE PRIVATE AIRSTRIP OUTSIDE OUR PACK LANDS TO WHERE we landed at another private airstrip in Wyoming took a little over two hours. After that it was still another two hour drive to get to the resort where the Summit was held.

The six of us loaded up into a large black SUV with Luke behind the wheel. Tate and I had climbed into the backseat, Remy and Dante sat in the middle bench seat while Gabe took the passenger seat. The drive to the resort was beautiful, most of it navigated us through mountains until we pulled up to a large set of gates similar to the ones at Granite Peak Academy.

Like at the school, there were men stationed outside the gate, checking people in.

Luke put the truck in park and rolled down the window as the man approached.

“Pack?”

“Brooks Ridge,” Luke answered, not bothering to lift his sunglasses.

“I have three on your confirmation,” the man said, his blue eyes narrowed as he studied the clipboard. “Lucas Davis and Dante Pearson?”

“That’d be us,” Luke drawled, motioning behind him to Dante.

The man frowned, his eyes drifting to Tate and I. “And you have a female companion?”

“Tatum Davis,” Luke said in a clipped tone, drawing the man’s attention back to him. “My daughter.”

The man nodded, making a mark on the clipboard before looking at Gabe.

“Blackwater,” Gabe supplied, taking off his sunglasses.

“Gabriel and Remington Holt?”

Gabe nodded.

“And you have a female companion as well?” His brow furrowed, his eyes going wide for a fraction of a second. “Skye ... Skye Markham?” His eyes went to me in the backseat, a mixture of curiosity and astonishment.

“My mate,” Remy replied coolly.

“R-right,” he stammered, scribbling again on his clipboard. He looked at Luke. “You’re cleared for entrance, Alpha Lucas, Alpha Gabriel. Check in at the main building for your cabin assignments.”

His gaze flickered to the backseat again, lingering first on Tate and then me.

I got it. Tate and I could have been dressed in matching moldy potato sacks and not showered for a month, but two young females would catch the attention of most males.

That didn’t stop Remy *and* Dante from shifting on their seats to block his view of us. Or their warning growls that had him stumbling back.

Tate turned her head to me and rolled her eyes.

Possessive alphas didn’t like to share.

Luke put the car into drive and moved through the now open gates as another car pulled in behind us, stopping at the guardhouse.

He drove down the tree lined drive to the main building and lifted his sunglasses on top of his head, his gunmetal eyes meeting mine and then Tate’s in the rearview mirror. “I meant what I said before, girls. Neither of you goes anywhere unescorted.”

“Yes, sir,” we echoed quietly.

Remy turned in his seat and gave me a halfhearted smile, reaching back for my hand. He brought it up to his lips, kissing my fingertips.

We curved around the long drive, the trees finally opening up to a circular drive leading to a massive stone and wood structure.

“Whoa,” I mumbled, twisting to look up at the main lodge. Almost the entire front was covered in glass that reflected the pond and cabins lining it.

Luke parked the car in an empty spot by the front stairs. “Let’s go in and see where we’re at.”

Gabe’s phone chimed and he unlocked the screen with a satisfied smile. “Jonah, Nero, and James are already here.”

“Finally,” Luke muttered with a rare smile, “good news.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door.

“They’re allies of ours from a few packs in the southeast,” Remy explained to me quietly. As we all started to get out of the car.

I climbed out of the back and groaned when my feet touched the ground. I stretched my arms over my head for a second to work the knots out of my back. The full day of travel had my muscles aching and my wolf impatient.

Remy tucked my hand into his and we followed Luke and Gabe towards the building. Gabe and Remy, and even Dante, were all tall. All of them were a few inches over six foot. Luke made them all look tiny by comparison.

Dante cleared his throat, wrapping an arm around Tate’s waist. “When do they want to meet?”

“Tonight,” Gabe answered, already typing a reply as he walked. “Nero has offered his cabin as a meeting place. The others will be there as well.”

“Works for me,” Luke agreed. “Nero always manages to have the best stocked bar.”

Gabe smirked at that.

Remy’s mouth flattened. “So, we bring Skye and Tate with us?”

Gabe pulled up short at the base of the stairs, his gaze moving from me to Tate and then to Luke.

“It might be best for you two to lay low tonight,” Luke grumbled. “You can watch movies and order room service and ... whatever girls do at night. Eat ice cream and paint your nails.”

Tate sighed. “Dad, seriously? We really just came hundreds of miles to sit inside and paint our nails?”

Luke leveled her with a look that would have terrified me, but Tate simply sidestepped Dante and lifted her chin at her father.

Luke set both large hands on his daughter’s shoulders. “Listen to me, Tatum Maria Davis,” he growled, “you’re here because Dante, me, *and* Ryder think it’s the safest place for you to be. This ain’t no trip to the beach or the mall. Until we speak to some people, we can’t have either of you two wandering around, causing a ruckus.”

Tate’s jaw dropped. “Dad, that’s not what I meant. Skye and I wouldn’t do anything to cause trouble.”

“You two bein’ young and pretty in a place full of Alphas, assholes, and testosterone is all you’d be needing for that trouble. It would find you quick enough.” His face softened and he touched her cheek. “Tomorrow you’ll be able to do more, but we need to set up some things.”

“You mean a babysitting schedule,” Tate muttered.

“Babysitting?” I echoed, looking at Remy and then Gabe.

Remy grimaced. “We’ll be in a lot of meetings, Skye. We can’t leave you on your own. Not with your uncle being here, too.”

“So, these allies you’re meeting with,” I said, understanding dawning like a cold winter morning, “they’re friends, but they’re also going to be what? Bodyguards for when you’re busy?”

“Yes,” Dante said bluntly behind me, arms folded across his chest.

Tate turned to look at him. I couldn’t see her expression, but whatever it was, Dante wasn’t moved in the slightest. He met her stare for stare, finally lifting a brow.

With a sigh, Tate turned and gave me a small, helpless shrug. “Guess it’s pizza and movies for us tonight.”

“Okay,” I agreed, not exactly caring that I was essentially being quarantined to my room. If it kept me from seeing my uncle or Preston, I was pretty okay with that.

Gabe tucked his phone into his pocket. “Now that we’ve got that settled, let’s check in and get everything to the cabins.”

“I didn’t even bring any nail polish,” Tate muttered as she walked by me, examining her bare nails with a frown.

I tried to hide my giggle as I followed her up the stairs into the open main lobby.

The main doors opened into a stone foyer with more heavy wood accents. The registration desk was angled to the left, and there were already several people milling around the open space.

Most of the people paused when we came in, and I quickly realized it was because Tate and I were standing there.

This isn’t awkward at all.

Most of the men were Gabe’s age or older, but a few looked closer to my age. Almost all of them fixed us with curious eyes, their conversations dying out.

Tate nudged my shoulder and I startled.

“Keep your eyes down,” she reminded me quietly.

Shit.

I dropped my eyes to the floor in front of me, realizing that the last thing we needed was me inadvertently challenging another Alpha and Remy or Gabe having to step in to settle the challenge.

So many damn rules.

Remy's hand closed around my wrist, and he none-too-subtly pulled me against him in a show of pure possessiveness that the other Alphas couldn't miss.

I kept my gaze unfocused, looking at the walls, floors, and decor instead of the bodies until someone familiar caught my attention.

"Elias!" I grinned as the older shifter approached us.

His craggy face split into a wide smile as he approached us, a younger man at his side.

Elias paused in front of us, dipping his head respectfully to each of the Alphas in our group.

"Remington, if I may?" he asked, inclining his head towards me.

Remy smiled with a small nod and stepped away from me so Elias could reach out and take my hand in his.

Because Remy had to do things like give another man permission to touch me in a place like this.

His dark eyes glittered as he leaned in. "So much pomp and circumstance," he murmured for me only, squeezing my hand.

I couldn't help the smile from stretching across my lips until my cheeks hurt.

"It's good to see you, Elias," Gabe said, extending a hand.

"Thank you, Alpha," he replied genuinely. He gestured to the man hovering behind him. "May I present my friend, Daniel Christopher?"

Daniel stepped forward at the introduction, his pale green eyes almost ghostly as they looked at all of us through a fringe of dark lashes that met his jet black hair, styled in a casually messy way that either took five seconds or an hour. He was slightly taller than Remy, his lean frame making him seem almost more catlike than wolf, and he was probably five years older than we were.

His eyes swept the room before landing on each of us as if he expected trouble.

"Daniel," Gabe greeted, also reaching out to shake his hand.

"Daniel, this is Alpha Gabriel from Blackwater and Alpha Lucas from Brooks Ridge," Elias added. "These are their successors, Remington and Dante."

"Sir," Daniel said formally, greeting each of them, maintaining eye contact.

Clearly some kind of alpha if he wasn't lowering his eyes to these two,

but Elias hadn't introduced him as one.

"Miss Davis," Elias said with a wink, "how have you been?"

"Very well, thank you," Tate replied primly, but her eyes glittered with amusement at the formalities.

"This is Alpha Lucas's daughter, Tate." Elias said. "I'm surprised to see you here, my dear. Although I believe your father is being wise in keeping you close. I heard about Maren. My deepest apologies."

Tate swallowed, her jaw working as she gave him a tight smile.

"Exactly," Luke said, wrapping an arm around Tate and tucking her against his side.

"I'm sorry," Elias muttered, a bit flustered. "Daniel, this is Skye Markham. Remy's mate."

Daniel blinked in surprise, looking from me to Remy. "Mate? Really? But you're both so young."

Remy reached out, pulling my back to his chest. "Yes. Mate."

Add another mark to the Possessive Mate tally.

"Congratulations," Daniel said quickly, flashing a grin at Remy.

"What pack are you from?" Dante asked, hovering close behind Tate.

Daniel grimaced and looked at Elias. "I'm not. My pack, Shadowlark ... I'm the only one left now."

"Have you considered joining another pack?" Gabe asked.

It wasn't uncommon for lone wolves to join a new pack. Especially not when the wolf was alone due to circumstance and not choice.

Daniel drew in a deep breath, a rueful smile on his face. "I considered it, but for now, Elias has taken me under his wing."

"He's helping me in my studies," Elias confirmed.

"And how are your studies?" Luke asked, the question sounding more like a demand.

Unfazed, Elias sighed. "Slowly producing promising leads."

"You're here to update the Council?" Gabe pressed with a frown.

"Indeed." Elias looked at me. "I did hear about the grievance your uncle filed with the Council."

Remy stiffened behind me.

Daniel frowned, looking at me. "Your ... uncle?"

"Skye's uncle is Alpha Linden Markham," Elias told him quietly. "From Long Mesa."

Recognition, and then disgust, flared in Daniel's eyes. "My condolences

that you're related to him. I can see why you left."

That caught my attention, but I wasn't the only one.

"What does that mean?" Remy demanded, his voice hard.

Daniel held up his hands in surrender, taking a step back. "Shadowlark was located in Arizona, near Stone Valley."

Oh, fuck.

I sucked in a sharp breath, pushing myself against Remy as I tried to put as much distance between myself and anyone remotely connected to Stone Valley.

It was the alliance with Stone Valley that my mother broke when she became pregnant with me. It caused a war in the south that left both packs bitter.

If Daniel was friendly with Stone Valley, then he probably hated anyone with the name Markham.

As fast as I reacted, Remy pulled me behind him. Like they shared a brain, Gabe, Luke, and Dante lined up alongside him to block me, and Tate, who was quickly moved out of the line of fire. They were a wall of snarling, growling Alphas that had everyone in the lobby freezing.

"Whoa, shit," Daniel said quickly. "I didn't—I'm *not* a fan of Stone Valley. Or Long Mesa, for that matter."

"Daniel has no allegiance to Stone Valley or Long Mesa," Elias confirmed gently. "I would not have brought him here if he did. I am aware of Skye's complicated history. If anything, Daniel shares as mutual hatred of both packs as you all do."

"My parents were killed in the war when Shadowlark refused to help Stone Valley. Trust me," Daniel said, his green eyes sincere as they met mine, "if you're here to put Linden down for good, I'm all for it. Hell, I'll even help if I can."

My hands found the soft fabric of Remy's flannel as I touched his back, leaning around his shoulder.

"I'm sorry about your parents," I told Daniel softly, tucking a loose piece of dark hair behind my ear.

That seemed to diffuse some of the tension.

Remy relaxed and let me step around him, but he stayed at my side, shadowing every move I made.

Gabe gave Remy a tight nod. "I'm going to get us checked in."

"You good?" Luke asked Dante as he stepped away as well.

He nodded, his hand already wrapped around Tate's. "We're good."

"I'm sorry that you thought ..." Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. "Shadowlark was a small pack, but none of us agreed with most of the morals and laws Stone Valley and Long Mesa upheld."

"Thank you," I murmured.

"How did you two meet?" Tate asked, tilting her head to the side.

Elias sighed and shook his head. "I've known Daniel since he was a boy. We reconnected after he had been on his own for a few years."

"Elias has been doing a lot of work behind the scenes," Daniel supplied, crossing his arms over his chest. "His work could change the course of our species. I asked to tag along to see firsthand what the Council thinks of his research."

"Are you closer to proving your theories?" I spoke up, remembering the chats we had about his theories on fertility rates.

His smile flickered ever so slightly. "In some ways I'm closer than ever. In others, I've never been more unsure."

Luke approached quickly from the desk, his phone in hand as he looked at Dante. "We need to get the girls settled fast. Griffin is in the bar, and, for once, isn't surrounded by his entourage."

Remy's head lifted. "Shit."

"Who's Griffin?" I asked slowly.

"Griffin Toms," Remy explained. "He's the Alpha for the Windale pack. They're the largest pack in the midwest."

"And were notoriously neutral for the last two decades," Dante muttered. "Griffin became the new Alpha earlier this year when his cousin stepped down. Getting Griffin and his pack on our side would add a lot of numbers."

Gabe came back, almost at a jog. "Let's get Tate and Skye settled so we can hurry back."

"Maybe you two should go meet him now," Remy said with a frown. "We don't want to miss the chance."

"But he's known you and Dante since you were kids," Gabe replied, shaking his head.

"Gabe's right," Luke agreed grimly. "He's only a few years older than you two. He might hold more weight in your words."

"Skye and I could go to the cabin ourselves," Tate offered.

All six males, Elias and Daniel included, looked at her like she was crazy.

"Or not," Tate muttered.

“What if Elias and I take them?” Daniel offered.

“Long Mesa and Norwood haven’t checked in yet,” Luke mused, rubbing his jaw. “I checked.”

Remy’s jaw ticked the way it did when he was annoyed. “I don’t know.”

“Allow us to escort Tatum and Skye to your cabin. We’ll see them inside safely,” Elias assured him. “Dante is correct—having Griffin on your side would make things more favorable amongst the Alphas.”

Remy looked at his dad.

“It’s your decision,” Gabe said quietly. “Skye’s your mate.”

I took Remy’s hand, grabbing his attention. “Go. I’ll text you as soon as we get inside.”

“Fine,” he said tersely, jerking me towards him for a fast, hard kiss. He pulled back, his dark eyes searching mine. “Straight to the cabin, babe.”

“I promise,” I swore, squeezing his hand. “I’ll lock myself inside and call Mom to check in. I’ll call your mom, too, and let her know we all got here. Tate and I will hang out and wait for you guys.”

Remy nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you as soon as we’re done.”

“Perfect.”

He kissed me again and let me go.

Gabe handed me the key. “We’re in the Pine Crest cabin. Elias knows where it is. We’ll bring the bags when we come.”

“Pine Crest. Got it.” My hand closed around the metal key. I gave Remy a supportive smile. “Go be awesome.”

He flashed me a quick grin before turning to go. I watched him head off through the lobby with his dad, Luke, and Dante before turning to Elias and Daniel.

“Thank you.”

“Our pleasure, Skye,” Elias said with a charming smile. “Shall we?”

Tate and I followed Daniel and Elias out the main doors. The sun was warm and bright in the sky as we headed down the staircase.

“It’s down that path,” Elias said, pointing to the right.

I followed his direction behind where our car and a few others were parked to the stone-laid path winding behind the main building towards a glittering blue lake.

We crossed the drive and headed for the path, making sure to keep our eyes down as other Alphas headed towards the main building.

As I stepped around our parked car, I heard a car door shut and a scent

drifted to me on the breeze. My wolf figured out what was happening before I did, immediately going alert and readying for a fight.

My head snapped up and I met a furious emerald gaze that mirrored my own.

“If it isn’t my long lost niece,” Linden said with a cold smile, blocking my path.

Fucking hell.

YEARS AGO I HAD STUMBLED ACROSS A BOOK THAT MENTIONED SOMETHING called *Murphy's Law*. I had kind of always thought that was really *Skye's Law* because anything that could go wrong for me usually did in spectacular fashion.

But now? Looking at my uncle with Tate, Elias, and a guy I had just met at my back, I knew it was true beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"Alpha Linden," Elias replied politely, bowing his head even as my uncle paid him zero attention.

"Dr. Samuels," Linden finally replied, still staring at me.

I was so fixated on glaring at my uncle that I almost missed Preston getting out of the car.

Fucking fuck.

Remy was going to freak. I would be lucky if he didn't handcuff me to him for the rest of the Summit.

Hell, the rest of our lives.

"Skye," Preston drew out my name slowly, his gaze dragging over me in a disgustingly familiar way.

"Preston," I ground out, even as Tate touched my hand.

"If you'll excuse us," Elias said, his tone just as pleasant as always, "we were escorting the ladies back to their cabin."

"Considering that's *my* niece, I would question who gave you authority to take her anywhere," Linden snapped, his eyes finally cutting away from me to glower at Elias.

I moved to step in front of Elias, to shield him, but Daniel grabbed my

wrist and pulled me back.

“Maybe we don’t start a pissing match with your uncle right now, yeah?” he murmured in a low voice that I barely caught.

He stepped in front of me. “Skye’s mate and Alpha asked us to escort her to her cabin, which is where we’re going.” His tone was firm and final.

“Her *mate*? I don’t think so,” Preston said with a wicked grin, rubbing his jaw and licking his lips. “We haven’t seen Skye in months, and we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Shut up,” Linden barked, surprising me.

Fuming, Preston took a step backwards, clearly pissed that he had been called off.

“We were just checking in,” Linden said, his voice suddenly cordial. “Skye, you look well, dear.”

I think I had whiplash from how fast his mood shifted,

“If you’ll excuse us,” Linden went on, “we need to be going. We have meetings later this evening.”

Linden and Preston stepped around us. Preston stomped towards the stairs, ever the annoyed child who didn’t get to play with his favorite toy. My uncle turned and gave me a cruel smile full of dark promises.

Instead of looking away, I again met his gaze head on, refusing to give him an ounce of respect. Short of shifting and taking him on right now, which my wolf was all for, there wasn’t much else I could do.

His smile grew, his even white teeth showing against his tanned skin. “I look forward to reconnecting with you, Skye. If you speak to your mother, give her my best.”

The mention of my mother was almost my undoing, and I couldn’t stop myself from replying.

“No message for your wife or daughter?” I cocked my head to the side curiously, feigning ignorance. It was an unnecessary dig, and I knew I would pay for it later, but damn it felt good to see him flinch.

Tate sucked in a sharp breath behind me.

Linden’s smile slipped, his gaze hardening. “No need. I’ll be able to give it to them myself soon enough.”

My hands balled into fists as he turned away, the bite of my nails digging into my skin the edge of pain I needed to keep from going after him.

“I don’t know if that was the most prudent course of action, Skye,” Elias chided behind me. “Aggravating your uncle is not wise.”

Daniel snorted derisively. “Maybe not, but it was fun as hell to watch. Looked like his head was going to pop off his shoulders like in a cartoon.”

I turned and looked at him. His eyes were glittering with amusement and ... respect.

“You’ve got some fight in you, huh?” he asked with a smirk. His eyes swept me, the move more appraising than interested. “That’s good. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

“We should get to the cabin,” Tate said softly, heading for the path.

“I believe that is for the best,” Elias agreed, still frowning, as he followed her.

I stayed put until I could see Linden and Preston step into the main building. As soon as the door closed behind them, all the adrenaline, anger, and bravado that had been amping me up, crashed.

Exhaling hard, I closed my eyes and tried to steady myself even as my body started to shake.

My wolf was howling for me to chase them down; the human in me was trying not to have a panic attack.

“You okay?”

I had forgotten Daniel was still standing beside me, and when I opened my eyes, he was looking at me with concern.

His green eyes flicked to the doors. “Want me to get your ... Should I get Remy?”

“No,” I mumbled, concrete in my blood as I turned and started to follow Tate and Elias.

Daniel fell into step beside me. “I never actually met your uncle,” he started slowly, “but I heard stories. We all heard stories about the Long Mesa pack.”

I bit my lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

“I guess I always thought they were just that,” he continued. “Stories. But they aren't, are they?”

Everything in me wanted to lie. I had trained myself to lie; to downplay the horror and the evil that I had lived through. Even now, there were things about life in Long Mesa that Mom and I hadn't fully confronted or confirmed.

Hell, I was still working on telling Remy everything that had happened.

But the whole reason I was here was to tell the truth. Finally, I could rip the monsters out of the shadows and shove them into the light.

More importantly, I wanted to.

It wasn't my job to feel guilty for their actions. It wasn't my responsibility to carry their dirty secrets.

I couldn't change the fact that I was a victim, but I was also a survivor. And maybe I could stop them from ever hurting someone else.

"No, they aren't," I confirmed finally. "All the stories you heard are true, and probably worse than you think."

A muscle worked in his jaw as he considered my words. "Elias said you're here to confront your uncle about what happened?"

I gave a short nod.

"Good. Let me know if I can help."



THE SLAM of the front door hitting the wall was the only warning I got that Hurricane Remy had made landfall and was headed straight for me.

After Elias and Daniel had left us, I had done a quick exploration of the cabin. I had left the master bedroom and bathroom downstairs for Gabe. The upstairs had two bedrooms each with a king-sized bed, a separate small living space in the loft area, and a shared bathroom.

Tate and I had checked the locks and curled up on one of the beds and turned on the TV. I wasn't even sure what movie was playing since I had been on my phone the entire time.

I had shot Remy a text saying we were in the cabin and safe, but opted to leave out the part of seeing my uncle and Preston. It was over and done, and I knew it would stress him out. We could talk about it later when he got back.

I had called Mom and Mallory, texted Larkin, Rhodes, and Katy to let them know we had arrived.

And then I waited, trying not to drive myself crazy with the realization that Linden was *here*. Preston was *here*.

It occurred to me that I hadn't really given that much thought. Sure, I knew they would be at the Summit with us, but for them to actually be *here* and the fact that I had seen them, was a whole different sort of chilling realization that left me a lot more anxious than I thought.

My anxiety fed my wolf's, and by the time Remy made it to the cabin, I was ready to climb the walls. I needed to shift and run off the excess energy.

Maybe I could convince Gabe and Remy to go for a quick run.

But, judging by the way Remy barked my name when the door flew open, I didn't see me ever leaving the cabin.

"Skye!" he shouted again when I didn't answer.

"Shit," Tate murmured, her wide eyes catching my gaze as I slid off the bed.

"I'm up here," I called, walking out of the bedroom and going to the edge of the railing of the loft that overlooked the main living area.

Remy was glaring up at me, and Gabe, Dante, and Luke didn't look so happy either.

They knew about Linden and Preston running into us.

This wasn't good at all.

"Double shit," Tate muttered, coming up behind me and seeing the same pissed off faces. She patted my shoulder in a small show of solidarity before she headed down the stairs, following Luke and Dante out the still-open door.

Gabe's electric blue gaze moved from me to Remy and back to me. "Are you okay?" He finally asked.

I nodded, the words sticking in my dry throat. I couldn't stop looking at Remy.

His hair was a mess. Either there was a giant windstorm between the main lodge and the cabin I had missed, or he had been raking his fingers through it nonstop. His eyes were twin flames of smoldering rage as he looked at me, his broad chest heaving and hands curled into fists that could do some serious damage.

Yeah, he was pissed.

Gabe nodded. "Okay. I'll be back in a bit." He pivoted on his heel and walked back out the door, closing it behind him.

Remy and I stared at each other for several beats before he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He unlocked it with his thumb print, finally tearing his gaze from me to see the screen.

"Hey, made it to the cabin. Tate and I are good." He slowly read the message I had sent him before tossing the phone onto the table by the door and looking at me.

"Funny, I don't see any part in that text where it says, 'Hey, Remy, I ran into my asshole uncle.' Any reason you decided to forget that little fact?" His brows rose. He wasn't yelling, but I could see he was barely holding in his anger. His quiet fury was almost worse than shouting.

Triple shit.

I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat, my fingers curling around the smooth wood of the railing as I looked down at him. “I figured there was nothing you could do, and we *were* safe, so I was going to tell you when you got here.”

“So, tell me,” he ground out, eyes flashing.

My insides shook with unease. “Do you really want to have this conversation Romeo and Juliet balcony-style?” I asked, stalling while I tried to get my galloping heart rate under control.

It took him seconds to get up the stairs, taking them three at a time. His long legs easily ate up the distance between us until it no longer existed. He stood in front of me, towering over me so I had to look up at him. Now that he was inches away, I could see he wasn’t just angry.

Fear lingered in his dark gaze as he studied me, his eyes sweeping up and down my body to check for signs of damage.

He was scared I was hurt.

“I’m really okay,” I said in a small voice.

“I’m really *not*,” he countered, folding his arms over his chest, not giving an inch.

Sighing, I rubbed my forehead. “He was getting out of his car when we walked past. I didn’t plan this, Rem. It was a stupid, freaking coincidence of the worst kind.”

He stayed quiet, waiting for me to elaborate.

“He said ... hi,” I mumbled, my eyes dropping.

“*Hi?*” Remy echoed, derision dripping from his tone.

“He asked me to say hi to my mom,” I added with a grimace.

“Fuck,” he swore quietly, shaking his head. “I knew I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” I said quickly, hating that he was blaming himself. “I was with Tate, Elias, and Daniel.”

He gave me an incredulous look. “Yeah, and none of these people are your mate.”

I closed the distance between us, grabbing his wrist. “Yeah, my *mate*. Not my keeper. Remy, you can’t be with me every second of every day.”

He glared at a spot over my head, his throat working as he tried to control his emotions. “I’m supposed to keep you safe.”

“Do I look like I’m not safe?” I stepped back and spread my arms. “I’m

right here. Linden didn't touch me."

"But he could have."

"But he *didn't*," I insisted. "And even if he did? That's on *him*, Rem, not you. The whole point of me being here is to make him accountable for his own actions."

With a low growl, he turned away from me, reaching out to brace his hands on the railing. His fingers curved around the wood until it groaned. He bowed his head, back arching as he nearly snapped the railing in half.

I stepped into him, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting my cheek against the warm expanse of his back. A few seconds crawled by before he released the railing and twisted, wrapping those powerful arms around me and crushing me to his chest.

I sighed into him, my cheek rubbing the soft cotton of his t-shirt, as the rest of the tension leaked from my body.

Tucked in Remy's embrace, as he sheltered me from the world, was my favorite place to be.

But who shielded him from the world?

I do, I vowed silently, squeezing him as hard as I could.

REMY AND I WERE BOTH ON THE COUCH DOWNSTAIRS WHEN THE FRONT DOOR opened. After he calmed down, we went to wait for Gabe to return. I had moved to sit next to Remy, but he pulled me onto his lap, cuddling me against his body.

I wasn't going to protest whatever need was driving him to keep me close. It was no hardship to have my body curled around his. His fingers sifted through my hair as we sat in silence, my eyes growing heavy as I relaxed and started to doze off. The adrenaline crash from earlier was taking its toll.

Gabe and Luke showed up, opening the door gingerly.

I lifted my head, watching in amusement as they quietly entered.

“Safe to enter?” Gabe asked with a small smile, angling his body through the door with his and Remy's suitcases. Luke entered a second later, wheeling the baby pink suitcase I had borrowed from Zoe for the trip. It looked absolutely absurd for this mountain of an Alpha to be carrying around something so feminine and dainty.

Luke deposited the suitcase by the door and walked in, his eyes sweeping across the room slowly.

Gabe closed the door, a vague smile toying on his lips as he watched Luke.

“Fuck,” Luke grumbled, turning to glare at Remy. “Where is it?”

Remy had his fingers tangled in my hair as he gave Luke a confused look. “Where's what?”

“He's Mallory's son,” Gabe said with a chuckle, like that was an

explanation.

Luke only growled again. "I saw you tear into this place like a man possessed. Half expected your ass to shift and run here after us hearin' her uncle was seen with her. You can't tell me you didn't at least punch a hole in a wall or some shit."

"You expected him to punch a hole in the wall?" I asked slowly.

Luke turned his glare to Gabe. "You sure he's your kid?"

"Pretty sure," Gabe replied with a shrug before holding his hand out.

Still grumbling under his breath, Luke yanked his wallet out of his back pocket, flipping through it before tearing out several bills and slapping them in Gabe's hand.

Gabe pocketed the money. "Thanks."

"You *bet* on Remy?" I was still confused even as Remy started to laugh.

Luke stabbed a finger in Remy's direction. "It ain't normal for an alpha to have so much control. Your dad sure as shit didn't when he was your age."

"Told you," Gabe said, "he's Mal's son."

"Just be glad that ain't the only thing your kid got from her," Luke snapped, stomping over to the armchair and throwing himself in it, legs splayed widely in front of him. "Last thing the world needs is a replication of your ugly mug."

With a snort, Gabe lowered himself into the other chair across from us. His eyes landed on me. "Everything okay here?"

"Yeah," Remy answered for us, "we're good."

"Tate said you gave that shithead uncle of yours a nice parting shot," Luke commented with a grin.

Remy tensed beside me, and I looked up from where my head was on his shoulder. His hand tightened around my hair subtly to keep me from moving away.

"What parting shot?" he asked. His tone sounded curious enough, but I could feel the lingering traces of anger and fear from earlier.

"He asked me to say hello to my mom," I reminded him. "I might have asked if he wanted me to give his wife or daughter a message."

He let out a breath that was half sigh, half snort. "Jesus, Skye. You're going to be the fucking death of me."

"Anything else we need to know about?" Gabe asked.

"No," I said quietly. "You were right. Preston is here, too. He was with Linden."

Thankfully I had told Remy about that after we came downstairs, so he wasn't surprised at all.

"Saw that smug little fucker in the lobby," Luke muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "Wanted to kick his ass even before I knew his name. That kid ain't an alpha."

I had to agree. Preston, for all his crazy, had never had an alpha air about him. Cassian, for all his faults and flaws, knew where to draw the line, even if it was for his own purpose. He knew how to show control when he needed to.

An Alpha needed control, and Preston Loomis was as out of control as a person could ever get.

"I'd be willing to bet his father has something to do with it," I said offhandedly.

"What do you mean?" Remy asked, looking down at me curiously.

"Preston's dad is Linden's beta," I explained, "but honestly, I'm surprised he didn't challenge Linden for Alpha. If anyone could beat my uncle, it would be Allan. He might've made some kind of deal where he agreed not to challenge Linden if Preston took Cassian's place as his successor."

"I could snap that kid with one hand," Luke replied, unimpressed.

"Feel free to," I said quickly.

"Tate told me some of the boys from that pack hassled you when you lived there," Luke said slowly, his voice dark and serious.

Everything in me wanted to deflect that comment. "Yeah."

"Three of 'em, right?" Luke went on, his steel gaze unrelenting. "The one you offed, the little shit crawling around here, and another?"

"Marc," I whispered, wanting like hell to bury my face against Remy and go back to shoving this part of my life into an iron box I could hurl in the deepest part of the ocean.

I twisted my hands in my lap as Remy's hand went from absently toying with my hair to massaging my neck, the pressure of his touch firm and grounding.

Luke nodded slowly, his expression completely unreadable. "Three boys. Girl like you must've loved that."

My head snapped up, anger and humiliation burning through me like a forest fire under the blazing summer sun.

"What did you say?" I growled the words as my wolf stirred.

The pressure of Remy's fingers on my skin increased slightly, but that was the only indication he had heard, or cared, about what Luke had said.

Luke shrugged nonchalantly. “Girls love that kinda shit, right? The attention, I mean.”

“I never once asked for this,” I hissed, my hands curling into fists. The bite of pain from the nails digging into my palms was the only way I could keep my wolf from attacking.

She wanted Luke’s blood for insinuating we wanted any part of what he was suggesting.

Luke leveled me with a smirk of pure arrogance. “Do girls like you even have to ask?”

“No,” I spat vehemently. The only thing keeping me from getting up and slapping him—Alpha or not—was Remy’s hands holding me back. “Girls *don’t* have to ask. Call me crazy, but I would think saying ‘no’ is a pretty fucking adequate form of refusing someone. I never, ever asked for anything except to be left alone.”

Luke blinked slowly before looking at Gabe and then Remy. “She’s ready to give her testimony.”

It took a second to register his words. “Wh-what?”

Luke flashed me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, sweetheart. We wanted to make sure you could handle a little unfounded accusation being thrown your way without losing your cool.”

“This was a test?” I frowned at him and then Gabe.

“Kind of, yeah,” Gabe told me unapologetically.

“It was my idea,” Luke threw out. “Don’t blame them. The Council won’t take it easy on you, and neither will a lot of the Alphas here. With women in short supply, they tend to think women love having multiple males sniffin’ around her.”

I looked at Remy. “And you knew?”

His fingertips grazed the base of my skull, his hand once again running through my hair. “Yeah.”

“That wasn’t nice,” I muttered.

“But you did great,” he told me sweetly, leaning over to kiss the top of my head.

“How did the meeting with Griffin go?” I asked, needing a change of topic.

“Good,” Remy replied with a sharp nod. “He agrees with us and even offered the support of his pack.”

“Windale is a big get,” Luke agreed, getting to his feet. “But we still have

a lot more work to do. I'm going to head back and finish unpacking. I'll drop Tate off over here and we can head to Nero's in a bit."

"Yeah," Gabe replied, nodding as he rubbed his jaw. "See you soon."

Gabe stood up once Luke had left. "I'm going to unpack and maybe go for a quick run. All this travel makes me antsy."

I knew how he felt. I could use a run myself, but glancing at Remy, I put my wolf back on the shelf in favor of having some alone time with him.

"Did you pick a room?" Gabe asked me as he headed for his suitcase by the door.

"I figured you would want the one down here?" I replied with a shrug. "There's two bedrooms upstairs, but I can do whatever."

"No, down here is fine," he answered. A dimple appeared in his cheek. "You guys use those *two* bedrooms."

Remy snorted next to me, his hand dipping inside the collar of my shirt to trace the delicate bones around my neck.

Yeah, we all knew the odds of Remy and I staying in separate rooms was about as good as my uncle deciding to abdicate his Alpha position and rescind his complaint to the Council.

"Sounds good," I managed with a squeak, trying to keep my cheeks from bursting into flames.

"I'll be back in an hour or so," he called over his shoulder before heading through the kitchen area towards the bedroom in the back.

"So," Remy started, amusement lacing his words, "want to show me which bedroom is mine?"

I slapped his rock-hard stomach. "Shut up."

He caught my wrist with his free hand and pulled me around for a fast kiss that quickly grew into more when he tugged me onto his lap.

I pulled back, looking over his shoulder towards the back of the cabin. "Your dad—"

"—is leaving," he finished for me, his teeth playfully nipping the side of my neck. "But if you're that worried ..." He stood up fluidly, and I almost toppled to the floor before he caught me.

I tried slapping his arm, but he caught my hand.

"Why don't you show me which of those two rooms is mine?" he asked, a teasing glint in his eyes.

I dropped my head back and groaned. "Okay, I get it."

"Get what?" He moved around me and grabbed both of our suitcases

before starting up the stairs.

I followed him with a huff, and when he paused at the landing, I nearly ran into him.

“So?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at me with a grin. “Which room is mine?”

A door opened and shut downstairs, probably Gabe leaving.

Leaving us ... alone.

Remy dropped both bags in the middle of the loft.

“What are you—” I ended with a squeak as he picked me up in his arms high enough that I had to wrap my legs around his waist as he picked a room and walked us into it.

“Hi,” he murmured, his breath warm against my face.

“Hi,” I repeated, breathless and spinning as I became hyper aware of every place my body was pressed against his.

His golden eyes glittered, playful and happy in a way I hadn’t seen in awhile. “This okay?”

My fingers tangled in his hair. “Could be better,” I admitted softly. Before I could overthink it, I dipped my head and kissed him. Moving my lips against his, I teased his mouth open, sighing quietly when his tongue stroked against mine.

“Better,” I finally managed when I pulled back for air.

He smiled, supporting my weight with one arm, he lifted a hand to my face. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered, pressing my forehead to his. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you.”

His gaze heated a second before his lips collided with mine, this time the kiss edging into desperation and frenzy.

He let me go, and I slid down his body, shuddering when parts of me came into contact with him. Both of his hands came up to hold my jaw, angling my head where he wanted for the best access. His tongue stroked, licked, and teased me until I was gasping, arching into him.

One hand fell away from my face, the back of his hand brushing the tip of my breast before landing on my hip. His fingers curled around my hip, tugging me closer as he took possession of the kiss.

As he took possession of me.

My hands slipped over his shoulders, pushing away the flannel shirt. He let me go to rip the shirt off and drop it before his hands found my body once

more, magnets being drawn to the opposite.

I traced the feel of his muscles over his shirt. The dips and ridges, the hard planes and chiseled ridges of his shoulders. Sliding my hands down the front of his t-shirt, I slipped my fingers under the hem, my nails scraping against his skin.

He groaned into my mouth, his body shuddered as he leaned into my touch.

The realization that he was turned on by what I was doing was a whole new kind of headiness.

With a growl, he reached between us for the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. He reached for me immediately, but my brain was still short circuiting from the amount of skin I could now touch and taste.

Damn, my boy was gorgeous.

He moved us back a few steps until I felt the edge of the bed at the back of my thighs. With a soft push, I fell away from him and onto the mattress.

He nudged my thighs open, standing above me, his dark eyes consuming and almost feral as he licked his lips.

From this angle I could see the sharp cut lines of his Adonis belt, the way each ab rippled and moved under his skin, the way his chest heaved as he tried to steady himself.

Fire licked through my blood as arousal and want and need swept through me in a dizzying torrent.

“Still good?” He arched a brow.

I gave him a pointed look, hooking a foot behind his leg with a grin. “Still could be better.”

Laughter danced in his eyes as he leaned down over me, bracing a hand on either side of me before slowly lowering his head and giving me a small kiss. His lips moved from my mouth across my jaw and down my throat, his mouth and teeth suckling and nipping alternately, his tongue dragging across the spot where my pulse raced.

He slid a hand down my side, his fingers toying with the bottom of my shirt. They barely dipped inside, stroking the soft skin of my stomach and then tracing the waistband of my jeans before going back to skin. Each pass, he dragged his fingers higher; his fingertips teased my navel, feathered across my ribcage, and when they traced the underside of my bra, I lifted myself up enough to tug my shirt over my head.

An uneasy wave of vulnerability threatened to unmoor me when I laid back against the bed, now with just the pink lacy bra covering the top half of me. This was barely charted territory for me, and having his intense stare focused solely on me was enough to cause butterflies.

I forced myself to look at Remy, and any nerves I felt vanished like smoke in the wind.

His gaze was a beautiful mix of awe and hunger as he looked at me. The hand that had been mapping my torso moved to trace the edge of my bra. His large, calloused finger looked strangely erotic as it was dragged against the lacy edges of my underwear.

After a second of exploring, he covered one breast with his whole hand.

The shock of it left me reeling, and I gasped so hard I worried I sucked up all the air in the room.

His eyes immediately went to mine. “Still good?” His voice was thick and low. Something in his tone called to me, pulled me in for more.

I arched into him. “More.”

The corners of his mouth tilted as he added pressure, massaging and tormenting my breast in his hand.

It still wasn't enough. The slight amount of friction was driving me crazy.

“Remy.” His name fell from my lips in a pleading prayer. It was the only word I could manage, unsure I could actually say what I wanted.

But I didn't need to.

Remy's hand slid behind my back, easily unhooking my bra with ease. The cups sagged against me, and neither of us moved for a second.

I waited for him to rip the garment away, but he didn't. His hand moved back to the bed and he ... waited for me.

Remy would give me whatever I wanted, but I had to meet him halfway.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the bra away, baring myself to him.

His eyes glittered with pride as he gazed at me. “You're gorgeous,” he said reverently, laying a hand flat between my breasts.

I couldn't help the smugness in my smile as I looked at him. “And you're taking too long.”

His eyes narrowed. “I'm savoring the moment.”

I barely had time to register his head lowering before he sucked one nipple into his greedy mouth in a long pull that woke up every nerve ending in me, zipping a sharp line down to my core. With a throaty moan, I arched my back, practically offering myself to him as I tangled my hand in his hair.

His hand slid up my ribcage to my other breast, taunting and teasing the nipple into a tight peak before he pinched it lightly.

My entire body shuddered at the delicious sensation.

He alternated his hand and mouth between both peaks, taking his time exploring the valley between them with each pass until I was a shaking, writhing mess under him. My hips jerked, searching for something just out of reach.

“Remy.” His name came out half-groan, half-whimper as his teeth scraped across a nipple. My hips jerked again, one of my hands still twisted in his hair and the other gouging marks into his back as my nails scoured over the flesh.

His hand abandoned my breast, blazing a winding path down, down, down.

He hesitated when he reached the waistband of my jeans. With an audible pop, he released my nipple from his mouth and looked in my eyes.

Slowly, he undid the button of my jeans.

I swallowed hard, my throat impossibly dry. My gaze flickered down my body to where he was starting to slide the zipper open.

“Still with me?” he whispered.

I nodded slowly, not sure if I could find the words.

“Hey.”

He waited until my eyes were on his again. “We can stop—”

“Don’t you dare!” The words flew out of my mouth before I could censor them or come up with something that sounded remotely sexy.

No, I sounded like a desperate, crazy person.

With a chuckle, Remy nodded. “Got it.” He kissed me again, his mouth gentle and soft against mine as he eased his large hand into the opening of my jeans. “I’ve got you.”

The first whisper of his hand feathering across my center felt like a dream. I wasn’t even sure it was real.

The next touch had more pressure, a single finger being swept insistently against me through the rough lace of my panties.

The pressure that had been building inside of me ramped up all over. I loved what he was doing, but it wasn’t enough.

“More,” I begged before I could stop myself.

Smiling to himself, Remy kissed me again. His mouth coaxed mine open as he slid his hand down the inside of my underwear.

With a sharp gasp, I rocked my hips into his touch. The feel of his skin touching mine was incredible and unsatisfying at the same time.

His tongue came out to lick against mine as he slid a finger inside of me, the heel of his hand pressed down on the bundle of nerves at my center that made my entire body jerk like I had been electrocuted.

With a gasp, I pulled my mouth from his, rolling my hips to meet the shallow thrust of his finger inside me. The heel of his hand ground against my clit, and I saw stars. Actual stars bursting behind my lids as I squeezed them shut.

He added a second finger, stretching me as pleasure arced through me.

My hand latched onto his wrist, but I wasn't sure why. I didn't know if I wanted him to go faster or stop or slow down. Maybe all three at the same time.

He kept moving in me, against me, with me until finally he curled his fingers inside of me while pressing the base of his palm against my clit, and I detonated.

With a sharp cry, I came, the pleasure so strong it bordered on painful. My core clamped down on his fingers, using his hand to ride out the aftershocks of my orgasm.

Panting, I tried to bring myself back to the present, but my mind and body were on another plane of existence altogether.

I was vaguely aware that Remy had pulled his hand away, but when he grinned down at me a second before licking his fingers clean, my eyes went huge at the blatantly erotic sight.

"You taste fucking amazing," he told me, his eyes dark with want.

I wasn't sure if I should be embarrassed or turned on until he kissed me again. His hand wrapped around my hip possessively, pulling me against the hard bulge in his jeans.

I wanted more.

I *needed* more.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him with everything I had. He lifted off of me, stepping back as his hands went to the button on his jeans.

Finally.

Everything in me was ready for this. I lifted myself up onto my elbows to watch him undo the button and reach for the zipper.

But he hesitated, his eyes going to the end table beside me.

I turned and looked.

Shit.

Over an hour had passed since Gabe left.

I sighed, flopping back on the bed. “Your meeting.”

Remy gave me a wry smile. “To be continued?” He glanced around the room. “I should probably take a shower.”

I bit my lower lip. Indecision warred in me for an eternity of seconds.

I got off the bed.

“Want some company?”

NEITHER OF US SPOKE AS WE COLLECTED WHAT WE NEEDED FOR THE SHOWER. When Remy left to grab our suitcases from the hall, I had pulled his discarded shirt on.

The idea of walking around topless in the bright late afternoon sun felt ... weird.

I slowly dug through my suitcase. By the time I had pulled out everything I needed for the shower, Remy was already standing under the spray.

My hands were shaking, nervous excitement morphing into giant butterflies flapping around with steel-tipped wings that almost shredded my resolve.

I set my clothes on the counter beside his. The sheer domesticity of it was reassuring.

His back was to me as he stood under the spray. The glass doors were warped and distorted by water droplets and steam, but there was no denying he was absolutely beautiful.

My gaze lingered on the tattoo covering his shoulder. I absently toyed with the matching pendant at my throat. The moon and star image that was a symbol of his family and his pack.

My family. My pack.

The stark reminder was all I needed to steady my nerves.

I quickly shed my clothes, crossing the bathroom floor and opening the glass door to the shower to step inside with him.

Holy hell.

The sudden surge of lust made my knees weak as I blatantly checked him

out. The hard contours of his muscled back tapering down to a trim waist and beyond that?

An ass I really could study for days.

“Are you done objectifying me yet?” he asked.

My eyes snapped up to see he was grinning unashamedly at me over his shoulder.

Heat flooded my face, and I prayed he would write it off as just the steam from the water making me red.

His nostrils flared slightly, and I knew there was zero shot of him thinking my reaction was due to the temperature of the water.

His heightened wolf senses could scent my arousal as clearly as I could.

Reaching around him, I grabbed the bottle of shampoo from his hands and squirted the liquid into my palm. I had to stand on my tiptoes, but I massaged the shampoo into his scalp, raking my nails across the sensitive skin.

My reward was a full body shudder from him as his head fell back to give me more access.

“God, that feels good,” he muttered, his voice husky and deep in a way that had me pressing my thighs together.

I maneuvered him back under the spray, washing the suds from his dark hair.

He turned to help me, and I kept my eyes on his face even as something brushed against my abdomen.

I wasn't ready to look down quite yet.

We finished rinsing his hair, my fingers lingering even after the last of the bubbles swirled down the drain.

He blinked his eyes open, watching me curiously.

I rocked up to my toes again, tugging his hair to pull his mouth down to me.

The slick slide of my body against his under the water was a whole new feeling. His hands slid across my back and down to cup the flesh of my butt, pulling me closer.

My legs turned to jelly when I felt him pressing against my stomach, hard and hot and heavy.

I slid a hand down the front of his chest, letting my nails drag across one flat nipple.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his hips jerking against me. I smiled against

his mouth and he turned us, pressing my back against the shower wall and out of the direct line of the showerhead.

My hand lingered for a second at his hip before following the natural curve of his body. I dragged a single finger down the length of him, and he tore his mouth from mine.

“Skye,” he gasped my name, his brown eyes unfocused as he rested his forehead against mine.

Fighting a grin, I took him in my hand, exploring and mapping the textures and feel of him.

“Fuck,” he muttered, his eyes squeezing shut when I added more pressure.

I glanced down and swallowed hard, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. My fingers didn’t even fit around him, and I wondered how the pieces of this particular puzzle were supposed to fit together.

Then again, judging by the way my core ached and clenched, I was also more than a little excited to find out.

I watched my hand slide up and down his length, taking note of what caused his breath to catch and his body to shiver.

Licking my lips, I looked up at him through wet lashes.

He had a hand braced by my head against the wall, the other hand was holding the nape of my neck in a borderline death-grip.

Not letting myself overthink it, I slid down to my knees.

His eyes snapped open. “Skye—”

I cut him off when I licked the length of him, sucking his tip into my mouth almost curiously. I slid my palm up the front of his thigh, using him for balance as I worked more of him into my mouth.

I wasn’t entirely sure what I was doing, alternating sucking, licking, and kissing him until his hand slapped against the marble of the stall wall so hard I wondered if he cracked the stone.

“Shit.” His chest heaved.

I smiled around him, using my tongue and lips to drive him crazy. My tongue mapped the vein that pulsed on the underside of his length, and I noticed his entire body tensed when I sucked harder on his tip. I tried to pay attention to the way his body reacted, using the bare basic knowledge I had picked up in some of my favorite romance novels to make this good for him.

I lost track of the time. It slipped by as quickly as the water going down the drain in the shower as all of me focused on him, until finally his hand

touched my aching jaw.

“Skye, I’m going to ...”

It was a warning I didn’t need. I lifted my hand, adding it to the mix as I worked him harder until he came with a hoarse groan that I felt in my soul.

He reached down and pulled me up roughly, my back hitting the cool tiles a second before his mouth covered mine.



WE TOOK our time finishing in the shower. Remy washed my hair, and we took turns soaping and rinsing each other’s bodies. That led to a lot of touching that had him pressing me against the wall and using his hand to wring another orgasm out of my body.

He pulled a giant fluffy towel off the shelf near the shower and wrapped me up in it like I was a glass doll that needed to be protected. He wrapped another towel around his waist before carrying me out of the shower and setting me on the counter.

Stepping between my legs, he used a third towel to dry my hair as best as he could. I watched him as he took care of me, feeling more loved and cherished than I ever had before.

He started to step away to hang up the damp towel, but I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him back to me.

My cheek rested on his damp chest, the steady thump of his heartbeat a lullaby that I wanted to fall asleep to.

His arms came around me instantly, his lips touching the crown of my head before laying his cheek against it.

“I love you,” I said softly, my fingers dragging up and down the still wet skin of his back.

I could feel his smile.

“I love you, too, babe,” he replied before kissing the top of my head again.

I snuggled into his chest, letting the sweetness of the moment sooth my heart. Tomorrow would be hard. The next day would be harder. But right now, everything was right in my world.

Remy tilted his head to the side. “My dad’s back,” he murmured, not letting me go. “We need to leave soon.”

“I know.” I focused on the rhythmic beat of his heart pumping a second longer before letting him go.

He smoothed my hair out of my eyes and leaned down to give me another searing kiss that ended way too soon.

I slipped off the edge of the sink and we both dressed quietly. Since I wasn't going out, I opted for a pair of yoga pants and Remy's discarded shirt. When I reached for my hairbrush, he beat me to it, silently brushing through the wet tangles in my hair until I was boneless under his touch.

He pressed a kiss to the side of my throat when he was done. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod, taking the hand he offered.

We left the bathroom and headed downstairs.

Gabe was already waiting in the living room for us, scrolling through his phone. He glanced up as we came down, but didn't comment on the fact that we both had clearly just stepped out of the shower. Since there was only one shower upstairs, the odds of us taking separate showers wasn't likely.

I ducked my head, letting my wet hair cover my flaming cheeks.

“Luke said they'll be over in a few,” Gabe told us.

I sat down on the couch, Remy perching on the arm of it beside me.

Gabe gave me a smile. “Tomorrow marks the official start of the Summit,” he began. “There will be a formal commencement in the main lodge that all of us attend. You and Tate are welcome to come, too, but you'll have to sit in the gallery. Or you can hang out here.”

“No, I want to go,” I said quickly. “I think the more visible I am, the less people will think we have something to hide.”

“Your uncle will be there,” Remy reminded me, touching my shoulder.

“I know.” I nodded, resolved. “He needs to know I'm not hiding, too.”

“I think that's smart,” Gabe agreed. “We'll take you and Tate to the gallery, and one of us will get you when it's over.”

Sensing his hesitation, I leaned forward. “And that's it?”

Gabe's mouth flattened. “Your uncle, and any other Alpha, can make a motion for the Council to hear their concerns or issues in the afternoon. It's up to you if you want to be there. You can sit in the gallery again, but you won't be able to say anything.”

“So, no flying off the handle when he starts spouting his lies?” I asked with a smirk, rolling my eyes.

“You can stay here at the cabin instead,” Remy offered, but we both knew it was pointless.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “If Linden wants to lie about what happened, he can lie to the Council while I’m sitting there.”

The corner of Gabe’s mouth hooked up in a smile I had seen Remy give me dozens of times. “Good for you.”

“How will the testimonies work?” I asked, pulling my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on them.

“Once Linden makes his complaint in person with the Council,” Gabe explained, “they’ll decide how to handle it. There is always a slight chance we can argue tomorrow and the Council will dismiss his accusations.”

“But I’m guessing that won’t happen,” I finished for him.

Remy’s hand stroked my wet hair. “Probably not.”

“The Council will decide when they want to meet with you. Probably later this week,” Gabe replied. “They’ll make their final decision by the end of the Summit.”

“No pressure,” I muttered, trying to ignore the tiny chance that I could be leaving here with Linden and Preston instead of Remy.

“We’ll be with you the whole time. You have the support of more packs than you know.” The encouraging smile on Gabe’s face melted into something more serious.

“There’s something else I want to ask you, but we’ll only move forward if you agree.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, shifting my attention from Gabe to Remy, but he seemed as much in the dark as I did.

“Luke and I were talking,” our Alpha began, his words measured and sure, “and we think it would be beneficial to file our own grievance with the Council on your behalf.”

My brows rose. “On *my* behalf?”

“On behalf of you and your family,” he amended. “That includes your aunt and cousin. We would file a shifter rights violation complaint against Long Mesa and Linden.”

I leaned forward. “What would that do?”

“It would make the Council investigate the pack,” Remy interjected slowly. “A violation claim is pretty heavy. Most Alphas agree that the Alpha has final say in their pack. To file a complaint like this would mean questioning Linden’s ability to control a pack.”

“Linden’s been so busy making us play defense, that he may not be prepared if we shift to offense,” Gabe added.

“Wouldn’t it look like we were filing our own complaint to get even?” I asked.

Gabe sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Maybe to some, but it would be another layer the Council would have to sift through before making a judgement about the four of you having to go back. The more we can expose Linden, the better.”

Fear slid into my stomach, oily and cold. “I thought we all agreed the Council wouldn’t make me go back because Remy and I are bonded.”

“You, no,” Gabe allowed. “Your mom, aunt, and cousin are a bit trickier. I’m optimistic the Council will see things our way, but there’s always a chance that they won’t.”

Remy’s hand settled between my shoulder blades as I struggled to pull in air.

“You think they’ll make them go back?” I could barely choke out the words.

“I think I want all of our bases covered and then some,” Gabe said in a firm tone that gave me some comfort. “But it might mean you would have to answer more questions. The abuse you endured ... you would have to detail what happened.”

“Aren’t I doing that any way?” I frowned.

Remy cleared his throat. “Since we would be filing the complaint, we would have to be in the room with you when you’re questioned.”

Soundlessly, my head turned to look at him.

Oh.

An elastic band looped once, twice, three times around my heart, squeezing until I felt dizzy.

Remy would know, in graphic detail, what had happened.

A bitter taste filled my mouth, and I realized, too late, that I had bitten down hard enough on the inside of my cheek to draw blood.

“Forget it,” he said quickly, looking at his father and shaking his head.

“It’s not your decision, son,” Gabe told him gently, his blue eyes still holding steady on me.

I swallowed down the crushing wave of panic that threatened to unmoor me from my anchor. From Remy.

There was so much he knew, but so much more he didn’t know. So much more I was still embarrassed to reveal. Humiliation burned through me, the flames of my shame incinerating me to ash and cinder.

“Even if we win,” I spoke slowly, the sound of my voice foreign to me, “even if Mom, and Zara, and Bella are safe ... What would happen to Linden if we didn’t file the complaint? If we let it go?”

“He would go back to his pack without any of you,” Gabe answered.

My hands curled into fists. “But there would be no repercussions? No punishment for what he did?”

Gabe shook his head, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

Linden had done unspeakable things. The punishments he doled out for the smallest of pack infractions were cruel and excessive by any standard. Jesus, he had killed Maisie and Shane.

After all of this was over, Linden could go back to Long Mesa and enslave new omegas, if he hadn’t already.

Unless I stopped him.

“I’ll do it,” I whispered, staring at my shaking hands. I was cold. Why was I so cold?

“You don’t have to.” Remy’s tone was low, his words vibrating with anger.

“Yes, I do,” I replied, unfurling my hands and blindly reaching for him. As always, he was there, his hand finding mine with a sureness that reeled me back in.

I looked up at him through glassy, blurry eyes. “I can’t let him do this to anyone else.”

The pain twisting his features morphed into a beautiful kind of fury, his dark eyes flashing as he turned into an avenging angel. *My avenging angel.*

“Okay. Then we’ll do whatever it takes to stop him.” He lifted my hand to his lips, kissing my hand with infinite gentleness. “We’re in this together.”

“We’re here if you need anything, honey,” Gabe assured me warmly as the front door opened.

Tate came in first, followed by Dante and Luke. She came to me and dropped into the couch cushions with a grin. “Did you check out the room service menu? We’re ordering *all* the things. I’m craving cheese.”

My stomach growled. “Food sounds good.”

Gabe stood up, and then Remy, who paused and leaned over to kiss me.

“I have my phone if you need me,” he said, his dark eyes searching mine. “No more accidental run-ins with former pack members, okay?”

“I’m staying on this couch and eating my weight in carbs,” I vowed, trying to shake off the shadows that still lingered.

He grinned and gave me another kiss. "I'll see you when we get back."
I leaned into Tate, watching as my heart walked out the door.

MY STOMACH QUIVERED WITH NERVOUS ENERGY AS I STEPPED INSIDE THE main hall the next afternoon. Alphas and others wandered around, some talking, some sitting at tables that were spread out around the large space. At the front of the room was a raised dais with tables and chairs for the Council.

The morning had been spent listening to the chair of the Council introduce the members, take pack attendance to see who was participating, and outline the program of events that would take place over the next two weeks including current issues, such as declining fertility rates and shifter displacement as packs started to dissolve.

We had been dismissed for lunch, but I could barely concentrate on eating knowing that the afternoon session was when Linden could, and would, lodge his formal complaint against my pack.

It was like waiting for the tap of a finger on the first domino in a line.

Once Linden filed his complaint, Gabe would file ours and there would be no going back.

After we finished eating, Remy and Dante led Tate and I behind a sectioned off area that was barely half-full. If it was anything like the morning session, the gallery would fill up with shifters who were attending the Summit, but not Alphas.

Several were betas and deltas, a few random lone wolves. Surprisingly, there were quite a few females. Most of the women sat together, their conversations stopping when we entered.

I tried to ignore the ones who were blatantly eye-fucking Remy and Dante as they walked with us, but when one woman leaned forward into the

aisle, licking her lips as Remy passed, I couldn't help the warning growl that rumbled out of me.

My wolf was ready to tear her head off for daring to look at our mate.

"Easy," Remy murmured, his hand squeezing around mine. He tossed me an amused smile as he stopped in front of a set of empty seats. "Besides, if anyone should be jealous, it's me."

I was still glaring at the woman who had been checking him out, even if she was now looking anywhere but us.

Not good enough. I still wanted to rip her head off.

"What?" I asked, turning my head to him.

His dark brows lifted. "Skye, men haven't stopped staring at you since we walked in."

I glanced over his shoulder, and sure enough, men and boys were openly gawking at Tate and I. Some tried to be more subtle, but being young and female in a world where men outnumbered us four to one was enough of a reason to stare.

He smirked and kissed me quickly, my lips tingling from the too brief contact.

"Stay here. We'll come and get you when the session is done." He squeezed my hand once before letting go.

"Okay," I agreed, already sitting down.

Dante kissed Tate before she sat down beside me.

"Don't leave," he told her firmly.

She held up her hands. "I promise. Skye and I are going to hang here while you do your alpha thing."

"Mind if I join?" Daniel asked, coming up behind them.

Remy turned first and extended a hand. "Hey, man. Good to see you. Thanks again for yesterday and getting them back to the cabin. I appreciate it."

"We both do," Dante corrected, also shaking Daniel's hand.

"No worries," he told them both. "Elias is up front, and since I'm not an Alpha, I'm watching from back here. I can hang with the girls if you want."

"That would be great," Remy replied, glancing back at me.

I nodded and patted the empty seat on the other side of me. "Come join the nonparticipating party," I offered.

Daniel sat down beside me as we watched Remy and Dante make their way to the front of the room. They joined Gabe and Luke and several other

men that Remy had pointed out as part of their alliance.

I was praying there wouldn't be a quiz at the end because I was rapidly forgetting who all these men were.

"Skye," Tate said softly. I turned and followed her line of sight to see Linden and Preston walk in, followed by Trace and an older man that was likely Trace's father. They joined a group of men on the opposite side of our guys, greeting them with smiles and loud laughter that set my nerves on edge.

A few more people came and sat with us in the observation area, and minutes later the Alpha Council walked out from behind a curtain across a stage to retake their seats.

There were seven of them, the two alternates sitting off to the side while the five current members sat at the head table. Most of the men were older, easily older than Gabe or Luke by a decade or more. One of the alternates and one of the Council were younger, but still middle aged.

They all looked stoic and alert, but there was also a tiredness to them. Like they knew they were stepping into an unwinnable battle.

The man in the center lifted a wooden gavel and clacked it loudly on the table. Silence fell across the room before the chairman, Alpha Vincent if the name card in front of him was correct, continued his opening remarks.

"Welcome back, Alphas." His voice was aged, but booming, commanding the attention of the room as he spoke.

I couldn't help myself from looking at my old packmates when he said that. Linden was staring straight ahead, but Preston was fixated on me, his dark gaze full of fury and contempt.

My jaw clenched as I glared back at him openly, ignoring as another Alpha on the Council began to take attendance of the packs, calling their names out in a monotonous voice that boomed in the room.

I could see the muscles of Preston's neck pull tight, rage tightening his features as I continued to keep eye contact.

With a cough, Daniel leaned forward, effectively blocking my view of Preston.

Blinking, I sat back against my chair and realized my chest was heaving and my hands were clenched into fists.

"Easy, killer," he murmured beside me, angling himself so Preston lost his view of me.

"You okay?" Tate whispered, touching my hand.

I nodded mutely, still trying to calm my racing heart and the angry wolf

prowling around inside of me. I focused my attention on Remy, my gaze staying on him as the Alpha kept talking.

“We will now open the floor to new business to be addressed,” Vincent continued. “If any Alpha has a dispute to file with the Council, we will hear those claims as well.”

Tate’s hand found mine. I crushed her fingers with mine, needing that support, but she barely blinked.

An older Alpha stood from the back of the room and made his way to one of the microphones in the center of the room that had been set up for this session.

“Alpha Calvin, from the Northern Appalachian pack,” he introduced himself, his white hair sticking up in different places. He looked like he could barely manage walking, let alone a pack. “I would like to inform the Council of a territory dispute on our Northeastern boundary with the Norwood pack.”

“What say you, Alpha Damien?” Vincent called from where he sat in the middle of the Council.

Trace’s father stood fluidly. “We acknowledge the dispute, but move to have the matter investigated further by the Council. As the Northern pack cannot seem to police its own borders, we have been forced to. Since their Alpha can’t properly manage his lands and pack, we are happy to absorb them into Norwood.

Flustered, Calvin gaped at him for a moment. “I take offense to these claims.”

Unimpressed, Damien smirked at the other Alpha.

“Very well,” Vincent finally said, waving for Calvin to head back to his seat. “We will schedule a time during the Summit for a formal overview of the matter.” His gaze fell back to Damien. “Unless you are proposing a formal challenge of the Northern Appalachian pack?”

“Not at this moment.” Damien sat back down, still smiling. Trace leaned over and said something to his father that had them both chuckling.

I was so busy watching them that I nearly missed Linden standing up.

Here we go.

“Alpha Linden from Long Mesa,” he began, not bothering to go to the microphone. His voice carried across the room with ease. “I would like to file a formal grievance with the Blackwater pack.”

Vincent leaned forward. “On what grounds?”

“Kidnapping,” Linden answered coolly, the word sending ripples through

the room.

The gavel cracked against the table. “Silence!” Vincent snapped, his voice cutting off all conversations.

I looked at Remy. He glanced at me with a nod.

“Who, sir, are you claiming they kidnapped?” Vincent asked.

I wanted to roll my eyes. Most of the people in this room knew this was coming. Both sides, Linden’s and Gabe’s, had been amassing allies in case the Council made the rare decision to turn the vote over to all of the Alphas. Linden had even filed a public, written complaint weeks earlier with the Council.

I was quickly learning that the Summit was a show. One big production to showcase who really had the most power in our world.

“This fall, my niece and sister went missing. Later, my own wife and daughter vanished,” Linden replied, his tone grave and full of emotion.

Fake emotion, I seethed silently.

“I learned they all had been taken by the Blackwater pack thanks to the loyalty of the Norwood pack.” He inclined his head to Trace and Damien, who looked way too smug.

“Is this true?” Vincent asked, the sole voice for the Council.

Trace stood. “Yes, sir. While attending Granite Peak Academy, I met Skye Markham, Alpha Linden’s only niece.”

I snorted under my breath. *Only niece*. Like my uncle gave a shit.

“She was there as a new member of the Blackwater pack,” Trace continued, the lies falling effortlessly from his mouth. “They made certain to keep her under close watch. The campus alpha and pack successor rarely gave her a moment alone.”

“You see how immediately they separated my sister from her own child,” Linden added. “No doubt to manipulate and brainwash my niece while controlling my sister.”

Vincent held up a hand. “Now is not the time that we will be taking commentary, Alpha.” His shrewd gaze cut to the other side of the room. “Do you have a response to these claims, Alpha Gabriel?”

Gabe stood slowly. He looked completely cool and calm.

“Adalynne and Skye Markham came to our pack seeking sanctuary in October of last year,” Gabe confirmed. “They had fled Long Mesa and Alpha Linden after years of prolonged abuse and cruelty.”

That sent off a second shockwave of comments, these louder than the last

as shifters began whispering to each other.

Again, Vincent slammed the gavel down hard enough to crack the handle. “We will have order!” he barked.

The room quieted.

“These are grave claims, Alpha,” Vincent finally said to Gabe. “You have proof to confirm the validity of your accusations?”

Gabe gave a short nod. “Yes. We have the recorded testimony of Adalynne, Zara, and Bella Markham. Skye Markham is here in person to offer testimony.”

I felt eyes turning towards me. I had been seen with Gabe and Remy most of the day; it wasn’t a stretch to guess who I was.

Gabe cleared his throat. “Additionally, Blackwater would like to request a formal investigation of the Long Mesa pack.”

“On what grounds?” Linden practically snarled the question.

Gabe didn’t hesitate. “Multiple shifter rights violations. Alpha Linden has committed some violations, and even more heinous acts have been carried out by his pack and council at his behest and under his direct supervision.”

“You kidnap *my family*,” Linden roared, “and have the audacity to accuse me of neglecting my duties as Alpha?”

“Yes,” Gabe said simply.

The growl that came from Linden was nothing short of animalistic and sent shivers skittering down my spine. My uncle was dangerously close to losing it.

“Alphas, we will investigate all these claims,” Vincent said firmly.

Chest heaving, Linden turned to the chairman. “In the interim, there is no formal agreement between our packs. As Skye’s only relative here, I demand custody of her until the Council makes a decision.”

My heart hammered painfully in my chest.

Vincent slowly nodded. “Very well. I think—”

“With all due respect,” Gabe cut him off, “Blackwater has a stronger claim to Skye than Long Mesa.”

“How so?”

Remy stood up beside his father, his broad shoulders squared as he lifted his head. “Skye is my mate. We bonded last fall.”

This time it wasn’t just whispers, but full blown conversations swirled around me. The room exploded in a flurry of chattering activity. Vincent had to slam the gavel three times before the crowd started to settle.

“I will clear the gallery if this happens again!” Vincent threatened, but I wasn’t sure why.

Sure, the people in the gallery had started talking, but it had mostly been the Alphas that were losing their shit over Remy’s announcement. Even the ones on the Council, except Vincent, seemed stunned.

Now even more eyes were focused on me. I tried to focus on my breathing and not shrink away from the curious stares.

Tate squeezed my hand again, and even Daniel pressed his shoulder lightly to mine in a show of support.

I kept my eyes locked on Remy the whole time. I needed to see him to keep from losing my mind.

“Forgive me, but how old are you?” Vincent asked Remy.

“Eighteen,” he replied.

“And your ... mate?”

“Seventeen. She turns eighteen in a few days,” he replied firmly.

“There are no bonded mates on record your ages,” Vincent finally said, the Council around him nodding and frowning in agreement.

“If I may, Chairman?” Elias stood slowly from his seat at the front of the room.

“Dr. Samuels,” Vincent nodded at him. “You have something to offer?”

Elias nodded. “As strange as it sounds, I can testify that I have witnessed Remington Holt and Skye Markham’s bond myself.”

“She’s still my niece and part of my pack,” Linden argued, but even he knew it was useless.

Vincent frowned at him. “This Council will not separate bonded mates, Alpha Linden. You know this. We will hear your grievance this week at a determined time, but for the interim, Skye Markham will remain with her mate and his pack.”

Remy gave me a triumphant smile as he sat down. I exhaled hard, lightheaded but relieved.

We had won for now.

I ZONED OUT FOR THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON SESSION. MORE COMPLAINTS were lodged, mostly boundary and territory disputes, but my mind was still reeling from everything that had happened earlier.

Watching my uncle unapologetically hurl accusations at my pack while Preston and their allies glared daggers at Gabe and Remy had shaken me more than I expected. Ever since Linden had stood up, the deep baritone of his voice scraping against my nerves, I had been fighting to keep my wolf under control. Even after he sat down, she still wanted out.

She wanted to defend our pack, our Alpha, and our mate.

It was draining trying to keep her under wraps while wrestling with all of my human emotions at the same time.

By the time Vincent adjourned the meeting for the day, I needed out of this room and away from all these people. Everything in me felt raw and exposed.

“You okay?” Daniel asked me, leaning over as people around us started to get up.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, wishing like hell I could leave, too, but I waited for Remy.

“Your uncle is an asshole,” Tate said, shooting a dark look at his back as he left the room with his Norwood friends and Preston.

“Yeah,” I repeated, lowering my eyes. My hands ached from twisting and knotting them together over and over. I had cracked and snapped every possible knuckle and bone in each hand multiple times. Slowly, I stretched my fingers out, trying to get blood flowing again.

Dark boots entered my vision a second before Remy squatted in front of me, balancing effortlessly on the balls of his feet.

“Hey.” His warm voice slid over me, an instant balm for the jittery, anxious parts of me that wouldn’t seem to settle. The wolf in me lay down, finally relaxing.

He took my hand in his, pulling me into his side as he tugged me up to my feet. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, moving us through the crowd of shifters until we were outside.

I blinked around the bright sunlight, the pressure in my chest loosening now that we were outside and I could breathe.

Remy guided us toward the path that led to the cabin. It seemed most people leaving the first day’s meeting were more inclined to stand around and talk, but he didn’t stop to talk even when a few guys called out to him. He moved us forward with a singular purpose, not stopping until he had closed the door to our cabin behind me.

I leaned my back against the door, closing my eyes as sweet relief sank into my bones. There was a beautiful calm knowing the world was closed off from me now.

Remy braced a hand on either side of me, caging me in, but not touching me. He was waiting for me to say something first.

“I’m okay,” I muttered, opening my eyes to see his warm chocolate eyes staring intently at me.

A small quirk of his brow was the only indication he gave, but it was enough to tell me he wasn’t buying it.

Neither was I.

Seeing Linden, watching him spew his lies, and seeing the belief on the faces of strangers had been more emotionally and mentally draining than I thought possible. I had convinced myself that I would come here, tell my story, and everything would be fine.

But I was starting to see now how completely unrealistic that expectation was. Stupid, childish naivety.

I wasn’t okay.

With a sigh, I turned my head and kissed the inside of his wrist before ducking under his arm to restlessly pace across the floor.

“I’m *not* okay,” I finally said, impatience and frustration lacing my words. I spun to see he was leaning against the door now, watching me with a maddening calmness.

I ran a hand through my hair, nearly ripping out a chunk when I hit a tangle. "I hate him. I hate him so much."

"I know."

My hands slapped uselessly at my sides as I dropped them. "I mean, what the hell is he trying to prove? Why can't he just leave us alone?" My jaw clenched. I didn't need Remy to provide the answer to the question. "Because he's a narcissistic asshat, that's why."

Remy nodded slowly.

My hands curled into fists. I wanted to punch Linden right in his smug mouth.

My wolf rumbled inside of me.

No, I wanted to *shift*. I wanted to let the beast in my heart out to end all of this. To end *him*.

I wanted him dead.

An unwanted image of Bella flashed before me. I could see the girl sitting in my room, crying because she missed her dad. The girl who couldn't understand why the man who was supposed to protect her wasn't.

The unfairness of it all draped over me like a wet, fifty-pound blanket.

All of the fight left me in a rush. My legs gave out, and I fell back onto the couch.

Remy pushed off the door and walked across the room, sitting next to me before lifting me up and settling me on his lap. A strong hand smoothed down my back as I snuggled into him, leaching up the comfort he offered like a sponge.

"I *hate* him," I mumbled against his chest.

"Me, too," he agreed quietly, his lips against my hair.

We stayed that way as the wolf in me quieted and my breathing evened out. Until the front door opened and Gabe walked in.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?" he asked, his gaze sweeping over us.

"Okay," I said. Feeling Remy tense under me, I added, "Better now."

Gabe dropped himself into the chair across from us, kicking his feet out. "We have time before dinner if you two want to get in a run. Burn off some of that energy." He rubbed his chest. "Hell, I could use it."

I sat up. "We can do that?"

Remy's chest rumbled as he chuckled under me. "Sure. As long as we're going as a group."

"Luke and a few others agreed," Gabe confirmed with a nod at us.

“Then it’s safe enough for you,” Remy finished.

“We’ll order something for dinner when we’re done,” Gabe added. He gave me a small smile. “But I think we could all use some time outside.”

It had been weeks since I was able to run with Remy. Too much had been going on, and my wolf definitely missed his.

She was practically clawing at my skin to get out.

Remy’s hand tightened around my hip for a second. “Let’s go.”

I was off his lap and heading for the back door that led towards the woods. Once I was outside, I stepped around the corner to a secluded area against the house and didn’t waste any time stripping my clothes off, letting them pool around my feet.

It only took a second for my bones to shift and reform, the warm sensation of my human body giving way to wolf form zipped through my veins.

Inhaling deeply, I let the aromatic scents of springtime, woods, and fresh air fill my lungs.

Remy was just coming outside as I walked around to the back door, my paws sinking into the soft earth. He chuckled at seeing me, pausing to stroke the star on my forehead.

“Feel better?” he asked.

I would feel better once I was running, my legs eating up the ground until my limbs were ready to give out. It would be better still with him at my side.

Gabe came out behind him, and I turned when they both stripped off their shirts.

Three wolves approached from around the side of the house. I immediately recognized the deep russet color wolf as Dante and the smaller white and gray wolf as Tate. Luke was the third, easily as big as Dante with a slate gray coat that looked like a winter storm on the horizon.

When two additional white and tan wolves approached, my ears flattened against my skull.

Nero and his wife.

My eyes closed, the familiar sound of Remy’s voice in my head soothing.

His large body bumped mine, his tongue coming out to lick at my muzzle a moment before Gabe approached us, his eyes brilliantly bright and blue against his ebony coat. He and Remy could have been twins except for the eye color and the shock of white on Remy’s forehead that perfectly counterbalanced my own dark mark.

I leaned my weight against Remy as Nero and his wife approached. I sniffed the air, committing their scents to memory. They were friends, allies. But there was something curious about the female's scent that caught my attention.

Is she pregnant?

Remy's head swung to look at me, surprise in his eyes. *I don't know. Nero never said anything if she is.*

With a low bark, Gabe took off for the trees leaving all of us to follow.

We spent the better part of two hours running through the woods, letting our wolves play and run until, exhausted, we all collapsed in an open meadow.

With a deep sigh, I closed my eyes, resting my head on my paws, the sun-warmed grass my new bed.

You seem better, Remy noted, his body pressed to mine. We had laid down away from the rest of the group, and I would have been perfectly content for them to head back and us to stay out here for the rest of the night.

Today sucked, I admitted, opening my eyes to look at him.

I think a lot of days are going to suck this week, he answered, his dark eyes studying me.

I huffed out a breath. *But we're together.*

He nudged me with his nose. *Always.*

I started to doze off when Remy stood up. I glared up at him, mildly annoyed at the disruption.

Time to go. He inclined his head to where his dad and the others were gathered, waiting for us.

With a low grumble, I pushed myself up onto my feet, stretching and taking another slow, deep breath.

An oddly familiar scent clung to the breeze that whispered past my nose. It was a small tickle, a long lost memory that was slowly being dragged up to the surface.

And then suddenly, brutally, I placed the scent. A low whine scraped up my throat before I could stop it.

Preston.

I knew the scent of his wolf. It was burned into my senses.

Judging by the faint trace of his scent, he was easily half a mile or more away, but it didn't stop the full body shudder that rippled down my spine. Or the crushing memory of the last time I encountered his wolf.

It had always taken me longer to shift than the rest of my pack In Long Mesa. The broken bond that linked me to my wolf had been smothered by years of fear and self-preservation.

My grandfather had always had the pack shift together before a run. It led to a lot of fights and humiliation, but that was the Markham legacy.

The last run I had been part of, I had been the last to shift. My body trembled and fought the change every step of the way until I thought I would pass out. My mother had been chased and herded away from me by the pack until I was left alone, naked and shaking in the dust, begging my wolf to just cooperate for once.

The whole pack moved on.

Except Preston.

He stayed by my side, his cold eyes watching me with morbid fascination, nostrils flared as he inhaled the stench of my fear.

When I tried to twist away, pathetically attempting to hide my nakedness from him, he circled me, not giving an inch. I had closed my eyes, trying to ignore him and focus on the shift, crouched in the dirt to hide as much of my body from his calculating gaze as I could.

Then I felt his tongue, rough and wet, lick the side of my face. I jerked back, my hand blindly slapping his muzzle away.

And he bit me.

His jaws latched onto my calf, his stronger body pulling me down to the ground with a sharp jerk of his head. Snarling, he loomed over me, his empty eyes suddenly sparking to life as he tasted blood.

My blood.

The pain that ripped through me was enough to trigger my shift. Seconds later, I had shifted and ran as fast as I could from him to catch up with the pack.

It took me a second to shake the memory from my brain, but I could still hear the deep throated snarls and growls.

But not from Preston, from the wolf that was beside me.

I blinked slowly, my breath catching as I realized Remy was snarling beside me, his entire body vibrating with fury.

Rem—

He was gone.

One second he was in front of me, the next he was lunging into the trees at an impossibly fast speed.

I scrambled to catch him, my adrenaline spiking as I fed off the rage driving him.

Remy! I shouted his name, desperately trying to get him to turn around as Gabe and the others caught up.

Gabe barely glanced at me as he ran past me, Dante, Nero, and Luke hot on his tail. We broke through another clearing, and I could see Remy racing ahead of us.

With an impressive burst of speed, Nero closed the distance between them. My heart lodged in my chest to see him hurtle through the air and slam into Remy.

They tumbled several feet, giving the others enough time to catch up in time for Remy to snap his jaws at Nero.

I slid to a stop, Nero's wife and Tate bumping into me. I pressed against the bond, trying to reach Remy, but all I could feel was rage and hate.

Remy was still snarling even as the others surrounded him. When Gabe approached him, he bared his teeth at the Alpha.

With a warning bark, Gabe leveled Remy with a glare that had me shaking from several feet away.

Remy didn't flinch, matching his Alpha's stare.

He was all but openly challenging his father now.

Shit. This was bad. Beyond bad.

I slowly approached, dropping to my belly and crawling the last few feet with a low whimper.

Look at me, I begged, stopping just short of Gabe. *Remy, look at me.*

His dark gaze turned to me, the slight flick of his ears the only indication he was paying attention.

I edged forward a few more inches. *What the hell is going on?*

The growl in his chest loosed into a low whine of distress. His gaze sharpened, focused on me.

Skye.

Relief surged through me. *Yeah, hey.*

His posture drooped, his head finally lowering in deference to his father.

We need to get back. Now. His clipped tone stung and only made me more confused.

Frustration filled the hollow void the relief exposed. *What is going on?*

His only answer was a sharp bark. His gaze met and held mine.

Okay, I agreed, relenting for now. *Let's go.*

All the playfulness was gone on the way back. We made the journey back to the cabin in silence. Once the cabins came into view, Nero and his wife peeled away from the group to head for their place.

Dante and Tate headed for their cabin next door to ours, but Luke hesitated as Gabe nudged Remy towards the backdoor.

I headed towards my clothes, confused as hell, as I shifted and started pulling on my clothes.

I came out from the little alcove of trees and slammed into Remy. He was only wearing his jeans and hadn't bothered with his shirt. His dark eyes were wild as he dropped to his knees and grabbed my leg.

"Remy, what the hell?" I grabbed his shoulders for balance as he lifted my leg, shoving my jeans up to expose my calf.

His fingers ghosted across the flesh, his mouth flattening when he found the small little scar just above my ankle.

His eyes flashed dangerously as he looked up at me. "Preston did this?"

"What ..." My mind struggled to catch up.

Yes, that tiny little scar was from where Preston had bitten me. The bite mark had healed almost completely except for where one of his canines had dug in. The scar that was left was barely the size of the point of a pen.

"How did you know that?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"I fucking saw it," he hissed, standing up to his full height.

I blinked. "Babe, it was a memory. I didn't mean to tell you—"

With a growl, he stepped closer, his hands landing firmly on my hips. "No, Skye, I *fucking saw it*."

Off balance, I grabbed his forearms to keep from stumbling back. "I don't get it. How could you see that?"

"I don't know," he ground out. "But it was like your memory was my memory. I saw what he did, felt how scared you were." His fingers flexed against me, his grip almost bruising as Gabe came around the corner, fully dressed and holding Remy's shirt in his hand.

"What the hell was that?" Gabe demanded. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

I sucked in a sharp breath. I had never heard Gabe so angry.

Remy didn't even bother turning to look at his dad. "Can mates see each others' thoughts?"

Gabe met my gaze over Remy's shoulder.

"Yes. They know what each other is thinking. You know this," Gabe

snapped.

“Not thoughts,” Remy replied, finally turning. “If Mom pictures something, a memory or something, can you see what she sees?”

Gabe’s frown turned into confusion. “No. The mental link is auditory, not visual.”

Remy looked back at me, a fine tremor rippling across his body. “Then how the hell did I see that?”

“See what?” Gabe asked slowly.

“Remy saw my memory. From when I was in Long Mesa,” I whispered, realizing what had happened.

Remy saw my memory and connected it to Preston’s scent. He was going after Preston because he had hurt me years ago.

“That’s not possible,” Gabe said, shaking his head in bewilderment.

I took a deep breath. “I think we need to call Elias.”

“SO, YOU ACTUALLY SAW WHAT WAS HAPPENING?” ELIAS’ VOICE WAS HUSHED with fascinated awe as he leaned forward to speak to Remy. He had literally been on the edge of his seat since Gabe ushered him into the cabin and Remy explained what had happened.

Thankfully he kept it on the vague side. The last thing I could handle right now was everyone knowing the details of *that* memory.

Remy’s hand was curled around mine in a deathgrip. He hadn’t let me go since we sat on the couch together. Like holding onto me was the only thing keeping him from getting up and hunting Preston down.

His gaze flickered to me for a moment before looking back at Elias. He gave a slow nod.

“It was like it was my own memory,” Remy admitted.

Elias turned to look at me. “And have you been able to see Remy’s thoughts?”

I frowned, shaking my head. “No, but we haven’t shifted around each other in a few weeks.”

“Have you ever heard of this happening before?” Gabe asked. He had been leaning against the wall since Elias came in, hovering in the background to give us space.

Elias sighed and leaned back. “No, but then again, Remy and Skye are much younger than most bonded mates. The progression of their bond doesn’t seem to conform to what we’ve identified as normal behaviors.”

I barely contained a snort. I was more than a little over being told how not normal our bonding was.

But there was something a little more pressing I needed an answer to.

“Do you think this will keep happening?” I asked quietly, unable to look at Remy. “Remy will be able to relive my memories?”

I had barely been able to look at him since I realized he had seen inside my head.

He had *seen* and *felt* what I experienced.

It was one thing for me to tell him about something that happened, but the idea of him experiencing my humiliation and fear in first person, high definition? That was fucking terrifying.

Elias frowned. “Maybe? It’s likely a new manifestation of your bond, which has defied most of what we knew to be true of bonded mates.”

I couldn’t swallow around the sudden lump in my throat, my mouth went desert dry.

“You could both try shifting again and see if you can project something the other can see,” he suggested. His dark eyes sparked to life as he leaned forward. “I would be fascinated to observe the two of you. Maybe we could all learn something.”

Anxiety clawed at my insides. Remy squeezed my hands, but they were practically numb and filled with ice.

“I don’t think now is a good time,” Gabe said diplomatically for the both of us, pushing off the wall. His eyes were on me as he spoke to Elias.

“Of course,” Elias said quickly, flashing us a smile. “I should probably get going.”

He got to his feet, and I moved to stand as well, but Remy’s iron-clad grip wasn’t letting up.

“Skye, Remy,” Elias said, dipping his head. “Don’t hesitate to reach out if I can be of any further assistance.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Gabe said, his gaze solemn as he opened the door for Elias and stepped outside with him.

I stared at the door after it had closed, my insides a tumultuous mess of nerves and fear.

“You’re shaking,” Remy murmured beside me.

Was I?

I scrambled for an excuse. “It’s kind of cold, and I’m tired-”

“So, when you get cold and tired you can’t look at me, too?” he asked quietly.

With a dry swallow, I turned my head, barely meeting his gaze.

His eyes narrowed as he sighed. “Are you mad?”

“No,” I answered quickly, forcing myself not to let my gaze skitter away.

It wasn’t a lie; I wasn’t angry. More like humiliated, frustrated, and slightly annoyed.

“But you’re upset,” he guessed.

I exhaled hard. “It’s just—”

I stopped myself when Gabe opened the door and came back in. He paused by the door, looking at us.

“Are we okay here?” he asked softly, but I had a feeling he was talking to me.

“Yeah.”

Gabe nodded, his gaze sliding to Remy. “Skye, can you give us a minute? I need to talk to Remy.”

“Sure,” I said, starting to stand.

Remy’s hand tightened around mine, anchoring me to his side once more. “Skye can stay. Anything you need to say to me, she can hear.”

“Fine,” Gabe said tersely, sitting down across from us. “We need to talk about today.”

“I know,” Remy replied. “Dad, I’m sorry—”

Gabe held up a hand. “Am I missing the part where you want to be Alpha of the pack now?”

Remy stayed quiet.

Gabe leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. “You pull a stunt like you did today again, and son or not, I’ll consider it a formal challenge.”

“Okay,” Remy replied with a sharp nod, his dark eyes full of an unnamed emotion.

Gabe grimaced. “I mean it, Rem. I know that you were reacting to the situation, but you need to get your wolf in check. You all but openly challenged me in front of the others.”

“He didn’t mean it like that.” I jumped in when Remy didn’t speak for himself and the need to diffuse the situation got too intense. “He was upset because of my memory and ... what he saw.”

Gabe’s eyes cut to me. “I get that, Skye, and I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing if someone hurt Mallory. But I’m the Alpha of Blackwater, and I won’t be disobeyed, no matter what the reason or who the person.”

He leveled a hard look at Remy. “You were lucky it was only our friends

with us today. Something like that happens in front of the Council or our enemies? You damn well better be ready to fight me for the pack.”

The gravity of the situation crashed around me, leaving me more shaken than before.

“He wasn’t ...” I trailed off, looking helplessly at Remy. “Tell him you didn’t mean it.”

“I understand,” Remy replied instead, his expression unreadable as he kept his eyes locked steadily on Gabe’s.

With a deep sigh, Gabe rubbed his temples. “Okay. I’m guessing you two aren’t hungry?”

“No,” I mumbled as Remy shook his head.

Gabe stood up. “I’m going back to the lodge to meet Nero and Luke for dinner.” He looked down at us, a frown creasing his handsome face. “Do I need to remind you what an epically bad idea it would be to go after anyone from Long Mesa?”

Remy’s jaw clenched. “I know.”

Gabe crossed the room, but hesitated by the door. He turned back, his eyes kind. “I love you, son.”

“I know,” Remy repeated, his tone softer. “I love you, too, Dad.”

“That goes for you, too,” Gabe told me. “You’re one of us. I know whatever Remy saw was awful, kiddo, but that’s over. You’re one of us now. We protect our own.”

That thawed some of the ice that had settled in my veins earlier. I managed what I hoped was a grateful smile as he left.

After several beats, I tried pulling away from Remy. I was almost surprised when he let my fingers slip through his.

I scrambled to my feet. “It’s late.”

It was barely after seven.

I started towards the stairs. “I’m exhausted.”

My mind wouldn’t stop working, my blood fizzing and popping with nervous energy. Sleep wasn’t happening any time soon.

My hand touched the bannister. “I’m going to get ready for bed.”

I was going to lock myself in the bathroom, take an ungodly long shower, and pray that, by some miracle, Remy was asleep when I came out.

Would it be obvious I was avoiding him if I slept in the second bedroom tonight?

“Good plan,” Remy agreed, getting up. He arched his eyebrows at me.

“Let’s go.”

So much for *that* idea.

I leaned against the railing. “Remy—”

“Tell you what,” he said, cutting me off, “I’ll give you a choice. We can talk about this down here or upstairs. Either way? We’re talking about what happened.”

I nudged my toe against the first step. “Any chance we could *not* talk about this and forget it happened?”

I was stalling. It was stupid and pointless, but it was all I could focus on because talking about this was the last thing I wanted. What I wanted was to hide under the covers until the next morning.

Or next year.

The odds of Remy letting that happen were nonexistent. I loved my mate in every way, but sometimes I wished he wasn’t such an alpha.

“Fine,” I muttered, turning and heading up the stairs like it was a slow death march.

And for my pride, it kind of was.

I headed into our room when I got upstairs, Remy right behind me. I turned when he closed the door, not sure if I wanted to talk first or if I wanted him to start.

He brushed past me, sitting on the bed before swinging his long legs up onto the mattress and leaning against the headboard.

“Come here,” he said softly, holding out a hand.

I shuffled forward a step, letting my fingers glide over his as I paused by the side of the bed.

“Remy—” I broke off with a squeak when he grabbed my hips and lifted me up, settling me on his lap so I was straddling him.

“That’s better,” he murmured, a small smile tugging at his lips as his eyes met mine. He brushed the hair out of my eyes. “No more running, remember?”

Closing my eyes, I nodded. That was the deal, wasn’t it?

I guess that included emotional running.

His hand slid up my thigh. “Can you tell me what you’re thinking? What you’re feeling?”

I met his gaze for a second before looking away. “Okay, I feel ... embarrassed.”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing at me. “Why would you feel

embarrassed?”

“Because,” I said stubbornly, “that was one of the more humiliating moments in my life. Having you *see* that, or experience that? It sucked.”

“Baby, you didn’t do anything wrong, okay?” He framed my face with his hands. “You have nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I was weak,” I argued, lowering my lashes.

“You were young and vulnerable,” he countered bitterly, his hands falling back to my legs, “and they preyed on that.”

“It wasn’t the only time something like that happened,” I confessed, the truth whispering out of me. “Pack runs were the worst because I could never shift. That memory was just one time when Preston was being extra douchey. I was always the last one. People always stared at me. It made me feel so gross.”

His face looked calm enough, but I could feel the barely contained rage thrumming in his blood as he tensed and loosened his muscles under me.

I shuddered. “Even right now I just want to take a shower. And I hate that you saw that.”

“I hate that you lived that,” he answered fiercely, his eyes burning hot.

I traced the back of his hand on my thigh. “But that’s not my life now. Now I have our pack, our family. I have to focus on that.”

“I was so angry,” he replied, his voice tight. “I’m still so fucking angry. I want to kill him, all of them.”

“I know, and I love you for being angry for me, but if something like that happens again,” I cleared my throat, “you can’t go after Preston or Linden.”

Jaw clenched, he looked away from me.

“Promise me,” I begged, not wanting to see him and Gabe fight again.

He turned, his molten gaze pinning me to the spot. “I can’t.”

Disbelief washed over me. “Are you serious right now? Rem, you heard what your dad said. What you did earlier could have had a lot of really bad consequences.”

“What do you want me to do, Skye? Apologize for wanting to protect you?” He glared at me. “I’m not that guy. I’ll never be *that* guy. Cassian hurt you, and I couldn’t stop that. Preston hurt you, and if I can do something about that, I will.”

“I don’t blame you for what happened with Cassian,” I said softly. It killed me that he would blame himself for any of the chaos and pain Cassian caused.

“I blame myself!” He shot back, eyes flashing. He raked a hand through his dark hair. “I was right there.”

I settled my hands on the hard planes of his chest as it heaved beneath me. “I made the decision to go over that cliff with Cassian.” I held his eyes. “Because I didn’t want you paying the price for me.”

“It’s not your job to protect me,” he muttered, but a corner of his mouth hooked up. “I’m the alpha, right? Pretty sure protecting *you* comes with the job description.”

I arched a brow and linked my hands behind his neck. “I’m the alpha’s mate. Pretty sure that makes it my job to protect you.”

His gaze dropped to my lips. “It does, huh?”

“Yeah.” I tilted my head to the side, a genuine smile dusting across my lips.

“Okay.” He was fighting a smile as he leaned forward and kissed me.

AT SOME POINT I SHOULD HAVE PROBABLY CHANGED INTO ACTUAL CLOTHES, but I was too content in my flannel pajama bottoms and one of Remy's t-shirts to bother. Besides, I wasn't leaving the cabin today.

I had slept in, long after Remy got up for the day's meetings, pressing a kiss to my shoulder as he slid out of our bed and started to get ready. My body needed rest, and I still felt cracked open and exposed after everything that had happened the day before. Hiding in the cabin seemed like a great idea.

It wasn't until I felt the familiar hunger pangs rumbling in my stomach in the early afternoon that I got up and headed downstairs. Remy had left a note on the table by the sofa, attached to a room service menu, telling me to order something to eat, but I felt weird knowing that Gabe would likely be footing the bill.

I grabbed an orange and a banana from the bowl of fruit in the kitchenette area towards the back of the first floor and spent the time texting my mom before she headed into the cafe to work the closing shift.

I tossed the phone down beside me on the couch and reached for the tv remote, figuring I could watch an hour of mindless shows and escape into someone else's problems for awhile.

Which was, of course, when my phone rang.

Snatching it up, I couldn't be mad when I saw it was Larkin requesting a video chat. I swiped my finger across the accept button and grinned when her face filled the screen.

"Hey!" she cried, dark eyes glimmering with warmth. "How are you?"

How's Remy? How's the Summit? Tell me everything."

"Let her answer one question at a time, Lark!" Katy's face appeared beside Larkin's.

"I miss you guys," I sighed, settling back against the couch cushions.

"Where's Tate?" Katy asked.

"Her dad and Dante had a thing this morning. She went with them."

"You didn't feel like going out today?" Larkin pressed, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

My eyes dropped. "I was tired. Yesterday was ... rough."

"Mom said that you saw your uncle," Katy said, her tone bitter. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," I replied carefully.

"And yet you look like you're anything but," Katy countered, reading me almost as easily as her brother could.

I exhaled and pressed my lips into a grim line before speaking. "Something happened yesterday."

"Something good?" Larkin's voice was hopeful.

"Something ... I don't know," I admitted.

Katy's eyes narrowed. "Do you need us to come down there? Is it Remy? He's my brother and I love him, but I can also kick his ass. Or I can make Dad do it."

"No," I said quickly. "It's not Remy. Well, it is kind of Remy. But don't call your dad. He was already mad enough after it happened."

"Quit with the vague and spell it out," Katy demanded.

"We all went for a run yesterday," I started, "and you know how Remy and I can read each others' thoughts?"

Larkin nodded. "Because you're bonded."

"Right," I muttered, running a hand through my hair. "Except it was more than that. Preston was in the woods—"

"And Remy killed him?" Katy jumped in.

"What? No." I huffed out a laugh.

"That's unfortunate," she sighed, eyes rolling to the ceiling.

"Let her finish," Larkin chided, slapping Katy's arm.

"I had this ... flashback of a memory," I went on, ignoring the dark pull of the memory. I didn't want, or need, to unpack that all over again.

"Anyway, Remy saw it."

Larkin frowned at me. "What do you mean he saw it?"

“Like he could see my memory,” I explained. “He saw what I saw, felt what I felt ...”

“Oh, shit,” Katy murmured. “And you’re sure Preston’s not dead?”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not dead.” I hesitated. “But Remy went after him. It took your dad, Dante, Luke, and Nero to stop him.”

“I’m surprised it didn’t take an entire shifter army to stop him,” Katy replied, her dimples flashing as she grimaced.

“He kind of ... almost challenged your dad,” I said softly.

Larkin and Katy exchanged glances.

“He did *what*?” Katy asked quietly, her mouth hanging open.

“Gabe tried to get him to stop, and I thought Remy was going to bite him at one point,” I added, a shiver of fear skittering up my spine.

“Holy shit,” Larkin breathed.

“But everything’s okay now?” Katy asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah. They talked it out last night, but ...”

“But?” Larkin prompted.

I pulled my knees up, resting my chin on them and balancing my phone in one hand. “It was close. I don’t want to be the reason Remy and Gabe fight. Ever.”

The corner of Katy’s mouth kicked up. “Dad and Remy butt heads sometimes. They’re both Alphas, so it’ll happen. I promise this won’t be the last time they fight about something.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my words as I shook my head. “I don’t know, guys. This just seemed like something else. Remy wasn’t backing down.”

They exchanged another glance.

Larkin had stayed fairly quiet, waiting until a moment to ask a very Larkin-question. “How do you feel about Remy seeing your memory?”

The humiliation burned through me again, not quite as fresh and potent as yesterday, but still stinging. “I hate it.”

“Why?” Larkin’s tone was soft, coaxing the words out of me. A non-voluntary therapy session with my two best friends wasn’t what I had planned today, but it wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened.

“It was embarrassing,” I finally replied, my voice barely above a whisper. “It was humiliating and ... God, I wanted to forget that it ever happened. I hated that he saw how weak I was.”

“You heard what you just said, right?” Katy jumped in.

“Huh?” My brows knit together.

“You said, ‘how weak I was’, Skye,” she clarified. “Not how weak *I am*. You used past tense.”

“Because you aren’t weak anymore,” Larkin added. “And that wasn’t weakness; it was survival.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes, hot and insistent. God, I missed these two. Everyone needed a best friend, or two, to remind them of how much they didn’t suck. Maybe I never had friends growing up, but the ones I had now made up for it in spades.

“And it wasn’t weak to go a thousand miles away to confront the people who literally held you down your whole life.” Katy’s eyes flashed with heat as she spoke. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Skye.”

“Did Remy make you feel like you should be ashamed?” Larkin asked pointedly.

“No.” He had been his always amazing, ever supportive self.

“Don’t let a memory trick you into forgetting who you are,” Katy said fiercely, “or how far you’ve come.”

My eyes closed, emotion swamping me in the best way possible.

“You guys are amazing.” My voice cracked as I looked at them through the screen.

“We know,” Katy replied smugly.

I swiped under my eyes, blinking back tears.

“How are you guys?” I asked, needing to get the attention off of me. “How’s Blackwater?”

“Quiet,” Katy said, her smile only slightly forced around the edges.

I wished I had news to report about Maren, or any of the missing girls, but I hadn’t heard anything.

“Any idea when you’ll have to testify?” Larkin asked, her arm wrapping around Katy’s shoulders.

“Not yet,” I replied. “Linden made a big fuss yesterday in the afternoon about how we had been kidnapped.”

Katy rolled her eyes. “What an asshat.”

“Gabe actually decided to file a human rights violation against Long Mesa.”

They both went quiet.

“That’s pretty serious, isn’t it?” Larkin’s gaze flicked from me to Katy and back.

“It’s very serious,” Katy answered, her usual playful snark completely vanished. “That’s basically saying Linden isn’t fit to run his pack.”

“Yeah.” I winced. “He wasn’t too happy about it.”

“The Alpha Council will have to investigate a claim like that. There will be a formal review,” Katy went on. “Your uncle could even lose his pack.”

“I’ll have to testify at that, too,” I murmured.

“You can’t just do it once?” Larkin’s nose wrinkled.

“No,” Katy said firmly. “They’re different types of violations. Skye and her mom leaving the pack was more about protocol not being followed. At the end of the day, the worst that could happen is Blackwater is fined or the shifters in question are returned to their former pack.”

A wave of nausea rolled over me, my mouth going dry. “Oh. Is that only the worst that could happen?”

Katy’s unfocused gaze, lost in thought, cleared. She gave me a guilty shrug. “Sorry. I just meant from an objective point of view. You, your mom, your aunt, and your cousin all have a justifiable reason for leaving Long Mesa. Your stories are consistent, there’s documented evidence—”

“There’s what?” I cut her off, surprised.

Katy frowned. “Your mom, Zara, and Bella all had their injuries and scars documented by our pack physician when they came to Blackwater. It was included along with the videos of their testimonies for the Council. I assumed you did, too.”

Other than the small scar on my leg, and the one on my hip, I didn’t have any visible scars from my time in Long Mesa. But I had been checked out by the pack physician before I headed to Granite Peak, and of course there were the records from my fall.

Our bodies were maps of scars that told our stories.

I hadn’t even thought about evidence, but clearly Gabe had covered all the bases, giving us the best case possible.

“That’s smart,” I finally said.

Katy nodded. “Dad and Remy didn’t want any chance of you guys going back. It’s probably why they filed the violation charge against your uncle. It’s a serious issue that could strip Linden of his Alpha rights and his pack.”

“If the Council agrees,” I said with a sigh, rubbing my forehead with my free hand. “I’ll have to testify at that hearing, too.”

“Tell them everything,” Katy said. “I know you hate it, Skye, but tell them every single detail. If they believe you, they’ll look into the pack.”

They'll send people to interview and monitor Long Mesa. Your uncle won't be able to hide all the skeletons in that place."

"You think?"

"It happened once before," she replied. "It was like ten years ago, but an Alpha had his pack removed from his charge. The man who testified at the Summit convinced the Council to investigate, and they found out everything he said was true and more."

"Your dad and Remy will be in the room," I said slowly.

"And they love you," Katy countered heatedly. "They'll have your back no matter what you say."

"We all will," Larkin added, flashing me a supportive smile.

"Skye, you can shut down Long Mesa for good," Katy said. "And you said that they have something to do with the missing girls. If the Council takes over, they might be able to find them. We could find Maren."

Something that dangerously felt like hope fluttered in my chest. "We could find them all."

"Exactly," she said, leaning back in triumph.

"You're freakishly good at this," Larkin said, looking at Katy.

Katy actually looked down, suddenly almost shy. "I'm thinking about majoring in pre-law next year," she replied.

"You should," Larkin and I said together.

"I want to." Her expression clouded. "But I can't focus on school until I know what happened to Maren."

"I know," I replied softly. "I'll do my best."

"I know you will," Katy replied, smiling slightly at me.

A text message notification at the top of the screen snagged my attention.

"Hang on," I said, opening it and pausing the video chat.

TATE: *Get ready. We're going out tonight when the afternoon session is done.*

I typed back a quick reply as Larkin and Katy kept talking.

ME: *Where?*

Text bubbles danced on my screen for several seconds before her reply came through.

TATE: *There's a club about an hour away owned by a shifter the guys know. It's safe. Remy said we could use a night of fun.*

I closed out the text messages and clicked back onto the video chat.

"Everything okay?" Larkin asked.

“It was Tate,” I replied, still a little confused. “She said we’re all going out tonight, so to get ready.”

“Going where?” Katy asked as I got off the couch and started for the stairs.

“A club?” I shrugged.

“Did you even bring any club clothes?” Katy demanded.

I made a face as I reached the top step. “What are club clothes?”

She groaned loudly. “Show me what we’re working with.”

It took Katy almost thirty minutes to decide I should wear a pair of dark skinny jeans and a black tank top. It took another fifteen minutes for her to walk me through how I should style my hair, even going as far as to use Larkin as a hair model for what was to be a simple, but sexy, braided bun.

In the end, I showered and bit the bullet, using the obnoxiously loud hair dryer in the bathroom on my dark hair. After several braid attempts, I gave up and let my hair hang down my back. I shoved an elastic in my pocket in case I wanted to pull it up later.

I opted for the jeans and tank top, tugging on a black leather jacket Zoe and Michael had given me for Christmas. I had started pulling on my boots when I heard the front door open and close.

A few seconds later I heard footsteps on the stairs and then Remy was walking through the door.

He paused as I finished zipping up the inside of my last boot, looking up at him. My lips curved into a happy grin.

I stood up, but even with the added inches of the heel on my boots, Remy was still several inches taller.

“Is this okay?” I asked, not sure I was wearing appropriate club attire.

His gaze heated and he licked his lips. “You look hot.”

A warm sensation licked through my veins.

“New plan,” he said softly, coming into the room and snaking an arm around my waist. He nuzzled his nose against my throat, his teeth nipping my collarbone. “Let’s stay in.”

I wound my arms around his neck, tilting my head back to give him unfettered access to any part of me his lips wanted to touch.

“I like that plan,” I conceded easily.

A notification chimed on his phone and he groaned, his forehead dropping to my shoulder.

“I told everyone I would drive,” he muttered, reaching into his pocket for

his phone.

My arms fell to my sides. I sat back down on the bed as he stepped away, typing out a message before putting his phone on the dresser.

“Who’s going?” I asked, trying not to stare when he grabbed his shirt behind his head and pulled it off in one fluid move. He turned and pulled a clean shirt from a drawer. The tattoo that matched my necklace rippled over the muscles of his shoulder as he moved to put the new shirt on, effectively blocking my watch party.

“Tate, Dante, and Griffin,” he replied. “A friend of Griffin’s owns a club about an hour away. Dante and I have gone with him the last few years. It’s safe. Nero and Allie might meet us there later.”

“Griffin’s the guy you met with when we arrived, right?” I asked, trying to remember when Remy went to meet him. “And Allie is Nero’s wife? The tan wolf from yesterday?”

He nodded at me and glanced at his watch. “I said we would meet them at the car.”

“Your dad isn’t coming?”

He gave me a wry smile, heading into the bathroom. “He and Luke are going to stay here and meet with some of the other Alphas.”

I waited until he came back out from the bathroom before getting up.

He hesitated in the doorway, leaning against the frame and watching me with serious eyes. “The Council approached us earlier this afternoon. They scheduled your hearing for tomorrow afternoon.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, the unexpected news hitting me like a lead blanket.

“Hey, come here,” he said, crossing the room and pulling me against his chest.

My arms slowly lifted and went around his waist. I squeezed my eyes shut and held on.

“You’re going to be fine,” he vowed quietly, his hand smoothing down my back.

“Are you going to be there?” I asked, blinking up at him.

His mouth twisted into a frown. “No. It will be you, a couple members from the Council, and Linden.”

“Great,” I muttered, ducking my head back down.

“If you want to stay in, we can,” he said quietly, his lips brushing my forehead. “I just thought you might like a night out to get away. We can go

out and celebrate your birthday.”

My birthday.

I had forgotten tomorrow was the day I turned eighteen. The day I was supposed to become an omega.

I supposed there was some sort of poetic justice that it would be the day I told my uncle to go to hell.

“We can do whatever you want.”

I considered what he was offering. No matter how tomorrow went, odds were I wouldn't feel much like celebrating by the time I got done facing off with Linden.

“A night away from here sounds good,” I answered finally.

“SOLUM?” I SLOWLY SPOKE THE NAME OF THE CLUB THAT WAS EMBLAZONED in neon lights on the brick front of the building. A line started at the front door and snaked around the corner, disappearing into the night as people waited to get inside.

Remy grinned at me from the driver’s seat as he pulled the SUV into a reserved spot.

“It means ‘alone’ in latin,” Griffin supplied from the passenger seat beside him. His blue eyes sparkled as he spoke. When Remy had introduced us, there was something about him that instantly put me at ease.

“Kace, the friend who owns this place, was always a lone wolf. Said it was a fitting name for a club for how he spent his life,” he added, raking a hand through his sandy blonde hair.

“Line looks long,” Tate remarked, angling her head to see where it ended.

“We’ll use the side entrance.” Griffin turned and winked at her. “VIP experience.” He opened the door and climbed out.

Tate and I opened the side doors and got out, Dante climbing out from the backseat.

Once my feet were on solid ground, Remy grabbed my hand and pulled me close. I leaned against his arm, soaking in his warmth. The night air had turned cold once the sun set.

We all headed towards the side of the building towards a nondescript steel door with a man leaning against it.

He looked up, his expression bored as he looked at us until his gaze landed on Griffin. A grin split his face and he extended a hand.

“Griff,” he greeted. “It’s been too long.”

“Kace has you pulling security detail now, Felix?” Griffin smirked at him, shaking his head.

“Only when he’s not doing it himself,” Felix replied, pulling the door open for us. His eyes scanned us as we walked in. “Man can’t stop micromanaging every little detail.”

“Someone has to keep you fuckers in line,” a deeper voice said from inside the doorway.

The newcomer stepped into the doorway, nearly filling it with his size. He was one of the tallest people I had ever seen and built like a mountain. His pale gray eyes were almost translucent, and a long scar ran from his brow down the left side of his face, disappearing into the open neck of his black shirt. He would have been absolutely terrifying if not for the warm grin on his face.

“Kace,” Griffin said, shaking his hand while he stepped inside. “You remember Remy and Dante.”

Kace shook each of their hands and we all stepped inside the back room of the club, the door swinging shut. I could hear the steady thump of a bass from music playing, but the sounds were muffled back here.

Kace welcomed Remy and Dante before looking past them. The smile on his face grew exponentially as he looked at Tate.

“Tatum,” he said warmly, his eyes practically sparkling, “Good to see you again.”

She stepped around Dante and hugged him.

“You two know each other?” I couldn’t help the question that slipped out.

Tate grinned up at him. “Kace and I go way back.”

“You must be Skye,” Kace said. He didn’t hold out a hand to me. Instead he turned his smile to Remy. “She’s too pretty for you.”

Remy smirked. “I’m well aware.”

Still grinning, Kace looked at me with a wink. “If you’re ever in the mood to trade up, Skye, let me know.”

It was said in joking, and everyone laughed, but it soured something in me. The thought of someone other than Remy touching me was repulsive. Everything in me rejected it to the point that my wolf was snarling.

That unease must have been displayed on my face because Kace’s smile melted away. He held up his hands, taking a step back.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he apologized, his gaze turning serious. “I was just

teasing.”

Remy’s hand tightened around mine, tugging me back to his side.

“It’s fine,” I said, forcing myself to let it go and offer a small smile at him. I pulled on politeness like a too-tight pair of jeans.

“Mate bonds are no joke,” he murmured, his gaze still wary. “Congrats to both of you.”

“Thanks,” Remy answered for us, his easy smile back.

Kace hooked a thumb behind him. “I set you guys up in the VIP section. Nero and Allie got here a few minutes ago.”

We followed him through the stockroom, past an office, and through a plain door that required a thumbprint to open.

The door opened and the sound of the music overwhelmed my senses, the bass throbbing in my bones as I stepped through the doorway and onto a loft that overlooked a dancefloor of writhing bodies.

A DJ was set apart on a platform in the center, a bar ran the length of the far wall with several people working it and ten times as many crowded around it, vying for attention. The space had an open, industrial feel. The lights pulsing to the beat of the music pulled me in, hypnotizing.

Kace led the others off to the side, but I lingered and slowly walked to the railing that lined the upper level, needing a better look.

“Whoa,” I murmured, pausing at the iron railing overlooking the main floor and letting my eyes wander across the room.

I inhaled through my nose, and immediately regretted it. The potent scent of shifters, sweat, and hormones was overpowering and slightly intoxicating.

Remy came up behind me, bracing a hand on either side of the railing and boxing me in. I leaned back into the protective cage of his arms.

“What do you think?” The deep timbre of his voice elicited a cascade of shivers in my nervous system.

“It’s unreal,” I replied, a little in awe. “There’s normals down there, too?”

Remy nodded, his cheek brushing the side of my head. He swept my hair aside before putting his hand back on the rail and lowering his chin to my shoulder.

“The majority of the people down there are normals,” he replied. “Some of the staff, too.”

“How does that work?” I asked curiously.

It had been drilled in my head since birth that shifters didn’t mix with normals. The risk of exposure was too great.

Not that I was ever allowed outside the compound walls in Long Mesa.

Blackwater was different, but I still had minimal exposure to the normal humans who had no clue we existed in their world.

“A lot of the staff Kace uses are lone wolves,” Remy explained, “but there’s some humans, too.”

“Do they know about us?” Curiosity warred with the small spiral of panic I felt pressing in.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “They shouldn’t, but Kace does his own thing. Always has. Humans aren’t supposed to know we exist, but Kace has a thing for strays. Wolf, human ... Solum has been a safe place for them.”

I turned, putting my back to the room as I faced Remy. His hands moved from the railing to my hips.

“We can go dance if you want.” He jerked a chin at the dancefloor below me.

My cheeks heated, remembering in vivid detail the last time we had danced together. My body remembered the feel of his hands on me, the way his body aligned just right with mine.

It was also the night Maren had been taken.

“Maybe later?”

He nodded and kissed me once before grabbing my hand and pulling me along the wall until it opened up into a private space where the others were gathered. The VIP section clearly had room for easily another thirty people, but we were the only ones using it. A private staircase led down to the main floor.

“We’re going down to get drinks,” Tate said, standing by the stairs with Griffin and Dante. “You guys want anything?”

“Water?” I asked.

“Whatever you’re having,” Remy said with a shrug.

“Thanks,” I called as they headed down the stairs. I looked back at the two people left in the room.

Nero and Allie were curled together on one of the dark sofas, and both watching us curiously.

Allie’s dark eyes glittered as she smiled at us. “There you two are.”

“Allie thought Remy might be trying to keep Skye to himself,” Nero added, his white teeth flashing against dark skin.

Allie slapped his stomach playfully, rolling her eyes. “Oh, shut it.” She smiled at me. “It’s nice to officially meet you, Skye.”

“You, too,” I said, sitting down across from them beside Remy.

“We didn’t really have a chance to talk yesterday.” She reached for a glass of water on the table in front of her.

“Uh, no,” I replied, unable to stop from glancing at Remy.

He was smiling ruefully. “Guess that’s my fault.”

Nero took a sip of an amber liquid in a tumbler. “Yeah, you planning on telling us what happened?”

Remy hesitated, his gaze lingering on me for a second.

“Leave them alone,” Allie shushed him, resting a hand on his thigh. Her long, pink nails traced out a pattern on the denim of his jeans. “Obviously it’s mate business.”

“It’s still hard to believe you guys are mates,” Nero said, shaking his head.

“Because we’re so young?” I guessed, a little tired of hearing how young we were.

Nero gave me a rueful smile. “Guess you hear that a lot?”

“Only daily,” I said, trying to smile and laugh it off.

“Well, I think it’s amazing,” Allie said firmly. “Life would be a lot easier if we could all find our mate when we were still in high school.”

Nero gave her a strange look. “You’ve known me since I was eight.”

Allie snorted and tossed an unimpressed look at him. “You’re right. I’ve known you for almost two decades. That’s why I didn’t agree to marry you until two years ago.”

“Are you two...” I trailed off, not sure what their relationship was.

“We’re not bonded,” Allie told me. “We got married last year, and this year...” She shared a secret grin with Nero before covering her stomach with her hand.

She *was* pregnant. I knew it.

“When are you due?” I leaned forward, happy for them.

“Congrats, man,” Remy said, standing up to shake Nero’s hand.

“I’m only a few weeks long,” Allie said, her face glowing as she smiled. “Nero didn’t like the idea of me being so far away while he was here, so I came with him.”

Nero sat back down, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. His lips pressed into a thin line. “It’s too volatile right now. Until we figure out who is taking these missing girls, I’m not letting you out of my sight, sweetheart.”

Allie curled into his side, her head leaning against his shoulder. “I know.”

“I still can’t believe they closed the school,” Nero continued, shifting his attention to Remy. “And you know one of the girls who disappeared, right? The one from Dante’s pack?”

“Maren,” Remy said quietly. “She’s my sister’s girlfriend.”

Allie’s dark eyes filled with tears. “That’s so awful.” She wiped at her eyes. “Shit, I’m sorry. Hormones are the worst.”

She stood up swiftly, blinking fast as she looked up at the ceiling. “I’m not ruining my makeup again with baby tears.” She looked down, fixing her gaze on me. “Let’s dance.”

“Oh, um ...” I tried to come up with an excuse, but Allie grabbed my hand and started pulling me up.

I gave Remy a helpless look, but he was smiling.

“Go have fun,” he said, his dark eyes dancing in a way I hadn’t seen much lately.

I looked back at Allie. “I don’t really dance.”

She waved a dismissive hand, tugging down the bottom of her dress. “So? In that crowd, the most we’ll be able to do is shuffle side to side. That’s not really *dancing*.”

I made a face. “No, really, I don’t—”

“You’re too hot for that body not to be noticed,” she declared, then winced when Remy stiffened beside me. She waved a dismissive hand. “I won’t let anyone touch your girl. I’ll go all mama bear on their asses.”

I stifled a sigh. “Seriously, I’m not a dancer.”

“Or I can stay up here and cry,” she said, her dark eyes yet again filling with tears.

“She’ll do it.” Nero chuckled from where he sat on the couch. “Don’t mess with the pregnant lady.”

“He’s right,” Allie said, her tears evaporating in front of me as her wobbling lower lip curved into a wicked grin.

I threw up my hands with a laugh. “Fine.”

Allie punched the air with a gleeful smile. “Yes!”

Shaking my head, I stood up and shrugged off my jacket, handing it to Remy.

He grinned at me. “Have fun.” Then his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “But not enough fun that I’ll have to come find you.”

I arched a brow. “Maybe I want you to come find me.”

His eyes turned molten as I winked and stepped back, letting Allie lead

me to the stairs. I wondered for a second how she would navigate them with the heels she had strapped to her feet, but she easily descended like she lived in five inch stilettos.

Tate, Dante, and Griffin were coming up as we were coming down.

“We’re dancing,” Allie announced, reaching out for Tate with her other hand.

Tate shrugged and passed off the drink in her hand to Dante. “I’ll see you later.” She leaned in and gave him a quick, loud kiss before letting Allie lead us onto the dance floor.

Allie pulled us onto the floor as one song slid into another. The crowd around us cheered, clearly happy with the new song pumping through the speakers.

We were swallowed up by a sea of dancers.

I hesitated for a second, watching as Tate and Allie’s bodies started moving to the beat like they were connected to it on a soul-deep level.

“Just let go,” Tate yelled, watching me struggle for a second.

That had been Ainsley’s advice when she and Katy taught me how to dance. Closing my eyes, I let the music settle into my bones. I shoved away the stress of the day, hell, of the week. I bottled up the nerves fluttering around about my testimony tomorrow.

I was alive, with my friends and my mate, and in the moment, I could just be me.

Time ceased to exist as we danced together. One song melted into the next as we moved, dancing and laughing with each other.

At one point, I glanced up to see Remy, Nero, and Dante leaning against the railing, watching us. I grinned, hoping Remy would come down and join me, but he seemed content to be a voyeur.

“I need water!” Tate yelled after the sixth song, fanning her flushed face.

I nodded and glanced at Allie.

She gave us a grateful smile and turned on her heel, leading the way off the dance floor. We barely made it a few feet from the dancers when Allie paused, grabbing her side.

I touched her elbow. “You okay?”

Grimacing, she nodded. “I think I need the bathroom first. Morning sickness is a lie. It happens literally any time except the mornings.”

“Morning sickness?” Tate echoed, surprise on her face.

“Surprise,” Allie said, still making a face.

“Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” she wheezed out, grabbing my arm. She jerked her head to the side hallway with the restroom sign emblazoned over it. “We can hug it out after I throw up. Right now? Bathroom.”

Allie was pale by the time we made it to the bathroom. Thankfully there was a stall open. She slammed the door open, barely managing to kick it closed before she threw up.

Two girls at the sink turned, both of them wearing identical expressions of disgust.

“Your friend should lay off the bar, honey,” the taller of the two remarked, her lips pinched.

“She’s not drunk,” Tate snapped.

They exchanged a glance and started giggling.

Annoyance flared in me. “Do you have anything else to say?”

They paused mid-giggle to stare at me, almost looking astonished I had dared say anything.

Somewhere behind me, a toilet flushed.

I arched a brow, still waiting for the girls to reply. My gaze narrowed. “No, really. Tell me what’s so damn funny.”

They both dropped their eyes at the same time.

Huh. Shifters.

“Sorry,” the shorter girl muttered, grabbing her friend’s elbow and pulling her out the door.

Rolling my eyes, I turned and looked at Tate.

“What?” I finally asked when Tate wouldn’t stop looking at me.

She gave me a warm smile. “I’m just glad we’re friends.”

I rolled my eyes, stepping aside as someone exited the stall next to Allie and headed for the sink.

“Allie?” I called over the roar of the hand dryer. “You okay?”

Silence.

The door to the bathroom opened again. The girl washing her hands left, and another came in, slipping past us and heading into the vacant stall.

Tate tapped on Allie’s door. “Allie?”

The door cracked open, and Allie’s face looked a little green as she leaned heavily against the door.

My eyes went wide. “Can we help?”

“Can one of you get me some water? Or maybe tell Nero we need to go?”

Her eyes closed. “He’s going to be pissed. He told me to stay in and take it easy. I probably shouldn’t have danced that much.”

“I’ll go get him,” I said quickly, already taking a step back. I looked at Tate. “Stay with her?”

Tate nodded, her eyes fixed on Allie. “I got this. Go get Nero.”

I spun and shoved through the door, nearly knocking over two girls who were trying to come into the bathroom.

“Shit, sorry,” I apologized, moving around them and crashing into another body in the hallway.

“Sorry,” I said again, turning to the person I had almost body checked.

A hand closed around my bicep, the touch bruising with intensity.

“You should really watch where you’re going, Skye,” Preston said darkly. “Especially when it seems like your mate is nowhere to be found.”

I tried to jerk away. “Let go. Now.”

“No,” he snarled, his grip tightening to the point of pain.

I looked around, my eyes wide.

No one else was in the hallway.

I could scream and Tate would come running. Maybe even more people.

“Nope. We need to have a little chat.”

Preston spun me around and slapped a hand over my mouth, pulling me deeper into the hallway and out of the side door.

THE DOOR TO THE CLUB CLOSING SHOVED AN EXTRA BURST OF PANIC FUELED adrenaline through my veins. I wrenched my body away from Preston, remembering a move Remy had taught when we first started sparring.

I hooked my leg behind his ankle, letting the momentum of my body twisting away from him send him off balance.

Preston let me go to catch himself on the brick of the wall.

It gave me enough time to put a couple feet between us. Enough time to look around and realize we were tucked behind the dumpsters. The small alley dead-ended a few feet to my right, and the opening with almost a hundred yards to my left. Even if I turned and ran, Preston was fast. He could catch me.

I could scream, but who knew what type of attention that would bring? The last thing I needed was a human stepping in the middle of a shifter fight.

Pale yellow light glowed from the lights on the side of the building as he glared at me, but for the first time in possibly my entire life, I wasn't scared of Preston Loomis.

I was fucking furious.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" I demanded, every muscle in my body drawing tight and readying for a brawl.

His eyes narrowed. "I told you. I wanted to talk. Without your shadow around."

Remy.

He was going to lose his mind.

"There's absolutely nothing left for you to say to me," I spat, my wolf

alert and begging to be unleashed.

“Oh, come on, Skye-baby.”

I hated that nickname. His dad had always used it when he saw me.

“Don’t,” I growled, my hands curling into fists.

“Or what?” His grin grew, his eyes lit with perverse joy as he taunted me.

My glare turned feral. “Why don’t you ask your brother *or what?*”

He froze, shock glazing his eyes and slackening his jaw for a split second before the sparks of fury caught fire and ignited.

“You stupid little bitch,” he hissed. “I was going to offer you a chance to make this right.”

“Make *what* right?” I snapped.

He took a menacing step forward. “Take back your claims. Get your ass back to Long Mesa and *maybe* your uncle will be lenient. Maybe he won’t eviscerate your boyfriend and his family before dragging your mom and the others back home where you belong.”

I choked on a laugh. “Are you out of your mind? Not a chance in hell, Preston.” I lifted my chin a notch. “And I’m pretty sure my *mate* can take care of himself.”

“Don’t be stupid, Skye. A lot of people are going to get hurt if you don’t shut your mouth and act like a good little wolf.”

“A lot of people have already been hurt!” I retorted. “My mom? Bella? Maisie?”

He licked his lips. “And how is little Bella doing?”

I shrugged, not taking the bait. “Great. Loves her new pack. You know, less psychos and rapists in Blackwater.”

The cruelty in his smile was breathtaking. “I can’t wait to have her back. She was so pretty when she cried. Almost as pretty as you, but she broke too fast, too soon. I love a girl with fight. Pity we had to let her go.”

“*Let her go?*” I laughed, the sound caustic and bitter. “She escaped, same as me.”

He smirked at me. “Escaped? You think we didn’t lock shit down after you and your mommy ran? Bella and her cunt of a mother only got out because we said so.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, cautiously keeping a healthy distance between us.

He angled his head, his eyes almost glittering with energy. It rolled off of him in manic, cloying waves. “Your uncle was getting a little too full of

himself. Dad had to remind of who was in charge. We knew fucking with Bella would set Zara off. She ran right up to her little sister ... and *you*.”

“That’s why Cassian gave her that message,” I murmured. Remy had wondered why Bella had been relaying a message to me. There was no way she could have known she would see me.

Unless they planned it.

Something he said bugged me. “What do you mean my uncle was full of himself? He’s your Alpha, right? Isn’t being an entitled asshole part of the Long Mesa Alpha package?”

Another smirk. “God, you’re so fucking stupid it’s almost cute.”

I growled.

His smile widened as he watched me. “You really think the Markham’s are in charge of Long Mesa? My dad has been handling everything for years. Your uncle is just a puppet. Jesus, even your grandpa contracted out your mom to be married to that prick from Stone Valley because everyone knew Linden Markham was too weak and short-sighted to be an Alpha. When that didn’t work? He started relying on my father to get shit done Linden was too weak to handle.”

“I never saw your dad challenge him for the pack,” I shot back.

Another amused snort escaped him. “My dad has zero interest in being controlled by the Council. A bunch of geriatric, impotent Alphas who lost their packs. Dad’s vision is a little too ... hedonistic for their limited minds.” His teeth flashed as he smiled cruelly. “Dad and I are simply waiting for our time.”

“You’re disgusting,” I seethed, shaking my head. “I’m going to enjoy telling the Council every single thing you did to me.”

His teeth flashed as he sucked in a sharp breath. “And I’m really going to enjoy watching every single person in the pack welcome you and your whore of a mother home.” He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully as his gaze swept down me.

I resisted the urge to shiver as it felt like bugs crawled across every inch of me he studied.

Preston licked his lips. “I like the weight you’ve put on. You were always too skinny.”

Oh, and whose fault was that? Starving hadn’t been something I signed up for.

“You’ve filled in a lot of places I can’t wait to put my teeth on.”

I would die before he put anything of his on me.

“Even Dad might give me some competition for you now that you look like your mom. My dad definitely misses her.”

The small control I had snapped. I stepped forward, my right arm swinging before I could think.

With a grin, Preston grabbed my wrist, anticipating the blow with a laugh. He didn't see my left hook coming.

I barely felt the pain as my knuckles collided with his jaw, snapping his head to the side.

Remy would've been proud.

With a roar, he spun me around, bending my wrist and hurling me against the brick. My back hit the unforgiving wall first, my head cracking against the brick hard enough that light flashes burst across my vision.

Any momentary joy I felt at landing a solid blow to his face was immediately replaced by terror when he raised a fist. I closed my eyes, bracing for the punch and praying I wouldn't lose consciousness.

The blow never came.

I opened my eyes, gasping and blinking against blurry vision.

Preston was on the ground several feet from me, and someone was standing between us. His growl echoed in the alley.

I squinted, trying to focus my unsteady gaze on the newcomer as Preston started picking himself up off the ground. He swayed on his feet a second before spitting out a mouthful of blood between him and my savior.

“Get the fuck out of here,” a deep voice snarled.

Preston grinned, holding his hands up in surrender. Blood stained his teeth. “It's all good, man. I was just catching up with a packmate. You know how it is.”

Another warning growl rumbled out of his chest.

Still smiling, Preston turned and sauntered away, whistling as he went.

“Are you okay?” The guy in front of me turned.

My eyes narrowed.

“Daniel?” I tested his name on my lips, my head still ringing.

“Yeah,” he said, grabbing my forearms and lowering his head to look me in the eye. “Jesus, Skye. What the hell happened?”

My thoughts were scrambled. “I don't ... What are you doing here?”

“Remy said you guys were heading here tonight, so I decided to come at the last minute. Where the hell is he?” Daniel looked around.

“Inside,” I muttered, reaching up to rub the back of my head. I winced when I felt the knot already forming at the base of my skull. “Ouch.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Okay, we need to get you insi—”

The side door slammed open before he could finish his sentence. Daniel was shoved aside and Remy was standing in front of me a second later, pulling me into his arms.

The small corner of the alley got even more crowded when Kace, Griffin, and Dante joined him.

Remy’s body vibrated with anger as he held me against him. “What the hell happened?”

My adrenaline started crashing, my entire body trembling. I could barely wrap my arms around Remy. “I ... Preston was h-here.”

Why were my teeth chattering? It wasn’t even that cold.

“Shit, I think she’s going into shock,” Griffin murmured behind Remy.

Kace raked a hand through his hair, pale eyes wild. “I’m sorry, man. He shouldn’t have been able to get into the club at all.”

“Then how *did* he?” Dante demanded, his voice hard.

“The guy I had watching the security cameras is gone,” Kace snapped, jaw clenched. “He must have let him in. I don’t fucking know. Skye, I’m so sorry.”

“What the hell are you doing out here?” Griffin asked, stepping around Kace and glaring at Daniel.

“He helped me,” I said, my voice still wobbly. I cleared my throat and looked at Daniel. “Did I say thank you?”

“No need,” he replied, his brow creased with worry.

Remy leaned back, smoothing my hair away from my face so he could see my eyes. “Skye—”

“I’m okay,” I said softly, hating the spotlight on me. “He didn’t ... I’m fine.”

“You might want to have her head checked,” Daniel added.

I tried to muster the energy to glare at him.

“He hit you?” Remy roared, eyes murderous.

“No,” I said, starting to shake my head. I stopped when pain lanced through my head. “I hit my head on the wall.”

“Yeah, that the asshole threw you into,” Daniel supplied with a snort.

“Not helping,” I snapped.

“Not trying to,” he retorted, green eyes flashing. “The only reason I didn’t

rip him apart was there's a line full of normals around the corner, and I don't know the area well enough to bury a body."

Remy's eyes closed, and I got the distinct feeling he was a second from losing it.

I placed my hand on his cheek. "I'm really okay. I swear."

His dark eyes opened, churning with intensity. Rage, fear, hate ... He was a volatile molotov cocktail of emotions ready to explode.

"Can we just go?" I asked quietly. "Please? I'll tell you everything that happened, but right now? I just want to go."

His eyes searched mine before he gave a short nod.

"I'll grab Tate and the car," Dante said, waiting until Remy handed over the keys.

I dropped my head against Remy's chest, my hand throbbing in time with my head. I flexed my finger, unable to stop a small hiss of pain from escaping my lips.

Remy caught my distress instantly, his eyes narrowing when he saw the way I was awkwardly holding my hand to my side. I was pretty sure it wasn't broken, but I might have sprained it when I punched Preston's stupid face.

Remy lifted my hand in his, his touch infinitely gentle.

"I punched Preston," I admitted.

His gaze met mine, something that looked a lot like pride shining through.

Kace appeared over Remy's shoulder, his expression grave. "I'm sorry, guys. More than you know."

Remy could only nod, the arm around me tightening.

"Dante's here," Griffin said, jerking his head.

I lifted my head to see our SUV parked at the front entrance of the alley.

"Do you need a ride?" Remy asked Daniel.

Daniel shook his head. "No, I drove here. I'll follow you guys back."

Remy nodded once, tucking me into his side and heading for the car. He opened the back door for me. I climbed into the back seat, not surprised when he slid in next to me, wrapping his arms around me. Griffin sat in the middle, pulling the door closed.

Tate turned around from the passenger seat as Dante pulled the car away from the curb. She looked at me with big eyes, passing my jacket back to me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, taking the leather coat from Griffin and draping it over my lap

like a blanket.. “I’m fine. Is Allie all right?”

“Yeah. She’s fine. Nero is with her,” Tate replied, biting her lower lip. “She said she’ll see you tomorrow if you’re up for it.”

I smiled weakly at her, settling in against Remy’s side as the car fell silent.

The drive back took slightly over an hour. No one spoke. The radio wasn’t turned on. At one point, Griffin pulled out his phone and sent off a few text messages, the glow from the phone illuminating the back of the SUV for a few moments.

Remy’s jaw was made of granite as we drove, his body cut from diamond, hard and impenetrable.

I touched his thigh, smoothed my palm down the soft denim of his jeans, my wolf driving my need to comfort our mate.

He blamed himself. It was written all over his face, and I hated that he was currently using himself as a mental punching bag.

Dante parked the car when we arrived back at the resort, cutting the ignition. No one moved to get out.

After a second, Dante opened his door. Tate and Griffin followed suit, opening their doors and getting out.

“Are we getting out, too?” I asked after he made no move to let me go.

Remy blinked and glanced down at me before slowly nodding once. His hold on me loosened enough for me to get out. Tate hugged me as I got out.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, letting me go as Remy got out and slammed the door hard enough to shake the car.

“Thanks,” I whispered, stepping away from her as Remy grabbed my hand and pulled me against him.

“Dante, can you go back? Tell my dad and Luke what happened. Tell them we’ll be there in a bit?” Remy’s voice was oddly calm, almost detached as he spoke.

“Yeah, of course,” Dante said, wrapping an arm around Tate and pulling her in the direction of our cabins.

Griffin shuffled back a step, holding up his phone. “I’ll call if I hear back from my guy with any info.”

Remy nodded, and we both watched as Griffin headed back to the lodge.

“Remy?”

“I need you to trust me,” he said softly, not looking at me.

Something in his tone jarred me.

“Of course I trust you.”

“Okay. Come with me.” Still holding my hand, he led us into the darkness towards the line of trees behind the cabins.

Our feet moved quietly, almost silently, through the grass as we walked.

The night sky was clear, the waning crescent moon casting a pale, hazy glow over the ground as we headed away from the lights of the cabins and the lodge. Only a few people were out, mostly Alphas talking by the lodge. Their voices grew softer the more distance we put between us and them.

Remy stopped just past the first row of trees.

“I need you to shift,” he told me quietly, letting my hand go.

I frowned. “What?”

He turned and looked at me. “I need you to show me exactly what happened tonight.”

Closing my eyes, I nodded and stepped back. I stripped off my jacket, dropping it onto the carpet of pine needles under my feet. Once I started taking off my boots, he joined me in silently undressing.

My heart was heavy as I finished taking my clothes off and surrendered my body to the change.

My wolf took over for us, letting me take a backseat to the events of the night. I waited until Remy’s wolf stood before me.

I don’t know how to let you see what happened, I admitted. I hadn’t ever meant for him to see the first memory I had shared.

Try. He leaned his forehead against mine, aligning the stars on our heads.

Two sides of the same coin.

I closed my eyes, dragging up the memory of the alley. I let it all in.

The panic at seeing Preston. The fear when he pulled me outside. The hate, the arguing.

I smiled, reliving the moment my fist made contact with his jaw, reveling in the snap of his neck and the shock in his eyes.

My head throbbed as I recalled my skull kissing the bricks, the confusion as Daniel appeared in front of me.

I let it all in. It must have worked, because Remy’s breathing changed. A low rumble started deep in his chest, turning into a full snarl by the time my memory saw him bursting through the side door.

The crushing relief of knowing Remy had found me was just as staggering in my memory as it had been in real time. I stepped forward, moving my head from his so I could wrap my neck around his, resting my

chin on his shoulders.

See? I'm fine, I tried to reassure him.

Silence lingered in our bond for a heavy moment, and then ...

Then I was in the club, panic a dagger slicing my chest as Kace told me ... No, told *Remy*, that I was missing.

This was Remy's memory playing out like a movie in my head.

The moment he realized I was gone. Running down the stairs so fast he completely jumped the last eight steps, landing deftly on his feet to the shock of the humans near the landing. Shoving through a crowd of dancers hard enough to knock two of them down.

Pushing through the side door and seeing me doubled over, Daniel holding me up. My face, ashen and drawn in the yellow alley light as my gaze connected to his.

Relief so potent it almost sent him to his knees.

I whimpered against him, pressing my body as close as I could. I wasn't sure if I was trying to seek or offer comfort.

I thought I lost you again, his voice whispered in my head.

My wolf resisted me changing back at first, wanting the nearness of her mate, but we both wanted to comfort Remy and that was better done with human arms I could wrap around him.

Crouched in the dry leaves and dead pine needles, I wrapped my arms around him.

"I'm right here," I whispered against his soft fur, burying my face in his neck.

I WOKE UP THE DAY OF MY EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY CHAINED TO A FURNACE.

Okay, more like Remy's arm had a vise grip around my waist, pressing my back against his bare chest that gave off more heat than the damn sun.

Definitely not the worst way to wake up on a day I spent almost my entire life dreading.

I traced the back of his hand absently, feathering my fingers across the knotted terrain of knuckles and muscle. A small scar marred the skin just above his thumb, a silvery white blemish on tanned skin.

I didn't know the origins of that scar. Depending on how the day went, I might never know.

Fear swooped low in my gut, snatching the momentary peace I had known waking up.

Would this be the last morning I woke up like this?

Maybe the joke was on me all along; my eighteenth birthday would be the worst day of my life, but not for the reasons I believed for so many years. Maybe I could have handled life as an omega in Long Mesa if I didn't know what it meant to be Remy Holt's mate.

But now I knew, and the change was irrevocable.

After we had come back to the cabin and filled Gabe in on what happened at the club, I had gone upstairs to let Remy and his father talk. I could have stayed with them, but I needed to take a shower.

I stood under the scalding spray of water until my skin turned red and shriveled. I used almost the entire bottle of body wash I had brought scrubbing my skin, taking time to thoroughly scour the places Preston had

touched.

I had stayed in the shower until Remy silently joined me, taking the loofah out of my hands and rinsing away the last of the suds. He pulled me out of the shower and into the hazy fog of the bathroom, drying me off with a fluffy towel before helping me pull on my clothes and taking the time to brush out my hair before drying himself off.

We were both locked in our own heads, trapped in our own memories, as we got ready for bed.

As soon as we slid between the cotton sheets, his arm locked around my waist and hauled me to him. I finally fell asleep after I felt his breaths even out, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest at my back leeching the last bit of tension from my bones.

We hadn't moved throughout the night, a fact that my hip and shoulder were currently protesting, but I would stay here all day with the dull throbbing in my joints if it meant we never had to leave.

The press of his mouth against my neck was the first indication he was awake.

“Happy birthday, baby.”

The words rolled through me, a thousand reactions hitting me at the same time. But the one that overwhelmed me the most?

Love.

I was loved.

Remy's arm tightened around my waist, and I rolled over to face him. My hand came up, tracing the stubble shadowing his jaw.

His dark eyes studied me, missing nothing.

“It's all going to be fine,” he promised.

I bit my lower lip. “What if it isn't? What if this is the last time—”

He cut me off with a slow, drugging kiss. “It isn't,” he vowed when he pulled back. “It's you and me forever. Not even the Council could keep me away from you.”

“When you say that, I believe it.” I smoothed a thumb across the curve of his cheek.

“When you're done telling Linden to go to hell,” he said, a small smile hooking up the corner of his lips, “we'll do whatever you want tonight.”

A shiver rippled across me leaving a delicious awareness in its wake. “Whatever I want?”

His eyes smoldered, heating and darkening. “Whatever you want, babe.”

His hand tightened on my hip as his grip turned possessive.

I raised myself up onto my elbow and leaned over him, pressing my lips against his. His mouth opened as he rolled onto his back, letting me take the lead as I stroked my tongue against his.

Nerve endings fired to life as I moved over him, straddling his lower stomach, and wishing like hell there were a few less layers of clothes between us.

A soft knock at the door cut through the start of my favorite birthday yet.

“One hour warning, guys,” Gabe’s voice called through the door.

One hour until I saw Linden and tried to convince the Council he was a lying, maniacal sadist who thrived on torture and violence.

It was more effective than a gallon of ice water being dumped on me.

I sat up and climbed off Remy and out of the bed.

“We should get ready,” I muttered, my back to him as I headed for the dresser.

What exactly did someone wear to bare her soul to the devil?

“Hey.” Remy came up behind me, his arms sliding around the front of me. “You’re going to be fine.”

I leaned into him, letting myself absorb his strength and confidence. “I hope so.”

“I know so,” he countered firmly. He turned me around so I couldn’t hide from him.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You already did the hard part,” he reminded me. “You escaped, you survived. Don’t let Linden or anyone else control you. If you’re scared, use it. Channel it into making sure no one else ever feels this scared because of them again.”

Use it.

I could do that. For me, for Bella, for my mom ... for all the omegas who came before me.

A sick feeling filled the pit of my stomach.

There were probably new omegas still in Long Mesa. Killing Maisie and Shane after my mom and I escaped would have been a temporary solution. No way Linden’s inner circle, especially people like Allan Loomis, would go without the release omegas provided.

“What?” Remy asked, pulling me back to the present.

I blinked, my gaze connecting with his. “They have to have omegas there

now. People who are being ...” I swallowed, unable to finish the thought.

His face didn’t show any surprise. He had already assumed the same thing.

Fresh resolve settled in my bones, hardening my purpose. “Okay. Let’s get ready.”

We got ready quickly, taking turns in the bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror and braided my hair, pulling it out of my face so I wouldn’t be tempted to hide behind it or use it as a buffer between Linden and myself.

I needed to look him in the eye, Alpha or not, and tell the world what he did.

Or the Council, at least.

The last piece of armor I put on was my necklace before giving Remy a grim nod.

He smiled softly back at me before opening the door.

Gabe and Griffin were waiting for us in the living room as we came down the stairs, both looking up at us. With his dark blonde hair and blue eyes, Griffin could have been Gabe’s younger brother.

Griffin’s eyes caught mine. “How are you doing, Skye?”

“Good,” I replied. The knot from where I hit my head on the brick was almost completely gone, and the bruising around my wrist from where Preston had grabbed me was faded into a sickly yellow.

“Tell me you have something,” Remy said, his attention to Griffin.

Griffin frowned, shaking his head. “The surveillance tapes were scrubbed. Probably when we were all in the alley.”

“Shit,” Remy muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. Anger flashed across his features.

“Surveillance tapes?” I repeated, looking at each of the men in the room.

“We were planning to use the surveillance footage of Preston grabbing you last night to help your case,” Griffin explained. “But it looks like the same guy who helped Preston get in also erased the footage of him grabbing you outside the bathrooms and attacking you in the alley.”

My shoulders sagged. Yeah, that video definitely would have helped.

“Any idea who did it?” Remy asked.

“New guy named Deeks,” Griffin replied. “Kace said he started a few weeks ago. He had an apartment close to the club, but it’s been cleared out. No sign of him.”

“Great.” Remy sighed heavily, jaw clenched.

“Daniel showed up,” I offered. “He saw what happened.”

Griffin gave me a sideways glance. “Yeah. Unfortunately for us, he came down the alley in time to see you deck Preston. Without the video to show what happened beforehand, it looks like you assaulted an alpha. Preston would have been within his rights to ... You know.”

Beat the hell out of me?

Sometimes shifter rules sucked.

“It changes nothing,” Gabe said firmly, his eyes on me.

I nodded mutely.

“You should eat,” Remy said softly to me.

“I’m not hungry.” The idea of food made me nauseous.

“Rem’s right,” Griffin added. “There’s no telling how long the interview will take. You need your energy.”

Sighing, I walked to the fruit bowl and fished out an apple, taking a bite before giving them a pointed look. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Remy deadpanned.

“I should go,” Griffin said, starting towards the door. “I have a meeting that I need to prepare for.”

“Thanks for your help,” Gabe told him, walking him to the front door.

Griffin nodded and looked over Gabe’s shoulder to me. “I’d say good luck, but I don’t think you need it.”

A smile ghosted over my lips. “Thank you.”

Gabe closed the door and started back towards us, gesturing for us to sit down.

Once I was sitting on the sofa next to Remy, he said, “Any questions about how this goes?”

I shook my head slowly. “I think I got it. It’ll just be me, Linden, and a couple of Alphas from the Council.”

Gabe nodded. “This is just the preliminary hearing. If they think there’s enough evidence, they’ll move forward with Linden’s claim and the entire Council will vote on the matter.”

I exhaled hard, resisting the urge to look away. “Right. And you guys are going to be questioned by someone else on the Council while that’s happening, right?”

“Yeah.” Gabe leaned back in his chair. “We’ll be questioned separately. They need to make sure our stories match before they make a decision.”

A decision that would determine the rest of my life.

No pressure.

Remy's hand curled around my knee. "We're mates, babe. They're not going to separate us."

I flashed him what I hoped was a confident smile in return. "I know. It's just ... There's that small chance of them *not* seeing it our way. What if they send us back?"

"They won't," he replied fiercely.

A sliver of desperation slipped through the crack in the wall of my confidence. "But what if they do?"

"Then we put you on a plane, go back to Blackwater, and demand an appeal," Gabe said bluntly.

I jerked, stunned, as I looked at him.

Gabe smiled grimly. "There's enough allies here to help us get you home if it comes to that. We could sneak you out and have you halfway to Washington before they realize you're gone."

"You would do that?" I whispered, somewhere between overwhelmingly touched and amazed. My hand fluttered to my mouth.

Gabe leaned forward. "Absolutely. Over my dead body will you go back to that hellhole, Skye. You, Addie, Zara, and Bella will *never* go back there again while I'm still alive."

"Even if the Council doesn't find in our favor for this," Remy started slowly, pulling my attention to him, "they still have to hear our shifter rights violation claim. That's scheduled in a couple of days."

"And if *that* fails?" I asked, a sick need to exhaust and work through all possible scenarios eating away at me. I set the half-eaten apple on the table beside me.

Gabe and Remy exchanged looks, but it was the Alpha who spoke.

"We'll figure that out when the time comes," Gabe answered. "But, honey, you're never going back." A smile stretched across his face. "I can't lose one of my favorite kids."

I couldn't stop the grin that spread across my face. "Okay."

Gabe stood up. "We should get going. Remy and I will walk you over, but then we have to go to our meeting."

Exhaling, I stood up and linked my fingers with Remy's. "Let's do it."

I PROBABLY IMAGINED THAT EVERYONE WAS WATCHING US AS WE HEADED FOR the main lodge, but it felt like dozens of pairs of eyes were on us as we walked.

The sunlight was blindingly bright, the promise of a beautiful spring day lingering in the mid-morning rays that fell across the lush property.

I walked up the stairs, my hand in Remy's and Gabe on my other side, like I was heading for the executioner's block. Dread and nerves weighed down my steps until the only thing that kept me moving was sheer will.

We wound down the hallway towards the individual meeting rooms, rounding a last corner where Linden waited with two men I recognized from the Alpha Council.

I squared my shoulders, lifting my chin as I readied for battle even though everything in me screamed to *run, run, run*.

Linden's eyes, the same brilliant shade of emerald as my own, glittered with unspoken threats and promises.

The older of the two Council members frowned as we approached. He turned, his shoulders hunched with age as he rested heavily on a cane in his right hand.

"Alpha Gabriel," the man started, his deep voice rough and worn from years of use, "you know you are not permitted at this inquest."

Gabe inclined his head politely, but I got the feeling he was grinding his teeth to keep from replying. "Of course. I simply wished to escort my pack member to the meeting. You can understand my son not wanting to leave his mate's side."

Linden scoffed under his breath, but held back a reply.

Remy squeezed my hand once. "I'll see you when this is over. I love you," he murmured in my ear, brushing a kiss against the side of my head.

I wanted to turn my head and capture his lips with mine. I wanted to mark him as mine in front of these men, in front of my uncle, so there was no question where I belonged.

Instead, cotton filled my mouth rendering me unable to speak. I simply nodded.

The younger Councilman opened the heavy wood door to the meeting space, waving me inside. "Miss Markham, if you please?"

I drew in a slow breath, willing my nerves to steady as I walked inside.

The room had a wall of windows, filling the room with bright light. A long, rectangular table took up the bulk of the space, eight chairs around it.

The door shut behind me with a heavy thud, and I flinched at the sound. It took everything in me not to get up and make sure it wasn't locked. To make sure I wasn't trapped.

"Please sit," the younger man encouraged, sitting at the head of the table along with the older Councilman.

I walked around to the side where the windows were and sat in one of the seats.

Linden sat across from me, his green eyes narrow as he looked at me with what seemed to be genuine concern.

I clenched my teeth as my wolf growled in my chest, prowling at the surface angrily, waiting for an opening to tear this man apart.

Down, girl.

The older man cleared his throat. "I am Louis Clouder, Miss Markham. I have been selected as the senior Alpha presiding over this meeting. This is Tobias Zale." He gestured to the younger man beside him. "He is one of our alternates and will likely succeed me on the Council next year."

"Shoes that will be hard to fill, Alpha Louis," Linden said smoothly, angling his head in deference to the older man.

Tobias smiled politely at me. "This meeting is to determine if you, Skye Markham, had cause to abandon your birth pack. Your uncle claims you were forcibly removed from his charge, along with your mother and other family members, by the Blackwater pack."

I snorted, shaking my head.

"I will remind you that you are bound by Pack Law to speak the truth to

the Alphas present in this room,” Tobias added, ignoring my sound of protest. “Failure to provide wholly and accurate truth may result in punishment, not only for you, but also those you seek to protect with your lies.”

Translation: tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth or Blackwater could pay the price.

“I promise to speak only the truth,” I vowed softly, giving a single nod of affirmation.

“Alpha Linden,” Tobias said, changing his focus to the man across from me. “I remind you that you, too, are bound by Pack Law.”

Linden gave me a slight smirk, barely hooking one corner of his mouth up, before he turned and addressed the Council members seated at the far end of the table that would observe the exchange.

“I am fully aware of the importance of complete and total honesty,” Linden said, so sincerely that I almost believed him. “I vow to speak only truth.”

He lied as easily as he breathed.

Louis nodded once. “As the aggrieved party, you may begin, Alpha.”

“Thank you for sitting in on this meeting, brothers,” Linden began, his tone firm but yielding. He inclined his head in deference. “I appreciate your treating my claims with the proper attention they deserve. We will need the support of the Council now more than ever.”

I glared at him. God, he was such a pompous asshole.

Linden looked at me, his expression the picture of warmth and worry. “Skye, sweetheart, I’m so relieved to see you looking well. We worried the worst had happened when you were taken from us.”

My jaw dropped in outrage. I was unable to stop from responding. “When I was *taken*?”

He made a clucking noise against his teeth, shaking his head sadly. “My sweet girl, we’re here to bring you home. Those brutes in Blackwater will pay for what they’ve done to you. Skye, you can come home now.” He spoke slowly, clearly articulating every single word like I had suffered a concussion or something.

“Are you out of your mind?” I hissed, slapping my hands on the table. My entire body shook with rage. “I *ran* from *you*. Because *you* are a monster. Growing up in the Long Mesa pack was hell.”

Sighing in dejection, Linden looked down the table at the other men, shoulders hunched. “You see how they’ve poisoned my own niece against

me? They've taken my sister, and they've corrupted my niece. I beg the Council to have them returned to my protection along with my wife and daughter before they can be abused and brain-washed even more."

My gaze swung down to the men sitting silently. "My *uncle* is the monster. He and my grandfather whored out my mother to the pack. To their friends. They would have done the same thing to me, just like they did to every other omega in the pack."

Both men turned wide eyes to my uncle, who simply dropped his head.

"This is most distressing," he finally whispered. Lifting his eyes, tears shimmered in the green depths. "Is there no limit to their manipulation? To their cruelty? Skye, sweet child, we are your pack. Your *family*. We would never do what they've done to you. No Alpha would betray his pack in such a way."

I looked at both men, completely stunned. "You can't be buying this act!"

Neither of them spoke, but both looked at my uncle with ... understanding?

Hell no.

"They have taken my sister, my wife, and my daughter. They murdered my chosen successor when he tried to free his mate."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" I exploded, ready to flip the table right here and now. I was barely maintaining control over my wolf right. "Cassian? Cassian was *never* my mate."

"We heard about the death of your young successor, but there have been conflicting stories," Louis commented, finally joining the conversation. A deep frown settled into the hard lines of his face. "You are claiming that the Blackwater pack murdered him?"

Before I could splutter out a coherent response, Linden was already talking.

"Cassian finally learned the truth of his mate's whereabouts from the Norwood pack, one of our allies in the North. He went and was able to save Skye. He was murdered by Remington Holt when Cassian and Skye attempted to flee for their lives to meet the convoy I had arranged to bring them back home. In his jealous rage, Remington nearly killed Skye as well, shoving both her and Cassian off a cliff. It was all witnessed by Trace Valois. He is here and will make a statement of confirmation."

I was going to lose it any second. I hadn't actually expected Linden to tell the truth, but this story was so far beyond anything I ever thought he would

dream up.

Tobias looked at me. "Is this correct?"

"Not. Even. Close," I ground out between clenched teeth. I slowly got to my feet across from my uncle. "Let's start with Cassian being my *mate*." I spat the word. "Cassian was your *daughter's* intended mate. Until he and his friends *gang raped* her. Then your wife and daughter ran for their lives and sought sanctuary in Blackwater."

The men at the end of the table glanced at each other, and I saw the first cracks of unease beginning.

Good.

But I wasn't even close to finished.

"Cassian came to my school and attacked me. He knocked me out and *kidnapped* me. He tied me down and laughed about what he and his friends did to your daughter. About what they were going to do to me."

I kept my eyes locked on Linden's the whole time. Slowly the concerned uncle was giving way to the vindictive Alpha. The concerned warmth in his eyes chilling to a bitter frost.

There was the monster I knew. Now I just needed the Council to see it, too.

Narrowing my eyes, I leaned forward. "*I tackled Cassian off that cliff and went over it with him because I would rather die than ever go back to Long Mesa. The only thing that saved me was my true mate. Remy got me off that mountain. He stayed by my side for weeks as I recovered.*"

Straightening, I folded my arms over my chest and glared at him, letting them all see how deep my hatred ran. "The only reason you want my mother back is so you can keep whoring her out to your friends." My gaze swung to the men, their mouths now agape.

"*That is what Long Mesa does. They abuse omegas, they allow and even encourage violence amongst pack members. I grew up in a shack just for omegas, surviving off whatever food scraps the local grocery store was throwing away because they were spoiled or expired. I listened to men and women being attacked and brutalized every single day, all with the knowledge that I only had days until that was my fate as well.*"

I finally looked back at my uncle. All pretense of the loving Alpha was gone. Pure hatred glittered in his eyes.

"You're a monster. And you *will* pay for what you've done to us."

Linden got to his feet, nearly toppling his chair. "You ungrateful little

bitch.”

“You sadistic asshole,” I hissed back. “I’m going to make sure every single shifter knows who you are and what you’ve done. Cassian told me that you had a hand in all the missing women from the packs.”

That caught the attention of the Council members.

Tobias leaned forward, eyes wide. “Is this true, Alpha Linden?”

Linden seemed to suddenly remember that we weren’t alone. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, calming down before he glanced at the other men. “You see the ways they have manipulated her? Brainwashed her into betraying her own pack?”

He leaned back in his chair and looked down the table at the men. “Of course I have no knowledge of the missing female shifters. I, myself, have *four* missing females from my pack. Perhaps Blackwater has more females in their hold than we know.”

My jaw dropped at his insinuation.

Both men watched my uncle with a new skepticism that wasn’t there a few minutes ago. I sank back into my chair, my legs turning to jelly as my adrenaline rush started crashing.

Louis slowly stood up and cleared his throat. “I can assure you, Alpha Linden, there will be a formal inquest into everything brought up here today.”

Tobias got up beside him, his eyes on me. “For the interim, we will not be ordering Skye or any other pack member who has gone to Blackwater to return to Long Mesa.” His eyes went soft around the edges.

Linden slammed a fist down on the table hard enough to make all three of us jump. “You will send my blood back to the pack that stole her? That corrupted her?”

I folded my arms over my chest, lifting my chin a notch. “No, they’re letting me stay by my *true* mate’s side. Where I belong. Thankfully that happens to be far away from you.”

My uncle snorted derisively. “*True mate?* Please. She’s an infatuated child. We all know true mates bond later in life. They’re too young to be bonded.”

“And yet we are,” I replied, unable to stop the triumphant smile on my lips.

Linden’s gaze swept me slowly, deliberately, before he arched a brow smugly. “I see no claiming mark on you.”

Both men at the end of the table shifted their attention to me once more,

their gazes more curious than condemning.

I shifted in my seat, not wanting to give away that I was more than a little clueless about a claiming mark.

My silence was all the fuel my uncle needed.

He smothered a smile. “Unless it is in a place we cannot see?” There was no missing the mocking in his voice.

My eyes narrowed.

“You do have the mark of a claimed, bonded mate, don’t you?” Louis asked me, tilting his head to the side as he studied me carefully.

Curiosity and uncertainty cracked me.

“What are you talking about?” I winced at the edge of uncertainty in my tone.

Grinning, he leaned forward. He knew I had no idea what he was talking about, and now he was going in for the kill.

“Everyone knows true mates *claim* one another. Mark their mate. It’s unavoidable in the heat of ... passion.” Linden sneered at me. “If you were true mates, you would bear your mate’s mark.”

I forced myself to take even breaths, to keep my head up even when I wanted to look away in embarrassment. He couldn’t mean what I thought he did, right?

His eyes glittered like emeralds in sunlight. “My sweet girl, I don’t think you’ve been claimed. Likely because he isn’t your true mate as Remington would have you believe.”

My jaw dropped. “Of course he’s my true mate.”

Linden leaned back, hands up in surrender. “Prove me wrong. Show us your mark.”

Tobias cleared his throat, getting my attention. “He does have a point, Miss Markham. All bonded pairs claim their mate. It’s an unavoidable act during the consummation of the bond. Surely you and your mate have,” he had the decency to look embarrassed, “consummated your bond?”

Louis’s brow wrinkled. “She must have.” Then he chuckled softly, knowingly, in a way that made my skin crawl.

My body was shaking. This wasn’t happening.

“We haven’t done ... *that*,” I whispered.

The men at the end of the table exchanged glances, and it was all the opening Linden needed.

“See?” he declared loudly. “Proof that they are not bonded mates. They

have manipulated and brainwashed my niece into thinking she's bonded to their alpha heir as a way to usurp my pack's authority and claim."

"Because we *are* bonded," I snapped, but even I realized no one was buying my argument.

"How long have you and Remington been *bonded*?" Linden made the words sound dirty, laughable.

"We bonded shortly after I arrived at Granite Peak. In the fall," I answered quickly.

Apparently *that* was the wrong answer because now the two men at the end of the table started whispering to each other.

"That has been nearly five months," Linden told me triumphantly. "True mates can barely wait a day once bonded before claiming their mate. You expect us to believe that you and your *mate* have waited half a year?"

"Yes," I ground out.

He snorted, glancing at the men with a knowing look. "Because teenagers are known for their restraint."

Louis chuckled again as he nodded at Linden, but Tobias still seemed on the fence, his eyes studying me calmly.

"So, Remy's not my mate because he hasn't forced me to do something I'm not ready to do? Something that scares the hell out of me because of what happened in *your* pack?" I hissed, digging my heels in.

These assholes had no idea who Remy was, or what we were to each other.

But it was also becoming clear that maybe I didn't know exactly what Remy and I were to each other either.

There was no way he didn't know about this claiming mark thing.

Linden sank back down into his chair. "Dear girl, if you were his true mate and he yours, no one would *force you* to do anything. You wouldn't be able to control yourselves. It's our basic, wolf instinct."

He looked down the table at the two men. "Remington Holt is not her true bonded mate as defined by pack law. I demand my niece be returned to my pack immediately before they can further corrupt her."

SOME STUPID PART OF ME HAD BELIEVED I WOULD LEAVE THIS ROOM WITH THE best birthday present ever—my freedom from Linden Markham and Long Mesa. The only thing that had given me the strength to step into that room with my uncle was knowing that when I was done, I was going back to Remy.

My mate.

Or is he?

I was the last one to leave the room. Linden had left with two men from the Council, who decided they would reserve judgement on the issue of which pack I belonged to until the final hearing when Gabe laid out all of his reasons to have Linden removed as Alpha in Long Mesa.

They kindly allowed me to stay with Remy and Gabe for the time being, only after offering to provide me with my own room in the main building. A room that came with a Council enforcer who would stand sentry at my door and protect me from Gabe and Remy, if I so wanted.

Protection from my kidnappers.

I had barely managed to tell them I was fine where I was, wondering the whole time if I even knew who I was with anymore.

Remy had left out a pretty big detail about us being bonded. Which begged the question, why?

Why would he keep something so monumental from me?

My steps were slow, sluggish, as I left the room feeling more confused and broken than ever.

I jumped when a hand touched my shoulder, whirling around to see

Tate's surprised face. Daniel hovered behind her, his pale eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he studied me.

"Skye, what happened?" Tate asked quietly, stepping closer to me. Her gaze shifted to where Linden stood across the hall, now joking with the two men who had just listened to me tell them that he was the devil incarnate.

Sensing my eyes on him, Linden looked up, his green eyes dancing with mockery.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes, the room going watery and blurry.

Dammit, the last thing I wanted to do was cry in front of them.

Darkness blotted my vision as Daniel stepped into my line of sight. My eyes fixed on the black of his shirt, the way it stretched over his broad chest.

"Don't look at him," he murmured, just for my ears.

My eyes lifted to his and then Tate. "I ... he lied."

Tate's face twisted into a grimace. "Your uncle is a snake, Skye. Of course he lied."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Remy. Remy *lied* to me."

Tate stepped back like my words were a physical blow. Daniel remained stoic in front of me, keeping me from seeing my uncle and keeping Linden from seeing me as I started to fall apart.

Tate touched my wrist. "There has to be something else going on. Remy loves you, Skye. You're mates—"

I wrenched away from her, turning from both of them and blindly hurrying down the hall before I lost it in front of everyone.

There was a side exit, and I hurried for it, not giving a shit if I tripped a fire alarm when I burst through it.

Thankfully, only the sounds of birds and cicadas greeted me on the other side.

"Skye, slow down!" Daniel said, catching up.

Tate grabbed my arm. "Skye, wait, okay? Tell us what's going on?"

"I need to talk to Remy," I said, shaking my head.

"He's still in his meeting," Daniel said. "Tate and I offered to wait for you in case you got out first."

"Skye, you're shaking," Tate murmured. "Let's sit down." She guided me over to a bench near a flawlessly curated garden.

I barely felt the metal under me as I sat down, my mind still a jumble of thoughts, each one more confusing than the next.

Daniel stood across from us, folding his arms over his chest. "Do you

need me to go get Remy?”

“No!” The word exploded out of me.

“Okay,” he said slowly, shooting Tate a confused look.

“My dad and Dante should be done with their meeting by now. I can get them,” Tate supplied.

I shook my head, on the verge of telling them both to leave me alone.

I needed to work through all of these thoughts. I needed answers.

“Do you know what a claiming is?” I turned and looked at Tate, hoping I wasn’t the only one in the dark here.

Surprise lit her features for a second. “You mean when a bonded pair ... you know?”

My heart sank. Tate knew what it was, too.

Daniel couldn’t hide his chuckle. “*You know?*” he repeated, shaking his head. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘consummate’, sweetheart.”

She flashed him a dirty look. “I was trying to be discreet.”

“You have *two* boyfriends,” he pointed out with a smirk. “I’m not entirely sure at what point you hopped on the chastity train. Call it what it is.” His green gaze turned to me, seeing more of me than I was comfortable with.

After a second, his eyes flared wide. He exhaled and stepped back, rubbing his jaw. “Oh. Shit.”

“Shit what?” Tate asked, looking back and forth between us.

I felt my cheeks heat with humiliation.

“You and Remy have never ...” Tate trailed off, her mouth hanging open. “I just assumed. I mean, you’re bonded so I just assumed.”

I stood up and paced away from them. “Yeah. Apparently everyone assumed, too.”

“You didn’t know?”

I whirled around to face her. “It’s not like bonding came with a freaking handbook. I didn’t even know it was possible until I came to Blackwater, and even then, I didn’t know how it worked. I ... I followed Remy’s lead.”

“So, you two *aren’t* bonded?” Daniel frowned.

“They *are* bonded,” Tate snapped, glaring at him before turning her attention to me. “I’m sure there is a reasonable explanation for this, Skye. Remy loves you. It’s obvious to anyone who is around you guys for more than five minutes that you’re mates.”

“Not technically,” Daniel argued, shrugging.

Tate growled at him. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m being honest,” he shot back, taking a step forward and positioning himself between us. “In the eyes of the Council, and according to Pack Law, they aren’t mates.”

My world tilted, bile crawling up the back of my throat.

This wasn’t happening.

“Because they haven’t had sex?” she threw back, shaking her head. “That’s bullshit.”

“That’s *law*,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Human and shifter. A marriage, or mating, isn’t final until it’s consummated.”

“Remy and I aren’t bonded,” I murmured, numbness settling in my heart and spreading out to all of my limbs.

“There has to be a reason,” Tate said desperately, fighting harder for Remy and me than I was.

Pulling in a deep breath, I unearthed those years of coping skills I had honed in Long Mesa. I shoved my emotions down, bottling them up.

Emotions were a weakness I couldn’t afford right now.

“I need to go back to the cabin,” I said softly, blinking as I steadied myself.

I could do this.

I could at least hold it together until I made it back to the cabin.

“We’ll walk you back,” Daniel told me.

“I’m fine on my own,” I replied coolly.

He gave me a grim smile. “Yeah, well, humor us.”

“We’re not leaving you alone,” Tate added. She touched my hand. “I’m your friend, Skye.”

Was she? Tate had been Remy’s friend first. Dante was one of Remy’s best friends.

The idea that I might lose Larkin, Katy, and Rhodes was a blow that nearly brought me to my knees.

But they were all loyal to Remy, and I wasn’t entirely sure where that left all of us.

Tate’s expression turned fierce. “Oh, no you don’t.” She took a step towards me, crowding into my personal space. “I know what you’re thinking and *don’t*. I’m your friend no matter what boneheaded shit Remy did trying to protect you. Because I’m sure whatever his reasons are, he was doing it to protect you.”

“Pretty shitty way to protect her,” Daniel said under his breath.

Tate exhaled hard, hands curled into fists. “I will literally beat the shit out of you if you can’t shut up.”

Daniel made a face, but didn’t say anything else.

“Whatever,” I muttered, starting for the cabin and not waiting to see if they were following.

I lengthened my strides until I was practically jogging. I came around the corner of the building and collided, hard, with another body.

I didn’t have it in me to apologize, so I managed a mangled sort of smile for the person I had nearly wiped out. At least, until I saw his face.

“Trace,” Tate spat, coming up behind me.

“Tatum,” he greeted coolly before looking at me. “Skye. You look—”

“It is so important that you not finish that statement with anything less than politeness,” Tate cut in brusquely. “No one is in the mood.”

His lips hooked into a smile. “Trouble in paradise?”

I moved to step around him, but he mirrored my movements, blocking me.

“Get out of my way,” I hissed, ready to punch him as hard as I had hit Preston the night before. Maybe harder because of what he had done to Larkin at school last semester.

“Or what?” he asked, his tone mocking. He cocked his head to the side. “Where’s your ... Well, he isn’t your mate, is he?”

It hadn’t taken long for *that* to get around.

“Her mate is in a meeting,” Daniel supplied, stepping around me to position himself between Trace and I.

Huh.

Despite what he had said about us not being mates, he was clearly sticking up for us now.

Trace eyed Daniel, his gaze indifferently appraising him. “Do I know you?”

Daniel grinned, his smile anything but genuine. “You really don’t want to.”

With a snort, Trace rolled his eyes and stepped back. “Whatever. I have a meeting.” His gaze landed on me. “Skye and I can catch up later when she’s back home in Long Mesa. My pack and her former are good friends.” His eyes lit with cruelty. “I’ve even had the chance to sample a few of their ... amenities. It’s pretty cool that they give omegas their own house inside the pack.”

I exploded forward, moving so fast it was a miracle that Daniel caught me around the waist and pulled me back before my hands could wrap around Trace's neck.

"Get out of here!" Tate ordered Trace, pointing a finger at the main building.

"Calm the fuck down," Daniel whispered in my ear.

I was almost beyond reason, struggling to break free. My wolf strained for release, ready to work out our frustration and pain on Trace's throat.

Smirking, Trace walked backwards. "I'll see you around, Skye."

Daniel grunted as my elbow connected with his abs. "A little help?" he asked Tate, still struggling to keep me from getting away.

Tate framed my face in her hands. "Skye, stop. You can't go after him right now. He's an heir, and there's people *watching*."

I let her words penetrate and glanced around. Sure enough, several Alphas were frowning at us.

"I'm fine," I said softly. "Let me go."

Daniel released me warily. "Let's just get back to your cabin."

I jerked my head in a sharp nod and walked to the cabin, not stopping until I was inside.

"Do you want us to stay?" Tate offered once we were inside.

"You should go," I replied, shaking my head. I needed to call Mom. I needed to hear her voice, hear her tell me everything would be all right.

"Okay," Tate agreed slowly. "I'm next door. Call me if you need anything."

I nodded absently.

Daniel opened the door for her. "I'm going to hang out on the front porch. At least until Gabe or Remy get back."

"You don't have to," I said, shaking my head.

"I promised them I would look out for you until they got back," he replied with a shrug. "But I'll stay out of your way."

Tate hesitated at the door. "Skye, you need to hear what Remy has to say. It's probably not what you think."

"And if it is?" I asked woodenly, sinking onto a chair.

She pressed her lips into a line and shrugged. "Then I'll be second in line to beat the shit out of him."

That brought an involuntary smile to my mouth. "I don't think I could beat him up."

She laughed. “Not you. Katy. We both know she’ll kick his ass.”

“She’s his sister.”

“And she’s *your* best friend,” she countered. “Don’t forget you have people who love you. And I truly believe Remy is at the top of that list.”

“I hope you’re right,” I admitted, closing my eyes.

“I’m outside if you need anything,” Daniel added before closing the door.

The silence inside the cabin was deafening, almost unbearable. After a few minutes of sitting on the couch, I stood and started pacing. After my first trip around the room, I kicked off my boots and peeled off my socks, wanting to hear the sound of my feet slapping against the hardwood planks.

I was on my fifth rotation around the lower level of the cabin when the front door opened.

Remy stepped through first, and my heart surged. That pure feeling of joy whenever I saw him swept over me, carrying me away for a second.

He smiled back at me, moving towards me as Gabe entered behind him.

Just before he could reach for me, I stepped back and held a hand up to stop him.

“We need to talk.” I was amazed at how calm my voice was since my insides were shaking apart.

Remy froze, his eyes searching my face. A muscle in his jaw popped, and he glanced back at Gabe, exchanging a long look with his father that I couldn’t decipher.

Sighing, Gabe nodded and headed back for the door. He paused when the door was open to look back at me.

“We love you, Skye,” he said softly, his blue eyes sad. “No matter what.”

I wanted to say it back before the door closed between us, but I was too busy staring at Remy and feeling my heart break into a million pieces.

“SKYE, YOU NEED TO LET ME EXPLAIN,” REMY SAID SOFTLY, HOLDING UP HIS hands, surrendering.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I definitely have a lot of questions,” I fired back as soon as the door shut and Gabe was gone.

Remy sank down onto the chair and rubbed his temples. “Can you sit down?”

I folded my arms across my chest. “No, Remy, I don’t want to *sit down*. I want to know what the hell a claiming mark is, and why everyone seems to know about it except for me?”

He looked warily up at me. “A claiming mark is the final way the mate bond is cemented. It’s ... complicated.”

My eyes narrowed. I was getting so sick of that word. “Then un-complicate it, Rem. I’m really over being in the dark all the goddamn time.”

“Fine,” he ground out, a muscle in his jaw ticking. “When true mates bond, the physical bond is the last part of the bond. When mates give themselves to each other, they claim each other. *Mark* each other.”

“Mark each other?” I echoed, wrinkling my nose.

“During the consummation of the physical bond,” Remy finished softly.

It took my brain a second to catch up. “You mean sex?”

He flinched. “Yeah.”

“What am I not understanding here?” A strange sort of unease started gathering in my stomach.

Remy exhaled hard and looked away from me. “Consummating the bond is the last step to sealing the mating bond. It makes the bond almost

completely unbreakable. During ... *it*, mates mark each other.”

“Mark?”

“Bite,” he amended. “It leaves a mark that’s visible to other wolves. It brands the mate as claimed by a mate. Kind of like a wolf version of a wedding band. You see the mark, you know that person is taken. Mated.”

“So, you’re worried about a vampire-ish version of a tattoo messing up our skin?” I sputtered, still confused as hell.

“No,” he insisted vehemently, his head snapping up and his dark eyes boring into me.

It still felt like I was missing a vital piece of this puzzle.

I hadn’t thought it was possible for me to be more humiliated, but I was rapidly finding there were more layers to embarrassment than an onion as another thought struck me.

“Do your parents know?”

He looked away and sighed.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered. “They do. They know that we haven’t ... that we never ...”

“It’s *complicated*.” He raked a hand through his hair in frustration.

“I’m really fucking sick of that word, Remy,” I snapped.

His chest heaved. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want the truth!” I shouted, throwing my arms up in the air. “I want the person who says he loves me, the man I *thought* was my mate, to tell me the truth!”

His eyes flashed dangerously. “I’ve never lied to you. And I’m your mate, Skye. Last month, today, and every single day for the rest of our lives.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “No, you’ve just decided to keep vital information to yourself.”

“Because it doesn’t matter!” he snapped, his hands curling around the arms of the chair. “You’re my mate whether we’ve had sex or not. Our bond isn’t based on that!”

“Is there even a bond?” I challenged. “Because according to the Council, we’re not bonded. So, please, tell me why the hell the first time I hear about a claiming mark or consummating a bond is from my *uncle*.”

He flinched, having the decency to look ashamed. “I should have told you.”

I glared at him, something I never thought I would do. “Yeah, you should have. So, why didn’t you? Why did you let me walk into a room with a man I

hate and people I don't even freaking know to find out?"

"Because once it happens, there's no going back. The bond can be broken, but it's messy."

I still wasn't following. I arched my eyebrows, waiting for him to elaborate.

He exhaled hard through his nose, nostrils flaring and jaw tight. "It would be like ripping a heart out of a body. It would be messy and jagged and brutal, and there's no going back. It's why so few bonded mates break their bond. Once you're fully bonded, trying to undo it is basically suicide."

Ice settled around my heart and that tendril of unease fisted into a knot of worry.

No, something more potent and vile than worry.

Horror.

My mouth went dry, my knees buckling as I staggered back a step. "Do you ... Are you worried that you don't want *us*," I choked on the word, "to be a permanent thing?"

Remy surged to his feet, and I scrambled back until I hit the wall behind me.

"Skye—"

"That's it, isn't it?" I whispered, wondering if he could actually *hear* the sound of my heart shattering between us. "You don't want ... me."

Everything else I had survived, endured, and overcame was nothing when compared to this moment. This would destroy me. This moment here would absolutely decimate whatever I had left in me.

I would take being kidnapped, terrorized and tortured over what was happening right now.

The bond didn't need to be complete for me to feel my heart being torn from my chest.

With a gasp, I slapped a hand over my chest as if that could stop the pain from arcing through me like an electric current.

"Fuck," Remy growled, crossing the distance between us in two long-legged strides. His massive hands came up and cradled my cheeks. "Fuck, *no*. Baby, that's not what I'm saying *at fucking all*."

Shaking, I tried to pull away but he was too strong and with the wall behind me, there was nowhere to go. "Let me go!"

"Not until you listen to me," he demanded, not budging.

I tugged uselessly at his wrists, trying to break free, but there was

absolutely no getting away. His body pressed me against the wall, and I did the only thing I could to escape the moment.

I closed my eyes, squeezing them as hard as I could until a kaleidoscope of colors burst behind my lids.

His hands dropped to my shoulders and gave me a sharp shake.

“Fucking *look* at me, Skye!” he snapped, his tone edging into desperation as he tried to scale the wall I was rapidly building between us.

I did open my eyes then, but he was a watery blur through my tears. “So, my uncle was *right*? This bond between us is just ... It’s *nothing*?”

His dark eyes searched mine. “No, no, no. Babe, I *love* you. I fucking love you, Skye.” His chest heaved. “You’re everything to me.”

“But not enough to be bonded to me forever?” I hissed, anger slowly seeping into the cracks in my heart. “I’m not enough? What is it? Am I too broken? Too damaged?” I shoved at the massive, immovable wall of his chest.

“Would you *listen* to me?” he roared. His hands tightened around my shoulders, almost bruising, and then he let me go suddenly and paced across the room.

I glanced over at the door.

“Don’t even think about it,” he snapped, frustration lacing his bitter tone. “You won’t make it out the door.”

My head swung in his direction, and I swallowed hard.

His hands were *shaking*. Everything about him was tense and hard, practically vibrating. Remy looked every single inch an alpha right now.

And he was also dangerously close to losing control.

I could see his wolf twitching under the surface, begging for release. I could see it because I felt the exact same thing. My own shift was seconds from ripping through me.

“If you leave, I’ll follow you,” he swore. “We’re having this out here one way or another. No more running, remember? You need to listen to me, babe.”

“Don’t call me that!” I snapped furiously. Rage had started to fuse the jagged pieces of my heart back into a mangled wreck. I shoved off the wall and took a defiant step towards the door.

His eyes lit at the challenge, a warning growl rumbling from his chest. “Sit down.”

Meeting his gaze, I lifted my chin in sheer defiance. “No.”

I felt the energy in the room shift, a tangible thing like a bomb going off on the ground below us. Everything suspended in some weird limbo, like waiting for the dust to settle.

I didn't know who felt more betrayed right now—me or my wolf. Either way, we weren't backing down.

His chest rose as he breathed in a sharp breath. A louder, more ominous growl ripped through him, the sound filling the room. His dark eyes flashed ominously, his lips pulling back in a snarl.

Something deeply primal inside of me demanded I yield to my alpha. Fighting the compulsion to take a seat like he freaking ordered was like being pulled apart inside. The wolf in me was ready to submit. The human in me was ready for a fight.

We stared at each other for several long seconds, both of us breathing hard. I could feel pieces of my resolve chipping and splintering away.

Minutes ticked by, neither of us budging until one last shard broke away.

"Fine," I hissed, storming to the couch farthest away from him and throwing myself into it. I angled my body away from him, not wanting to look at his stupid, beautiful face for another minute.

It was childish, but it was the only card I had left to play in my hand.

A sharp scraping noise filled the room as he dragged the armchair over in front of me. He sat in it, his knees brushing mine.

That simple contact sent my pulse galloping. My traitorous body still didn't seem to get the message that we weren't wanted by him.

With a sniff, I lifted my legs and hugged them to my chest so not a single part of my body was touching his. I even curled my toes inward.

Remy sighed. "Please look at me, Skye."

I ground my molars together, stubbornly looking anywhere but at him.

"You owe me that much."

That caught my attention.

My head swung around. "I don't owe you—"

There was no mistaking the triumphant gleam in his eyes.

Made ya look.

I huffed and glared at him. "What?"

Amazingly, his frown melted into a blinding smile as he looked at me and shook his head. "God, I love you."

My eyes narrowed into slits.

"Will you please listen to me?" His tone was considerably softer now,

almost pleading.

“Do I have a choice?” I retorted.

“Skye, I never wanted you to feel trapped by our bond,” he started slowly.

I was going to scream. Hadn’t we been through this? “I never—”

He held up a hand to stop me. “Yes, you did. That first night when you came to the cabin at school? You were worried about not having a choice. You spent your life being told what to do and when to do it. I don’t know everything you’ve been through, but I know enough. I never wanted you to feel trapped or forced again by anything or anyone, and sure as hell not by me.”

Fuming, I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

“And maybe I was scared, too,” he admitted quietly. “Maybe I was scared that one day you would wake up and realize this wasn’t the life you wanted. That I’m not what you wanted.”

Not what I wanted?

Remy Holt was *all* I wanted. The idea that I wouldn’t want him was completely absurd.

He let out a long breath, rubbing the back of his neck. “I knew that if we ... completed the bond that there would be no going back. Not for me, anyway.”

“Who the hell said I would want anything except you?” I whispered, struggling to make sense of what he was saying.

His dark eyes were swirling with a riot of emotions, but the darkest one lingering was fear. “The last few months, I’ve watched you discover the *world*, Skye. That first time I watched you walking into a grocery store? That damn near killed me.”

I flushed and looked down. That wasn’t one of my finer moments. Most seventeen-year-olds had at least made it inside a damn grocery store in their lives, but not me.

I took one step through the sliding glass doors and my eyes about fell out of my head trying to see and catalog every color. I could still remember the stale scent of the air conditioning laced with fruits and vegetables. I had stood there until Remy had coaxed me further inside.

Yet another shining example of how I was a total freak show.

“Every time I watched you find something you loved, or something that excited you, I wondered if I was holding you back.” His confession was

barely audible between us.

Swallowing, he continued, "I've seen bonded mates after their bond was broken. It's like they've lost a part of themselves, even if they wanted to end the bond. It rips you apart. And I thought that if we didn't fully complete the bond, it might be easier for you."

"Easier for *me*?" I repeated dumbly.

He reached out and grabbed one of my hands, clinging to it like a lifeline.

"Easier in case you wanted to go and live your own life," he added. "Without me."

A shudder shook him, rippling through his hands into me. He leaned forward, his warm breath caressing my skin.

"That's why I always stopped us from going farther," he finished. A thumb stroked over the back of my hand. "I wanted to protect you, Skye. I never wanted you to feel trapped in another situation out of your control. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry," I repeated dumbly, trying to organize and understand his rationale.

Slowly he let my hands go and pulled away, still facing me. A foot separated us, but it might have been a canyon. The void hanging between us matched the gaping hole currently in my chest.

I caught my lower lip between my teeth, biting hard enough to draw blood. The coppery tang gave me something to focus on, the pain centering me in some grotesque way.

Pain I understood. Pain I could endure.

"You've asked me to be honest with you," I started slowly. "Every time I did something stupid, you said we needed to *talk* about it. Open and honest. *No more running.*"

He nodded, his movements jerky. He knew where I was going.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me any of this?" I demanded. "If you wanted me to have a choice, why the *hell* haven't you given me all of my options?"

"I should have," he allowed, head bowed. "I should have told you everything."

"You knew I had no idea about bonded mates before I came to your pack."

He flinched, jaw tight. "*Our* pack," he corrected.

Loneliness swamped me. I wasn't sure it was *my* pack anymore or my home. Remy was Blackwater.

And apparently Remy wasn't mine.

"I went into that meeting blind today," I hissed, those feelings of having the rug yanked out from under me welling up all over.

I could see the smug smile on Linden's face. That look of triumph he wore like a freaking badge. He knew something that could call our bond into question and *strengthen* his position amongst the Council.

"I should have told you." He hung his head, defeated. "I never thought they would actually ask you if we had..."

"They all fucking *knew*, Remy!" I spat the words at him, like venom poisoning me from the inside out. "Do you know how stupid I felt when they questioned me about our bond?"

His head ducked lower, his fists clenched on his thighs.

I snorted derisively. "And there I am, looking like an idiot defending us, when they're *right*. We aren't bonded. Not in the eyes of every person here. Not according to pack law."

"Fuck the packs," he snapped. "What matters is us!"

"Is there an us?" I demanded, my tone bordering on slightly hysterical. "Because *this*—" I frantically waved at the space between us, "—doesn't feel like an *us*, Remy."

His teeth ground together as he tipped his head back to look at the ceiling, his throat working. "Skye—"

"You should have seen the look on my uncle's face," I continued, ignoring him. I swallowed the memory, bitter taste flooding my mouth as I recalled the sheer glee on Linden's face. "On all of their faces. They believe him. And they believe that this? You and me? It isn't real."

"You and I both know it's real," he returned heatedly.

"What if they decide it *isn't* real? What if they side with my uncle, and we have to go back? What if tomorrow they decide I have to go back to Long Mesa?"

"I won't let that happen," he replied coldly, ice dripping from his tone. "No fucking way will I let any of them take you."

I slammed a fist into the cushion beside me. "But you opened the door so they *can*! All because you didn't *trust* me!"

"I was wrong, okay?" he yelled back, all restraint gone. "I was scared of losing you, of pushing you too fast, and I fucked up, Skye. Okay? Is that what

you want to hear?”

No, that wasn't what I wanted to hear.

Everything was falling down around us. I was being crushed under the weight of the debris. My past, the future I thought I had, and the present that wasn't anything that I believed.

Resting my elbows on my knees, I dropped my head into my hands and swallowed a sob. “I woke up this morning so sure that it was you and me against the world. But in that room today? It was just *me* against the world because you didn't tell me the truth.” I looked up at him through a haze of tears.

“I know,” he answered softly. “I didn't think this through. I never imagined they would question the validity of our bond or ask to see your mark. I'm sorry, babe. I messed up.”

I could only nod slowly in reply as I tried to sort out what he was saying.

He licked his lips, his eyes darting to the door before landing back on me. “The choice is yours. I won't stop you. If you want to leave, you can.”

“You won't stop me?”

He took a deep, shaky breath. “No. You have a choice, Skye. You always have a choice.” He paused, hesitating. “I'm just hoping you chose me.”

Time leaked by in agonizing silence. Each second was another moment of oily doubt, each minute a fresh wave of hell until I finally had enough of this cruel purgatory.

My legs barely supported me as I pushed to my feet, every muscle shaking as I stood up. I looked down at Remy, wanting like hell to touch him.

To fix this mess.

His dark eyes, so full of hope and despair, looked at me like I had all the answers.

And maybe I did have this one answer.

With a shaking breath, and my heart still in pieces under my feet, I headed for the door.

THE METAL WAS COLD UNDER MY HAND AS I SETTLED MY FINGERS AROUND IT. The air conditioner unit kicked on, the mechanical hum eating up the empty silence between us.

So. Much. Silence.

It was a tangible thing hanging between us, strangling and suffocating all at once.

I could feel Remy's eyes on me as I stood there. I knew he was resisting every single urge to walk across the room and haul me back.

It was a testament to the kind of man he was that he didn't do just that.

He could have. He could have demanded my submission, my compliance, but that wasn't the kind of man he was. I loved him for being the guy who would always give me a choice.

But right now, everything was so twisted, so wrong. Confusion swamped me. All I wanted was to hide in my room and cry my eyes out. To lick my wounds in peace.

My wolf felt so far away now. All the rage and passion that had bonded us these last few months was gone, driven away in a few minutes that left me rudderless and adrift in a sea of complete misery.

She felt the chasm between us, driving us apart. As she had done years before, she was going back into hibernation, letting me chart a course for us as she slipped into the background of my mind, behind the chaos and the heartache.

But somewhere in the heavy sludge of fear and unease, I could feel that thin tie linking me to her.

Linking us to *him*.

Consummated or not, Remy and I were bonded. Our wolves were mates for life, no matter what our human sides decided.

I grabbed onto that tether with everything I had inside of me and held on.

Please, don't make me regret this.

I turned the lock and stepped away from the door.

Remy was already on his feet when I turned around, his eyes dark but hopeful. His tongue came out, licking his lower lip as he watched me.

I held up a hand, my voice cracking with emotion. “No more secrets. Swear it, Remy. Swear on our bond—”

He was across the room and pulling me into his strong embrace before I could finish. His massive arms practically squeezed the air out of my lungs.

“I swear,” he whispered fiercely, his breath hot against my throat. “I fucking swear. It’s you and me forever.”

“Prove it,” I whispered.

He lifted his head, eyes searching me.

No turning back now.

I stepped back, but he wouldn’t let me go. His arms were loose, but firm, around my waist, so I maneuvered the best I could.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it off. The shirt slipped out of my shaking hands, pooling at the floor between us.

Heat flared brilliantly in his eyes. “Skye.”

“I’m yours,” I said softly, pressing a hand over his heart. “I want to be yours in every way.”

His chest rose and fell rapidly, lust flaring brightly in his eyes for a second before he shoved it down. His mouth flattened. “No, Skye. No. We’re not doing this to prove a fucking point to your uncle or the Council.”

I covered his mouth with my hand. “This doesn’t have a thing to do with that asshole or anyone else except you and me. I want this. I want to be with you.” I swallowed around the sudden dryness in my throat, positive he would hear the hammering of my heart.

He dropped his forehead to mine, sharing the air with me. “Baby, are you sure?”

I slid my arms around his neck, pressing my chest against his. My soft curves yielded to the hard planes of him. “I choose *you*, Remy. Now, yesterday, tomorrow, and every single day I’m alive.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest. A warning and a promise. “If we do

this, I'm never letting you go, Skye. *Ever*. Are you sure?"

"Even without the bond, you're the guy who taught me how to love, Remy," I told him, needing him to believe what I was saying. "You're the one who taught me how to *live* when I didn't know how. The only world I want to discover is the one that you're in with me."

He raised a hand from my waist, tracing the laced edge of my bra. He licked his lips slowly, his throat moving as he swallowed roughly before his eyes met mine.

"You're sure?" he pressed, his expression bordering on feral. Whatever restraint he had left was slipping.

I inhaled deeply, the rise of my chest making the pads of his fingers brush against my skin. That simple graze of skin against skin set my body on fire. "I'm sure."

He moved closer, barely a couple of inches, but enough so that I could feel the inferno of his body near mine. The hand not currently exploring my bra splayed wide over my naked stomach. The flesh there trembled under his touch.

"I need you to be completely positive that this is what you want, Skye," he whispered, dipping his head to kiss the underside of my jaw.

One last chance to back out. One final check to make sure I was giving consent.

I lifted my hands and framed his face. "All I want is *you*. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Another low growl vibrated through his chest, his lips curled into a smile that promised all sorts of things that had a low throb starting between my thighs. I pressed them together, trying to relieve the ache.

His eyes lit like twin flames as he caught the subtle movement of my legs. The hand on my stomach dropped lower.

Lower.

My head fell back with a sharp gasp as his knuckles dragged against the zipper of my jeans. The friction so unsatisfyingly soft, but so incredibly hot, that my knees went freaking weak. I had to grab his shoulders to steady myself.

His teeth caught the tender place where my shoulder curved into my neck. The usually playful nips he often delivered had a little more sting this time, his teeth scraping against the skin with a promise of a lot more.

"You're mine," he swore, kissing the flesh he just assaulted.

Mine.

I'd had that word thrown at me more than I cared to remember. My life was never *mine*. My body was never *mine*. People like my uncle and Cassian liked to remind me as often as possible that I belonged to them. I was an object to be owned and used. I spent seventeen years of that word being my prison.

And now that same word was the key that opened the lock of my cage and set me free.

"Yours," I agreed. I curled a hand around the nape of his neck, holding him to me.

"*Mine*," I vowed, settling my other hand against the steady thump of his heartbeat. I could feel the delicious heat of his skin through the thin cotton of his shirt.

His lips curved into a devastating grin. "Yours," he agreed, rocking his hips into me.

My head dropped back with a groan, every nerve ending alight with anticipation and awareness.

He exhaled slowly. "I love you." His lips blazed a scorching trail across my collarbone.

"Then show me." I arched a brow, a teasing dare I knew would have an irreparable effect on the alpha in front of me.

His grin turned absolutely feral, more wolf than human, a second before his mouth claimed mine.

The kiss was hot and drugging, pulling me under and twisting my body in an undercurrent of sensations that had me gasping for air. My fingers curled into his shirt, fisting the material so I had something to hold on to before my legs gave out.

His tongue slid into my mouth, invading and conquering. His kiss demanded everything I had to offer and more, but I was happy to surrender it. Happy to give him anything I had left to offer.

A hand slid around me, his massive palm splaying across on the small of my back as I arched into him. The prominent ridge in his jeans pressed against me. I rubbed myself against him, needing relief from the heady pulse that thundered through my body.

His hand slid lower, drifting over the curve of my ass and squeezing. He released a low, appreciative male groan, but kept going until he caught the back of my leg and lifted. The change in angle pressed my center against

him, and now I whimpered.

He lifted me effortlessly into his arms, easily absorbing my weight with his strength. My legs came around him, twisting around his body as I tried to get closer still.

Our teeth clashed together in a frenzied kiss as he started moving, walking. He carried me up the stairs and to our room, kicking the door shut with his foot. Seconds later, I gasped as he tossed me on the bed.

I landed sprawled on my back and managed to push up onto my elbows to see Remy reach behind his neck and fist his shirt in one hand, pulling it over his head and dropping it to the floor by the bed.

Shit.

It took me a second to remember to breathe again as my eyes roved over all the planes and dips in his torso, every muscle sculpted out of granite.

He was, in a word, perfection.

And he was, in another word, mine.

I leaned forward, snagging one of the belt loops on his jeans and tugged him closer. With a teasing grin, he knocked my hand away. He reached down, deftly undoing the button and zipper of my jeans before I could blink. A second later, he peeled them from my body, tossing them over his shoulder.

My breath caught as he stared down at me, his eyes ravenous and his tongue darting out to wet his lips. I could hear the whooshing of my blood as it roared in my ears, my breaths coming hard and heavy.

His dark gaze dragged slowly up my body before latching onto my eyes. They were twin flames of want and need trying to decide what part of me to devour first.

For a heartbeat, I was almost nervous and embarrassed. But there was no mistaking the love in his eyes, the reverence in his hands when he reached out and traced the feminine arch of my hip.

He slowly lowered himself to his knees beside the bed, using his hands to drag the thin material of my panties down my legs.

I held my breath for a second. In the stillness of the room, I could hear the rustle of lace and satin as my underwear hit the floor.

Remy nudged my legs apart, pressing his mouth to the inside of my thigh before draping it over one shoulder. He moved to the other leg, kissing his way up in a sinfully delicious trail that made my hips jerk.

I didn't know which one of us groaned louder when his tongue licked up

my center. I gasped, my hands fisting in the fabric of the bedspread as my back arched.

“Your taste addictive as hell.” His throaty words were a direct line to the throbbing pull between my legs. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to squeeze my legs shut or open them as wide as I could.

I reached for him, and he threaded my fingers with his, using his other hand to trace the inside of my thigh as his tongue made another pass, licking me from my entrance to my clit. His lips suckled the needy bundle of nerves into his mouth gently as he worked a finger inside of me.

Mindless with need, I moved my hips, finding the natural rhythm of his finger pumping into me as his lips and tongue teased my clit.

I gasped his name, my hand tangling in his hair as he added a second finger. He slowly worked me up, the peak of my orgasm just hanging out of reach. The second I was ready to topple over the edge, he changed the speed of his mouth or the angle of his fingers, finding new places to torment. I lost count of how many times he brought me to the edge, only to drag me back.

“Rem,” I finally whimpered, looking down at him.

He looked up at me, his dark eyes hooded as he stared back at me from between my legs before dropping them back to what he was doing.

His fingers rubbed a spot inside of me that had stars bursting behind my eyelids. When his teeth grazed my clit a second before he sucked it hard into his mouth, I shattered apart with a strangled cry.

My body slowly floated back down to earth as he kissed his way up my body, taking the time to worship every inch of skin he found before claiming my lips in a bruising kiss.

A hand palmed my breast, his fingers twisting and teasing the peak until I arched against him, rubbing myself against the heavy bulge in his jeans.

“I need you,” I whispered, shuddering as he lowered his head to suck a nipple into his mouth.

He grinned against my skin, climbing off the bed and standing up.

I pushed myself up onto my elbows as I scooted back, not willing to miss the show as he stripped out of his jeans and boxer briefs, pausing only to toe off his boots and socks, before he was spreading my legs apart and kneeling between them.

He braced his hands on either side of my head, lowering his mouth to mine as his hips settled between my thighs, the length of him nudging my entrance.

He reached for my hands, tangling them in his and bringing them on either side of my head as he kissed me slowly, thoroughly. I hooked a leg around his waist, arching my back.

He broke the kiss with a throaty groan that made me grin.

His dark eyes met mine. "I love you."

"I know," I whispered back, emotion clogging my throat. "I love you."

Another smile that warmed my heart. "I know."

He kissed me again, squeezing my hands as he flexed his hips forward, sliding into me in one powerful thrust.

I gasped into his mouth, crying out at the sudden rush of pain mixed with pleasure. Everything in my being throbbed, pulsing in time with the galloping of my heart.

Remy paused giving me time to adjust as he kissed my jaw, my cheeks, my eyelids.

After a few seconds, I rocked my hips into his once, experimentally, and my eyes nearly rolled back in my head at the sensation.

"More," I murmured, needing him to move.

He lifted his hips, almost pulling out of me before driving back in with a groan. He repeated that over and over, thrusting and retreating, building in speed and intensity until his hips were slamming into mine.

I pulled my hands free, needing to touch him. My arms circled his shoulders, pulling him down on top of me as his hips snapped against mine. He slipped one arm under my back, the other hand settling between us and circling my clit. My hips jerked in response, a low moan clawing from my chest.

The need inside of me started to build, rapidly ascending as I scoured his back with my nails. It was more than just a frantic race for relief, though. I could feel my wolf, feel *his* wolf, driving us faster and harder.

His mouth found the curve where my neck met my shoulder, and he dragged the flat of his tongue across the skin before nipping at it. He repeated the action, but this time, bit down harder, his teeth piercing my skin.

The wolf in me howled and I turned, lifting my head enough to bite him back, locking us in a circular embrace that rippled through us. My teeth sinking into his hard skin until I tasted the coppery tang of blood on my lips. The taste of him filled my mouth, awakening the animal in me. I clawed at his back, raising my hips to meet each of his thrusts even as my legs hooked around his lower back, frantic to reach an epic conclusion.

His hips pounded into me once, twice, a third time, and then I flew apart. He followed me over the edge with a roar, his teeth again biting down harder than before. The spike of pain rolled into the orgasm ripping through me until I thought I would never come back down.

Which was fine by me; I was happy to live amongst the moon and stars if Remy was with me.

I WAS NEVER LEAVING THIS BED.

“We need to get up soon,” Remy told me, his voice full of regret as his lips trailed kisses across my bare shoulders. His hand caressed the curve of my ass, coasting over the dips and swells absently. I wasn’t even sure if he knew he was doing it.

I glanced over my shoulder at him from where I lay on my stomach in our bed. “Your words say one thing, but your mouth and hand seem to have other ideas,” I laughed.

The hand in question lazily exploring my backside dipped lower, teasing the seam of my entrance before one finger slipped inside of me.

I sighed, my eyes closing as I moaned softly into the pillow.

The slight twinge of discomfort was quickly washed away by a cascade of want and need, my legs falling open wantonly to give him better access.

Our first time together had been fast, driven by our wolves to complete the bond. I had damn near blacked out after the orgasm to end all orgasms tore through me. Remy had gently cleaned me up, his soft strokes and mouth pressing kisses against my damp skin until I was a writhing mess on the bed.

The second time, Remy had taken his time, dragging out my pleasure until I was pretty sure the whole resort heard me begging and moaning for release.

The third time had been after we had fallen asleep. He had woken me up with his head between my legs, his mouth coaxing a rolling orgasm out of me before I was barely awake. I returned the favor an hour later, waking him up with my mouth.

Exhausted, we had fallen asleep, curled around each other until morning, where my body was more than ready to go a fifth round. Exhaustion be damned. I could sleep later.

I bit the corner of the pillow as he added a second finger, curling them to hit some magic spot in my body that had my vision blurring every time he did it. It only took minutes before my body splintered apart again.

Remy grinned as he lay back down beside me, lifting his hand to his lips to lick them clean.

My breath caught, the sight indescribably erotic and sending fresh waves of want pulsing through me even as my stomach growled.

Screw food. I could feast on my mate.

He chuckled, a hand smoothing my hair away from my face. “You need to eat.” His stomach growled. “Okay, we both need to eat.”

“What time is it?” I mumbled, not wanting to roll over and look at the clock.

“Almost eight,” he replied.

We had been in bed for almost eighteen hours, only getting up to use the bathroom and grab a drink. That had to be some kind of record.

I rolled over onto my back, grinning impishly when his eyes dropped to my bare chest.

“I think we should stay here all day,” I said, reaching up to touch his face.

I wanted to stay in this moment forever. I was happy. More than happy. My wolf was at peace, and I felt closer than ever to Remy.

He kissed the side of my breast, a finger gently tracing the mark he had left on me last night. I winced as a small thread of pain pierced the happy fog I was in.

The bite was healing, but, judging by what I had glimpsed in the mirror in the middle of the night when I went to the bathroom, I would have a hell of a scar. I was definitely a claimed mate.

My eyes studied the mark I had left when I bit into the hard muscle of his shoulder. It wasn't as deep as the one he had given me, but it was still there.

Remy's lips found mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth like he owned it. Which, he did. Completely.

“I think you should stay in bed,” he said softly, his eyes warm and full of love. “I have a meeting I can't miss this morning. You can be lazy for both of us.”

“It's more fun when you're in the bed with me,” I said with a huff as he

sat up.

He stood up, unabashedly naked as he headed for the bathroom.

“I could always join you,” I offered, raising up onto my elbows.

He glanced over his shoulder with a chuckle. “Yeah, that’s a good way to make sure I’m late. I have ten minutes to get ready.”

I flopped back against the mattress and stared up at the ceiling. “Fine. I guess I’ll take care of myself.” I splayed a hand low on my belly, making the intent clear.

Two hands grabbed my ankles, jerking me down the bed until my butt reached the edge. I squeaked in surprise as Remy stepped between my spread knees and cupped me between the legs boldly, his thumb easily sliding through my slick folds and tracing my opening before stroking the side of my clit with unerring accuracy.

I bit my lip to suppress a groan as he did exactly what I had hoped my little threat would entice him to do.

“You don’t fight fair,” he said, shaking his head before pulling his hand back and heading into the bathroom.

I groaned, frustrated in more ways than one. “You suck!” I called.

His head appeared in the doorway, his eyes glittering with mirth as he smiled. “Yeah, but you like it when I do.”

My jaw dropped open a second before a giggle slipped past my lips. I rolled onto my side as I laughed while he shut the door and turned on the shower.

I was still being lazy, laying in bed and studying dust motes floating in the air when the door opened and he appeared dressed with wet hair. He grabbed his phone from the dresser and slipped it into his back pocket before coming back and sitting on the edge of the bed beside me.

“I’ll order you something to eat before I leave,” he said, his fingers sliding through my hair.

“Waffles?” I asked hopefully, wanting carbs and sugar. I adored the way butter and syrup would pool in the tiny pools the waffles provided.

“And extra bacon,” he added with a knowing smile. He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “If you want to come to the afternoon meeting, they’ll be doing a group session. Let me know and I can come back and get you.”

“I’ll see what Tate’s doing,” I replied. “I need to call my mom at some point today. We haven’t really talked since I got here.”

“Sounds good,” he agreed. “Call me if you need me.”

I blinked at him slowly. “I always need you.”

His gaze heated. “Same.” He kissed me again, his mouth slanting over mine. The kiss ended too soon and he was getting up and leaving the room.

I waited until I heard his footsteps on the stairs before getting up and heading into the bathroom myself. I flipped on the light and studied myself in the mirror.

“Whoa,” I murmured, bracing my hands on the counter and leaning forward to inspect my seriously messy hair. I tried to finger comb it into submission, but it was a disaster from Remy’s fingers and rolling around in bed.

My gaze dropped to the bite on my shoulder. I winced as I touched it, gently probing the bruised and red skin. The muscle under it ached where Remy’s canines had pierced muscle as well as flesh.

I smiled at myself, proud of the mark and what it represented.

I took my time showering, letting the hot water ease some of the soreness from my body before I stepped out in a cloud of steam thick enough to hide the door.

My skin chilled as I stepped into our bedroom, and went to the dresser to decide what to wear.

Jeans were an easy choice, but I hesitated before selecting a white scooped-neck tank top. I pulled on my underwear, struggled to get the jeans on over my damp skin and finally pulled on the top.

The low cut perfectly showed off the claiming mark.

I smirked at myself in the mirror, already imagining my uncle’s face when he saw he was wrong.

Fuck you, Linden.

I braided my wet hair to the side, making sure there was nothing blocking the view of the bite mark. The silver chain of my necklace rubbed the broken skin, but I relished the reminder that the mark existed.



“WHOA,” Tate said, eyes huge as I stepped out of the cabin and met her outside.

I had decided after eating and trying to call Mom, who didn’t answer, to go to the afternoon session. I wasn’t hiding from Linden or anyone else. I had

texted Remy to let him know I would be there, but he was stuck in meetings.

“I take it things with Remy went well?” Tate’s eyes sparkled as a smile spread across her face.

I couldn’t stop my grin. “Yeah. We’re good.”

She bit down on her lip, trying to hide her spreading grin. “Like ... how good?”

I smirked, meeting her gaze so the meaning was clear. “Freaking amazing.”

“Fabulous,” she remarked with a giggle, her gaze focused on the mark on my shoulder. “Does that hurt? It looks like it hurts.”

I shrugged. “Not really.”

She smiled, impressed. “Damn, girl. You realize that the second we walk inside that meeting, everyone is going to know what you two were up to last night?”

My smile grew. “Exactly.”

She gave a low whistle as she fell into step with me. “You’re a badass, Skye Markham.”

A few people were on the main path heading to the lodge. I kept my head up, ignoring the whispers and stares as people saw the healing mark engraved in my neck. But it seemed that as quickly as they registered the bite mark, their eyes immediately looked away.

“You’re claimed,” Tate murmured to me. “You’re a bonded mate; it can be viewed as a challenge to Remy if they look at you for too long.”

Tate and I stepped through the open front doors, and into a crowd of Alphas.

It was hard not to react to conversations dying off as eyes snapped to us. I scanned the crowd, smiling when I saw Remy and Dante talking to Griffin.

Remy’s eyes lifted, his wolf searching for mine before he even realized what he was doing. Our gazes connected, and I saw the flare of surprised appreciation flash across his face. He grinned when he saw me, stepping around Dante to cross the room to me.

All the stares and whispers faded into white noise as soon as he pulled me into his arms, kissing me soundly in front of a room of Alphas.

“You should’ve texted me. I would have come and gotten you,” he told me softly, his look serious as he pulled back. “I don’t want you wandering around here by yourself with Linden and Preston around.”

“I hardly see myself as a threat to my own niece,” Linden drawled beside

us.

We turned to see Linden hovering beside us.

His green eyes studied the mark on my neck, the lines around his mouth tightening.

Remy angled his body in front of mine, making sure to put himself between Linden and me.

“What do you want, Markham?” he demanded.

We had the attention of everyone now, all conversations ceasing to study us with open fascination and interest.

I shifted my weight forward, unable to stop myself from touching Remy’s back.

Linden changed his focus to Remy. “Forcibly marking my niece in a pathetic attempt to stake your claim on her is childish. Like a dog pissing on its favorite toy. The Council will see through this.”

“Forcibly?” I echoed, tilted my head to the side. “I can assure you that I was a willing participant all,” I pretended to count on my fingers, “five times.”

A ripple of nervous laughter swept the room, and Linden actually flushed. Remy’s massive shoulders shook as he tried holding in his own chuckles.

“The only people who ever forced me to do anything came from *your* pack,” I added.

A new wave of whispers swirled around the room, but this time the stares were focused on my uncle along with several suspicious looks.

Linden glared at me before cutting his eyes to Remy. “She speaks for you, alpha?”

Remy’s lips curved into a smirk as he stepped back so we were side by side. He folded his muscular arms across his broad chest.

He was an alpha—*my alpha*—but he was showing Linden, and all of the men in the room that we were equals in his eyes.

“Skye is my mate. She absolutely speaks for me.”

A loud gong signaled the start of the afternoon session, and people began heading for the doors until it was just the three of us standing outside the room. Dante and Tate had hesitated by the doors for a second before Remy gave them a dismissive nod.

Linden’s eyes were full of venom. “I suppose you’re pleased with yourself, Skye.”

My fingers floated up to touch the scarring flesh. “You said it yourself,

Uncle,” I started, my tone biting, “a bond isn’t recognized by Pack Law until it’s consummated. I’m just playing by your rules.”

His lips curled into a snarl. “My dear girl, you have no idea what game you’re playing or what the rules are. But I look forward to educating you.”

“Watch yourself,” Remy said softly, his tone deceptively calm. “Skye’s my mate. If you threaten her, you threaten me *and* my pack, including our allies. That’s a fight you can’t win, Markham, and we both know it.”

Linden’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see about that, boy.” He spun and stormed into the meeting room.

Remy sighed and turned to face me. “That was exciting,” he muttered. “You definitely got the attention of every Alpha here.”

I stepped closer to him, sliding my arms up and around his neck. “That was kind of the point.”

He raised his brows, his hands settling on my hips.

“Linden needs to know he isn’t controlling this,” I explained. “I’m tired of letting him think he has all the power here.”

“I get that,” he replied, “but don’t underestimate your uncle. I’ve watched him at the Summit for years. He’s dangerous.”

“He’s a monster,” I retorted.

“All the more reason to tread lightly,” Remy advised. “He’s planning something, I can feel it.”

That made me pause. Remy was right; Linden wouldn’t let something like me being claimed by Remy stop him from getting what he wanted. My uncle was many things, but he was also smart and manipulative.

“We should get in there,” I said.

Remy nodded, taking my hand and leading me into the room as the doors started to close. He left me in the gallery with Tate and Daniel. I slipped into the seat between them as the meeting began.

“Damn,” Daniel whispered, eyeing me as Remy headed towards the front of the room where Gabe waited.

Gabe looked back, flashing me a big smile before turning his attention to an Alpha complaining about boundary lines.

“Does that hurt?”

I bared my teeth at Daniel when he moved to touch the mark.

He held up his hands innocently. “Sorry.” His innocence melted into a shameless smirk that made me think he acted more like Sam and Dax than someone who was a few years older than I was.

Tate leaned around me with a frown. “No touching the newly bonded mate, idiot.”

Daniel rolled his eyes as Vincent stood up to speak on behalf of the Council.

“We will look into these boundary disputes, Alpha.” He cleared his throat, his gaze moving around the room before landing squarely on ... Linden.

I sat up, my gaze narrowed.

“Is there any other business to be added?” Vincent asked.

Linden stood up. “There is. If the Council will permit me, I must speak up on behalf of Alpha Damien and the Norwood pack.”

“And where is Alpha Damien?” Vincent had mastered the art of looking simultaneously bored and curious.

“Retrieving two pack members from the airport who felt the need to testify,” Linden explained calmly, turning to address the room. “My brothers, it is no secret that I have made my grievances known with the Blackwater pack, but I must further impress upon you how long their reach is. It would seem that their allies follow the same vile, reprehensible ways.”

“Someone was hitting a thesaurus when he practiced this speech,” Daniel muttered beside me, but even he was leaning forward with interest.

“Explain your words, Alpha,” Vincent said, his voice booming.

“Females are becoming more endangered by the day,” Linden went on, causing several heads to nod in agreement. “I have lost *four* from my own pack this year. A pair of mates from Norwood lost their only daughter years ago. Stolen from them by an Alpha. They feared speaking out against him as he is closely aligned with Blackwater.”

The side doors opened and Damien entered first, followed by a smaller man and woman.

A few scattered conversations started around us, but it was the gasp immediately to my right that caught my attention. Across the room, Gabe and Luke were getting to their feet.

Tate’s face was ashen as she stared at the newcomers.

“Tate?” I reached for her hand.

Damien stepped up beside Linden. “This is Grant and Karen Brandon,” he said, his voice rising above the confusion. “Their daughter, Tatum, was kidnapped at age seven by the Brooks Ridge Alpha. We demand justice for them, and all the daughters these two packs have stolen.”

THERE WAS A SECOND OF SILENCE, AND THEN A ROAR THAT SHOOK ME TO MY core as Luke shoved past Gabe and launched himself across the room. Papers, tables, and chairs all became flying debris as he ripped through the room to get to his target.

A cry tore from Tate's lips, and she was on her feet as well as the room exploded into chaos.

Luke managed to make it to the other side of the room where he shoved Damien and Linden apart before settling his hands around Grant Brandon's throat and lifting the smaller man into the air. Karen shrieked, scrambling backwards so fast she fell flat on her ass.

"Alpha Lucas! Control yourself!" Vincent was shouting into the pandemonium, and no one was paying him any attention as Gabe struggled to push through the Alphas, Remy and Dante flanking him.

Several Alphas grabbed a hold of Luke, prying his hands off of Grant finger by finger. Damien snarled, shoved at the wall of Luke's immovable chest.

Across the room, Linden's eyes met mine.

And he smiled at me.

"Take him into custody!" Vincent shouted, thrusting a finger at Luke, who was being restrained by no less than five Alphas.

Gabe, Remy, and Dante were currently being held back by the rest of the room, keeping them from helping Luke.

"No!" Tate started for her father, but Daniel and I quickly grabbed her.

"Tate, stop!" I hissed, my fingers digging into her arm as I held her back.

No good would come from her joining the fray. We needed a plan. We needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

She turned, her hair flying in her face. “They’re lying!”

“I know,” I said. “But we can’t do anything right now, and if your dad sees you with them, he’ll shift and lose it.”

Luke was finally starting to stop struggling against the men that held him.

“Remove the Brooks Ridge Alpha,” Vincent ordered. “Lock him in the cells until we hear more on this matter.”

“Oh, God,” Tate gasped, shaking her head as Luke was pulled to his feet and dragged out of the room.

I met Remy’s gaze across the room. He was just as stunned as I was by this, and definitely as furious. His entire body was tense, pulled tight like the over extended string of a bow, ready to snap at a moment’s notice.

“Find your seats or we will clear the room!” Vincent’s voice boomed across the room. Someone had clearly turned his microphone all the way up. The sharp screech of feedback made me wince.

I sat down, pulling Tate down with me.

“Skye, I need to get to my dad,” she hissed, perched on the edge of her seat.

“And we need to figure out what the hell they’re trying to pull,” I countered firmly.

Tears filled her hazel eyes, but she nodded and focused her attention back on the room.

“Mr. Brandon, do you require medical attention?” Vincent asked as the room settled and people went back to their seats.

Dante was the last one to sit down, his neck craned to look back at Tate to make sure she was okay.

Grant cleared his throat, gingerly rubbing the already bruising skin as his wife simpered on his arm.

“I believe I will be all right, Alpha,” he called, his voice raspy. “I simply wish to tell the Council, and these Alphas, what this man has done to my family. I cannot allow another family to be ripped apart the way ours was.”

“You claim that Lucas Davis, Alpha of the Brooks Ridge pack in Alaska kidnapped your daughter?” Vincent clarified.

Tate’s hand squeezed mine as her body shook with rage and fear.

Grant nodded, his head down. “I am embarrassed I was unable to protect my daughter, but he was an Alpha who made it known that if I spoke against

him, he and his friends would kill my wife and I, as well as our daughter.”

“Liar!” Tate yelled, getting to her feet.

Aw, shit.

I moved to grab her, but she was already ducking under the rope that separated the gallery from the rest of the room.

“You tried *selling* me to the highest bidder!” Tate raged. Across the room, Dante stood up and started making his way to her. “I was a child, and you only cared about making as much money off of me as you could.”

Karen let out a low wail, leaning heavily against her husband.

“You were a small girl,” Grant said sadly. “I can only imagine the lies they filled your head with.”

“You son of a—” she broke off as Dante reached her side, pulling her against him and whispering something in her ear.

“Please, sir.” Karen turned to the Council and fell to her knees.

Actually dropped to her fucking knees.

“We have lost so much time with our beloved daughter.” Karen’s voice shook with emotion as she spoke, and, if I didn’t know the whole story of Tate’s childhood, I might have believed her.

But I did know.

Tate had explained, in detail, how her parents never wanted a kid. When they had her, all they saw was a lottery ticket. A beautiful baby girl they could sell to the highest bidder in a world where girls were in short supply. They tricked countless shifters into believing they were buying a child bride until they attempted to sell her to Luke.

It had been a trap. Luke, Gabe, and several other shifters had been working to dismantle the illegal selling of shifter females and saved Tate. Luke had brought her home and raised her as his daughter.

Luke had saved Tate from these vile people, who were now spinning lies that supported Norwood and Long Mesa, our enemies. No way was that a coincidence.

“She is still a minor by Pack Law,” Grant added, kneeling beside his wife with his head bowed in deference to the Council. “We humbly ask the Council to return her to our custody.”

“Only by a few months,” Gabe spoke up, on his feet. “Luke Davis saved Tate when she was a child from parents who were trying to sell her, capitalizing on the fact that she was female.”

Vincent held up a hand. “Were the proper adoption documents filed? Is

there a transfer of custody to clear this up?”

Gabe’s hard gaze turned glacial as he glared at the Brandon’s. “No. They turned and ran, abandoning their daughter. Luke raised her as his own.”

“We were threatened!” Karen argued shrilly. “I demand—”

Vincent stood so fast his chair fell over. “You forget your place, woman.”

Everything in me flinched at his tone. He was pissed off less because she was questioning him and more because she was a woman. I had no love lost for Karen, but Vincent was clearly in the ‘females should be seen and not heard’ camp.

Which meant he likely wasn’t on our side.

Karen dropped low, her forehead to the floor.

I sucked in a sharp breath, looking away before I actually growled.

“Easy,” Daniel murmured beside me.

“Are there any other witnesses that can verify your claims, Alpha?” Vincent drolled, actually looking a little on the bored side.

Gabe’s jaw flexed. “Not here. They can be contacted for confirmation.”

“You may submit their information to the Council and we will investigate,” Vincent replied. “For the interim, the girl is a minor and will return to the custody of her birth parents and their Alpha.”

“No,” I whispered, starting to push to my feet.

Daniel clamped a hand around my wrist and kept me down.

“I’m not going anywhere with them,” Tate said, her voice shaking as she backed away. Dante pulled her behind him.

Vincent’s gaze narrowed with interest. “You will release her, Dante. Your pack has no valid claim until we can confirm the ... *story*.”

“Not a chance in hell,” Dante growled.

“We can always add you to the holding cell your Alpha is in,” Vincent snapped.

My breath caught as Remy stood up and walked to Dante. He put a hand on Tate’s shoulder, and lowered his head to speak to them.

It was clear Dante wasn’t having it, but Tate was on board with whatever Remy was saying. She nodded and took a step away from Dante, but he wasn’t letting her go.

“Very well,” Vincent said, sighing. “Take him into custody.”

Three men moved from where they stood against the wall, intending to forcibly remove Dante.

“No,” Tate said, pulling away from Dante and Remy. “I’ll go with them.”

I held my breath as Tate crossed the room, weaving between tables and chairs with her head held high. She stopped a few feet from Karen.

“I hate you.”

She said the words softly, but her voice carried in the silence. She moved around them and stalked out the side door, not waiting to see if her newfound parents followed.

Karen and Grant exchanged a long look and headed after Tate, followed by Damien and finally Linden. Gabe had joined Remy and Dante, along with Griffin and Nero. They were trying to get a still furious Dante out of the room, but at least the guards had backed off.

“I need to get out there,” I said as Vincent moved on to the next order of business.

Daniel nodded, getting up behind me. I grabbed the small purse Tate had left in her seat and stood. We moved silently through the rows of people until we made it to the back doors.

“This way,” Daniel said, jerking his head to the side.

We hurried out the side door to see Dante shove Nero to the ground as Tate kept walking away between Grant and Karen, Linden and Damien walking slower behind them towards the opposite side of the resort our cabins were.

“Get off me!” he roared, moving to charge through the line of Alphas. “Tate!”

Tate hesitated, yards away, and turned. Damien reached out and grabbed her wrist to physically pull her along. Tate tried jerking out of his hold, but Damien held fast.

Which made Dante even crazier.

“Shit,” Daniel muttered, jogging away from me to help Remy and Gabe hold Dante back.

I glanced down at the purse in my hand.

“Wait!” I yelled, taking off for Tate and the others.

“Skye!”

Remy’s sharp voice stopped me. I turned and looked at him, begging him to trust me.

“Give me a sec,” I said softly.

He winced as Dante tried to jerk away before giving me a short nod.

I had to run to catch up to Tate and the others.

“You left this,” I said when I caught up, thrusting the purse at Tate.

Her hazel eyes were glazed with tears as she took the purse. “Skye—”

“We need to go,” Damien said. I followed the line of his arm down to where his fist was curled around Tate’s wrist. That was going to bruise.

“Give my niece a moment,” Linden ordered quietly.

Damien glared at him, but didn’t stop me from moving closer.

“Stop him before he gets arrested, too,” Tate pleaded, her voice breaking. “I’m fine. I’ll be okay until this gets sorted out.”

“We’ll keep Dante with us,” I promised, reaching out to hug Tate.

Damien jerked her away from me at the last second.

Tate hissed a sharp breath, flinching at the sudden pain. Her parents didn’t seem to give a single shit that their daughter was being manhandled. If anything, they looked completely disinterested in what was happening.

“If you wish to visit Tate, you can,” Linden told me, his voice smooth and cold as ice. “Of course you will have to come to our cabins to do so. And you’ll need to do so alone.”

“No,” Tate argued, but she broke off, nearly going to her knees as Damien tightened his already brutal hold.

“Don’t hurt her,” I snapped, barely restraining my wolf.

Damien smiled coldly, and it was easy to see where Trace got his cruelty from. His grip tightened once more in defiance of my order, and Tate let out a soft whimper that made my chest ache.

“I’m taking my new charge to our cabin,” he announced. “Trace is looking forward to meeting his new packmate.”

“I told you,” Linden said, grinning, as he walked backwards away from me, “you have no idea what the rules of this game are, sweetheart. If you want to see your friend, you’re welcome at our cabins any time, as long as you come alone.”

DANTE NEARLY RIPPED THE FRONT DOOR OFF ITS HINGES AS HE WAS FORCED inside. I was the last one in and closed the door behind us. I leaned against it, trying to wrap my head around what had just happened and stay out of the way.

“Calm down!” Gabe ordered, shoving Dante into a chair.

The chair rocked back, and I thought it would topple over, before Dante swung forward, planting his feet on the ground as he started to get back up.

“Listen to him, man,” Nero urged, clapping a hand on Dante’s shoulder. Daniel and Griffin hovered behind him, ready to jump in again if Dante made a break for it.

Remy stood in front of him. “This isn’t helping Tate or Luke. Get yourself together so we can make a plan.”

I hovered by the door, not sure if I should say anything. Then again, I was with Dante; I wanted Tate away from those people *now*.

“Would you be so fucking calm if Skye was there?” Dante seethed through clenched teeth. “You saw a fucking memory and took off ready to kill someone. Imagine seeing her hauled out of a room by her uncle.”

Remy sighed and shook his head. “I would probably do the same thing you are, but you would stop me from making a mistake the same way you stopped me in the woods. You need to be smart about this.”

I stepped up beside Remy, lightly touching the inside of his wrist as I spoke to Dante. “She said to tell you she’s fine. She’s okay while you get things sorted out. So, let’s sort it out.”

He bowed his head and released a long breath. Jaw tight, he gave a short

nod.

“You said there were witnesses who were part of the group that rescued Tate, right?” Griffin asked Gabe.

“Yeah.” Gabe nodded.

“We need to call them. Hell, I’ll send my plane to get them here if we need to,” Griffin replied.

“You good if we go make some arrangements?” Gabe stared hard at Dante.

Dante nodded, jaw clenched.

Gabe headed to the back of the house with Nero and Griffin.

“Did she say anything else?” Dante asked, the pain in his eyes almost too much to bear. This was wrecking him.

I slowly sat down on the coffee table across from him. “No, but ...” I sighed. “There might be a way to get in to see her.”

“How?” Dante leaned forward.

I kept my gaze on Dante, and definitely *not* on Remy, as I spoke. “My uncle said I could come visit her.”

“Absolutely not,” Remy snapped, his hand landing on my shoulder.

Daniel frowned behind Dante. “That seems like a monumentally bad idea.”

I turned and looked up at Remy. “Tate’s on her own. I can go to her—”

“Not fucking happening,” he cut me off, eyes flashing dangerously.

Dante heaved out a long sigh. “He’s right, Skye. Sending you into the lion’s den to join Tate is a bad plan.”

“We can’t leave her there alone,” I said softly, knowing in my heart it was the right call. “Besides, I’m only going on the other side of the lake where their cabins are, not another state.”

Remy’s jaw clenched. “Can I talk to you? Outside?”

“Remy—”

“Now, Skye,” he bit off, turning and stalking towards the front door and throwing it open.

I winced as the door slammed against the wall, and wondered if Gabe would be billed for a new door before the day was done.

“Think he’s mad?” Daniel asked, rubbing his jaw with a sigh. “He’s probably mad.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Shut up.”

“Whatever,” Daniel muttered. “I’m assuming the wet bar isn’t for show? I

need a drink. Hell, you definitely need a drink, man,” he said to Dante as he walked by.

I left Daniel to pour himself and Dante something alcoholic while I followed Remy outside and closed the door gently.

His back was to me as I stepped off the small front porch and into the blinding sunlight. “Okay, hear me out.”

He turned, his expression arctic as he watched me.

I exhaled and pressed my lips together. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” he replied, ice dripping from his words.

“Like I’m crazy,” I replied helplessly, spreading my arms wide.

His eyes narrowed. “Except that I’m sort of wondering if you *are* crazy. Because it’s really crazy for you to willingly want to go to your *uncle’s cabin*, the same place the guy who attacked you a couple of nights ago is.”

“Okay, first, it’s the Norwood cabin,” I started.

Remy nodded. “Got it. So, the place of the guy who sexually assaulted Larkin and broke Katy’s leg a few months ago before arranging to help have you kidnapped. That sounds so much better.”

My jaw dropped open. “Tate’s alone, Remy. I can’t just leave her there by herself!”

“And I can’t just let you walk over there,” he roared, his anger finally boiling over.

“Let me?” I echoed. “I’m sorry, but since when do you ‘let me’ do anything?”

He winced, his features tightening. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what you said,” I retorted.

“Are we really having an argument about this right now?” he demanded. “Luke has been taken into custody, Tate has just been *taken*, and Dante is about to go off the rails.”

I stepped forward, grabbing his hand. “I can’t do anything about Luke, but I might be able to help Tate and Dante. Tate needs to know she isn’t alone, Rem.”

His fingers curled around mine, but he didn’t reply.

“If the situation were reversed,” I said softly, “and Tate could see me, wouldn’t you want her to?”

“I would never ask her to do that,” he said stubbornly.

God, I loved him. I loved how he wanted to protect me from everything, but right now I needed him to trust me.

“She didn’t ask. I’m offering.”

He opened his mouth, but I placed my fingers on his lips.

“I won’t do it unless you’re okay with it,” I promised, meaning it. As much as I wanted to help Tate, I wouldn’t do it at Remy’s expense. The last thing anyone needed was Remy losing it the way Dante was.

“I’m not okay with it,” he replied with a low growl. His hand reached up and toyed with the end of my braid before wrapping it in his fist. He angled my head to the side and gently pressed his lips over the claiming mark.

“I don’t trust Norwood or your uncle,” he muttered, relaxing his hold on my hair.

I slid my arms around his waist. “I know. But I need you to trust *me*. Linden said I could come and visit her. It sounded like an invitation.”

“It sounds like a trap,” he replied, shaking his head.

I leaned my forehead against the center of his chest, feeling the steady *thump* of his heart beating. “Tate’s alone in a house with Damien, Trace, and two people who tried to sell her as a little kid. I can’t just let her sit in there by herself, Remy.”

“Would it kill you to be a little more selfish?” he grumbled.

I hid a smile against him, letting the feel of his chest rise and fall with every breath sink into my bones.

“Sorry,” I said softly. I lifted my eyes to look up at him with a sad smile. “I’m sure you never planned on getting a mess like me as your mate.”

His knuckles brushed across my jaw. “No,” he admitted. “I always hoped I would find a mate one day. I wanted what my parents have. I grew up watching them, and wanting that. I wanted someone to share my life with.”

A rueful smile spread across my mouth as my heart kicked in my chest. “Instead you got me.”

“You’re definitely not what I expected,” he replied, his eyes soft as he watched me. “You’re better.”

I couldn’t help the snort that escaped me. “I’m a mess. A total, complete mess that has complicated your life since I walked into it.”

“You’re worth every complication.”

I dropped my gaze, the chaos and pain of the day settled around my shoulders like a heavy blanket. “Everything is a fight for us, Remy. Nothing is ever just easy. It’s exhausting.”

He dragged a finger under my chin, lifting my eyes until I was staring into his. My breath caught at the wonder and love reflected there.

“Anything worth everything requires a fight.”

“So, I’m worth the fight?” Some stupid part of me needed to hear him say it.

His hand cradled my jaw, infinitely gentle. “You’re worth a million wars. I’ll fight for you every day for the rest of our lives.”

His mouth lowered to mine, coaxing my lips open so his tongue could slide against mine slowly, languidly. He took his time, exploring gently but fiercely, letting me know in every way I was his, and I was worth it.

He licked his lips when he lifted his head. “I really don’t like this, but okay. Go see Tate.”

My heart soared. “I’ll be careful, I swear.”

“I know,” he replied, resting his forehead against mine. “Two conditions, okay?”

“Okay.”

“One, you keep your phone on you the whole time,” he said. “I want you to call me right before you go inside. Put your phone in your pocket, keep it on speaker phone. Lower the volume so they can’t hear, but I need to know if you’re in trouble.”

I actually kind of liked the idea. It was reassuring that Remy would know if things went sideways.

“Two, you can’t go alone.”

I pulled back, shaking my head. “I can’t. Linden said to come alone.”

“Take Daniel,” he said. “He’s technically neutral in this.”

“Daniel pulled Preston off of me at the club,” I reminded him.

“But he’s Elias’s mentee,” Remy countered. “He may not be able to go inside, but they’ll let him closer than they would me or Dad or anyone in our alliance. Or we can see if Elias will go with you, but I feel like Daniel would stand a better chance at helping you if you need it.”

“You trust him?”

Remy nodded slowly. “Yeah. I think so. As much as I can, anyway. He’s better than no back up at all.”

“A ringing endorsement,” I deadpanned, smirking.

“I’m working with what I’ve got.” Remy shrugged with a humorless laugh. “And since what I’ve got is a mate that seems to love throwing herself into dangerous situations, I’m doing the best I can.”

“I don’t *love* it,” I sighed. “I just can’t sit here and do nothing.”

“I know,” he replied, pulling me against his chest. “It’s why I love you so

damn much.”



“SO, HOW’D YOU DO IT?” Daniel asked when we were halfway around the lake.

“Do what?” I frowned at him, my fingers curled tightly around the metal and glass of my cell phone. I would call Remy, as planned, when we rounded the next corner.

“Convince Remy to let you go on this one-woman, suicide mission?”

“It’s not a suicide mission,” I replied archly.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he started, “but you came to the Summit to get *away* from your uncle? A man who, as far as I can tell, is psychotic with a side of sadistic?”

I nodded.

“Okay,” he drawled, “and now we’re walking up to his front door, asking to be invited inside.”

“We’re not going to *his* front door,” I muttered. “We’re going to the Norwood cabin.”

I looked ahead, narrowing my eyes at the mentioned cabin, if you could call it that.

The Norwood cabin was easily the largest cabin around the lake. It had a private dock to access the giant lake in the center of the property. It made all the other cabins look rustic and tiny in comparison.

I wasn’t sure how Trace’s father had managed to secure the biggest place at the Summit, but it was clearly some kind of statement to the other Alphas.

“So, we aren’t going to see the Devil, just his second-in-command,” Daniel said under his breath. “That sounds better.”

“You sound like Remy.”

“Then maybe you should listen to us,” he retorted sharply. “This is a bad idea. Trust me. I’ve been part of a lot of bad ideas, and even I wouldn’t do something this stupid.”

“She’s my friend,” I said evenly. “I won’t leave her alone.”

“Your loyalty is cute,” he replied offhandedly. “I’ll make sure to mention it during the eulogy I give.”

I jerked to a stop. “You can leave if you’re so against this. I’ll do it

myself.”

Daniel's pale green eyes narrowed. “And have your boyfriend—sorry, your mate—rip me apart? No, thanks. I’m too pretty to be ripped to pieces.”

Sighing, I unlocked my phone and called Remy. He answered on the first ring.

“Be safe,” he ordered by way of greeting.

“I will,” I promised. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he replied. “If you’re not back here in an hour, I’m coming after you. If the call ends, I’m coming after you. If you get into trouble—”

“—you’ll come after me,” I finished with a smile.

“I’m serious.”

“I know,” I said, biting my lip. It definitely didn’t suck to be the center of someone’s world. To be loved so completely and wholly.

“I’ll talk to you as soon as I’m done,” I said, switching the phone to speaker mode and turning the volume all the way down before sliding the phone into my back pocket.

Daniel and I started walking again, no talking this time until we rounded the last part of the lake, the Norwood house looming several yards ahead, set on a hill that overlooked the entire lake. It was bracketed by two smaller cabins on either side, and I had a feeling my uncle was lurking in one of them.

“Are you ready for this?” Daniel asked, taking a deep breath.

No.

“Yeah,” I said, starting forward.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I EXPECTED WHEN I WALKED UP THE STEEP STAIRS TO THE front door of the Norwood house, but it wasn't Trace leaning against the railing with a cigarette.

My nose wrinkled at the acrid scent of burning tobacco, and I wondered when he had picked up a smoking habit.

"Come to see my new packmate?" he asked, leaning his head back and blowing a ring of smoke into the air.

I squared my shoulders, refusing to show a single chink in my armor. "I'm here to see Tate. My uncle said—"

"I know what he said," Trace said coolly, his gaze disdainfully assessing me. "Gotta admit, I'm surprised you showed up here. Maybe even a little impressed."

His gaze slid past me to Daniel, who hovered at the base of the stairs. Trace scowled. "Pretty sure your instructions were to come alone. Who the hell are you?"

"Just walking a friend over to her own version of hell," Daniel finished with a mocking smile. "Besides, Elias wanted me to ask your dad a few things."

I tried not to show my surprise.

"What things?" Trace flicked ash into the sculpted bushes beneath the railing.

"Pack things," Daniel replied, his smile all teeth and no kindness.

Trace tossed the still lit cigarette into the mulch. "Whatever. You, stay. Skye, come with me."

“I’ll wait right here,” Daniel said loudly, and I was pretty sure that was more for me than Trace.

Trace pushed open the front door, and I held my breath as I followed him so I wouldn’t inhale the stench of the cigarette remains.

The door closing behind me felt ominous and wrong. I took a steadying breath, trying to convince my wolf—and myself—that we weren’t in danger. My hand skimmed my back pocket where the phone was.

Trace paused inside the foyer, turning to study me with cold eyes. “I guess I should check you for weapons, right? Make sure you’re not a threat.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “You’re welcome to try. I can’t promise I won’t break your nose if you touch me.”

“I’m an alpha,” he snapped.

“And I’m out of patience,” I shot back. “Where the hell is Tate?”

“Brave words for a girl all by herself in the big, bad wolf’s house,” he said darkly, stepping closer to me.

I lifted my chin, meeting his glare for glare, refusing to back down the same way I had when we first met. “I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered softly. “I’m not a scared girl you attacked in a bathroom or a wolf with a broken leg you got the jump on in the woods. You brought Cassian to school to try and hurt me, and I *killed* him.”

I sucked in a slow breath, not nearly done. “I don’t know what your dad was thinking by taking one of our own, but it reeks of desperation. We all know Tate will be back with her family before the week is over.”

“Is that something we know, Skye?” Trace’s eyes lit with interest. “Because right now, a really pretty, helpless girl is sleeping in the room next to mine. Maybe I’ll see if she’s up for company tonight.”

“You try that,” I said with a small smile and an encouraging nod. “I dare you. Last time I checked, you liked your girls a lot more unable to fight back, and Tate’s a fighter.”

“How is Larkin?” Trace asked, tilting his head to the side. “Pity we never got a chance to finish what we started.”

“I’m surprised you even care enough to ask,” I answered, refusing to take the bait no matter how much I wanted to punch him in his smug, asshole face. “Sierra vanished the same time you did. Isn’t she your mate? At least, that’s what she told everyone.”

Trace stepped back, his smile slipping for a fraction of a second before it was wiped away and replaced with a smirk. “Ask your boyfriend. She was

rolling around in his bed long before mine.”

That jab might have worked if I didn't already know Remy hadn't touched Sierra, despite her multiple attempts at coercing him into a relationship.

Besides, Trace would never admit Sierra had gone to Norwood with him after he literally tucked tail and ran. She had been a minor, and her parents definitely hadn't given consent for her to change packs. If she was in Norwood, it was against their wishes and it opened up their pack to the very accusation they were leveling at Luke.

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. “Now you're just lying. Remy never touched her.”

“If he says so.”

“He does,” I affirmed. “And I trust my mate.”

“Good for you.” Trace winked at me. “You enjoy that bond for as long as you can.”

A shiver of unease rippled down my spine. The implied threat was there, and it struck more of a nerve than I cared to admit.

“I want to see Tate,” I said softly. “Now.”

He folded his arms over his chest and grinned. “No.”

“Linden said—”

“First? Your uncle doesn't call the shots for my pack,” he snapped, cutting me off. “Second, they're not here. They're in a meeting. Visiting hours will resume when they come back. You can try then.”

He leaned forward, leering. “Or you can hang out with me until they get back. I'm sure we'll figure out a way to pass the time.”

Ew. Never.

I flicked my eyes up and down him for a second, like I was actually considering his disgusting suggestion.

“Pass,” I finally said.

“Then time to go,” he hissed, reaching for my arm.

I stepped out of reach. “Don't touch me.” My gaze narrowed, trying to figure out a workaround. “I guess I'm not surprised they left you here with Tate. I haven't seen you at many sessions. Guess even Daddy knows you're only good for a babysitter.”

He bared his teeth at me.

Bingo. I hit a nerve.

“Or maybe she's my reward,” he replied smugly. “And you're kinda

killing the vibe.”

“Far be it that I would put a kink in your rapist fantasies.” I rolled my eyes. “But since you were sitting out on the porch with your cancer stick, I’m guessing you weren’t even allowed to sit inside to keep an eye on Tate. Daddy probably told you absolutely no touching.”

His flinch was almost imperceptible, but it was there.

I smirked. “Yeah, okay. I’ll come back and speak to someone who’s actually in charge.”

“I *am* in charge here, bitch,” he spat.

I raised my brows. “Clearly. I’ll let you get back to ... sitting on the front porch and counting birds? Watching grass grow? What else did you have planned today?”

He snarled, lashing out and grabbing my wrist.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out as he ground the delicate bones together. One yelp from me, and Remy would send the calvary.

Hell, he would be leading the charge.

“You want to see her? Fine.” Trace dragged me towards the staircase.

I winced as he pulled me up the stairs and around a corner. His fist cracked twice against a closed door.

“Fuck off!” Tate yelled from the other side.

I hid my smile. That was my girl, still fighting.

Trace let me go with a growl. He started fishing for a key in his front pocket, pulling the scrap of metal out with a grimace as the front door opened.

“Skye? Person whose name I don’t know?” Daniel called from the doorway. “Where are you guys at?”

“What the *fuck*?” Trace exploded, a vein in his forehead popping out as he turned.

“Daniel isn’t very patient,” I admitted with a shrug, hiding a smile. “He said he needed to speak to your dad. You probably should’ve mentioned he wasn’t here when we were outside.”

Trace whirled, his face inches from mine. “Stay right fucking here while I deal with your annoying friend. You even attempt to let Tate out, and I’ll break her legs and yours.”

I held up my hands innocently. “Whatever you say.”

“Hellloooo?” Daniel called, somewhere deeper in the house, clearly

taking it upon himself to explore the downstairs.

Something crashed and broke below us.

“Shit,” Daniel’s voice carried up the stairs with a sigh, “was that expensive? It kinda looked expensive.”

With another curse, Trace stormed down the stairs.

I leaned against the door as soon as he was out of sight. “Tate? You okay?”

“Skye?” I heard her move to the door. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Checking on *you*,” I huffed, my eyes sweeping the empty hallway.

“Where’s Trace?”

“Dealing with Daniel,” I said with a laugh.

“Why is Daniel here?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m ... I’m fine,” she said softly. “They haven’t done anything to me. Any word on my Dad? How’s Dante?”

“Gabe’s working on getting your dad released. Dante is ... He’s been better.” I winced. That was the understatement of the year.

“Tell them both I love them, and not to worry.” Tate sniffled.

I lay my palm flat against the door. “I will. Tate, are you—”

I froze as a door slammed down the hallway. I whirled around, heart pounding. I had assumed it was just Tate and Trace in here.

“Skye?” Tate’s voice was muffled through the door.

“I think someone’s up here,” I whispered, stepping back from the door and looking around.

It wasn’t Trace or Daniel; I could hear them arguing downstairs.

Another door slammed, followed by an angry voice.

I slowly walked down the hall, keeping my back to a wall as I walked.

“This ... ridiculous!” A high-pitched voice snapped. A woman’s voice.

“Calm down,” a deeper, masculine voice said.

There was a door cracked open at the end of the hall. I slid forward, praying there weren’t any loose floorboards that would groan and give me away.

Something else crashed downstairs, followed by Trace yelling.

I closed the distance to the open door, nudging it open slightly wider with my toe.

It was a bedroom, yellow sunlight drenching the white walls and cream

carpet.

Grant and Karen stood near an open suitcase, glaring at each other.

“We need the money!” Grant snapped.

“And who’s fault is that?” Karen spat. The meek little woman from the meeting earlier was now a furious she-wolf, staring down her cowering husband.

“Mine,” Grant mumbled.

I reached behind me, sliding the phone out of my pocket. It was still connected to Remy. I held it up, hoping he could hear what I was hearing.

“We wouldn’t even be here if you had been able to stay away from the fucking casino,” Karen snarled. “Now we’re stuck in the middle of a shifter pissing match. You better pray Damien holds up his end of the deal and gets us out of here before Luke Davis is released.”

Grant glowered under her stare. “You were right next to me, placing bets, too, Karen.” He sniffed. “And I didn’t see you turning down the money.”

“Whatever,” Karen snapped. “The sooner this is over, the sooner we can cash that check.”

“And the girl?” Grant asked.

Karen sneered at him. “Don’t be a fool, Grant. We’re not taking her with us.”

Grant looked at the ground. “She’s our daughter.”

“She’s a mistake we never meant to have.” Karen huffed. “And she’s more trouble than she was ever worth.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle my gasp.

“As soon as the check clears, we’re out of here,” Karen told him. She sighed a second later, moving towards her husband and touching his cheek. “We’ll go somewhere sunny. You always wanted to visit Hawaii. We’ll be able to afford that trip now.”

Grant watched her walk away. “And if the Council gives us custody?”

Karen paused. “She’s pretty, young, and likely fertile. I’m sure we can find someone willing to take her off our hands. Hell, Damien’s kid was practically salivating when we brought her in, and they definitely have money. I bet my ass they’d pay for her.”

My free hand curled into a fist. This woman was a monster, and Tate was better off without her. I glanced down at the phone and tucked it into my pocket before scurrying back down the hall to Tate’s door.

“Still there?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Where did you go?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

It did matter. Hopefully the Council would listen to me, or listen to Remy, when we told them the truth about Tate’s parents.

Footsteps on the stairs were my warning Trace was coming back.

“Just hang in there, okay?” I said, touching the door once more.

“You’re leaving,” Trace told me when he saw me. His hand lashed out to grab me, but I ducked away.

“I can walk downstairs by myself.” I stepped around him and hurried down the stairs. I didn’t wait for him as I pulled open the front door.

Trace slapped a hand on the wood, closing it as soon as I tugged it open an inch.

He leaned in, not quite touching, but crowding me all the same. I forced myself still, forced my wolf to be silent.

“I’ll see you later, Skye.” His breath tickled my ear.

I didn’t speak, didn’t look at him. A second later, he released his weight from the door and I could open it. I stepped through, and hurried down the stairs where Daniel waited.

“That guy has trust issues,” Daniel remarked, falling into step beside me. “Is it so bad that a total stranger is walking around your downstairs, unaccompanied?”

I choked on a laugh. “Why did you do that?”

He shrugged. “You’d been gone for five minutes.”

“And you got worried about me?”

Daniel smirked. “I got worried about *me*, and what Remy would do if I returned you in anything less than pristine condition. Did you talk to Tate?”

I grinned, lengthening my strides as I reached for my phone, turning the volume back up so I could hear him. “Even better.”

“Better?”

I put the phone to my ear. “Tell me you heard that.”

Remy’s warm chuckle slid into my ear, sending a spiral of heat unfurling in my stomach.

“Babe, we heard everything. We recorded it. Dad’s on his way to the Council right now with the recording.”

Relief hit me, so sweet and potent that I stumbled as I walked, grabbing onto Daniel’s arm for support.

“Get your ass back here,” Remy ordered.

I glanced at Daniel beside me before I dropped my voice, unable to resist teasing him. “Just my ass?”

Remy chuckled. “I mean, it’s my favorite part.”

I pressed my lips together and ducked my head so Daniel wouldn’t see my cheeks turning bright pink.

“But I’m pretty attached to all of you,” he added, the heat in his voice making me shiver. “I’ll make you a list when you get back.”

“I’m on my way.”

BY THE TIME DANIEL AND I MADE IT BACK TO MY CABIN, GABE HAD convinced the Council to free Luke. Damien's meeting was disrupted, and he was ordered to return Tate to her father.

Luke didn't care about waiting for them to comply, so he headed for the Norwood cabin to collect his daughter himself.

I stepped over the threshold of the cabin, waving goodbye to Daniel, and was immediately swept into strong arms that were *not* my mate's.

"Thank you," Dante whispered, hugging me hard enough to crack a rib or four.

"You're welcome," I replied, squeezing him back and making eye contact with Remy over his massive shoulder.

He gave me a soft, private smile I felt down to my toes.

Dante let me go and I stepped back, a little embarrassed. Clearing my throat, I looked around the room.

"Where's Griffin and Nero?"

"Griffin went with Dad," Remy said, moving forward and pulling me to his side. "Nero went to check on Allie. They'll meet us for dinner later tonight."

"Us?" I blinked up at him.

"We're having dinner in the lodge," he replied, his arm tight around my shoulder.

Dante grinned at me. "Someone just had a birthday. We wanted to celebrate. Now we have a few reasons."

"Like a birthday party?" The words came out a lot more breathless than I

had intended, but I had never had a birthday party. It wasn't like I had friends in Long Mesa to invite, or even a reason to celebrate before.

Remy's lips found the top of my head. "Hell yeah."

Dante looked at the front door, and I smiled.

"Why don't we wait outside for them?" I suggested.

He was outside and on the porch before I finished my question.

Remy chuckled warmly, the vibrations of his chest settling deep into my bones. I started to follow Dante, but Remy pulled me back, swinging me around so we were face to face.

"You're really okay?" he asked quietly, his dark eyes looking for any signs of trauma or injury.

I touched his face. "I'm really okay. Trace was ... Trace. He tried to get a rise out of me, and I didn't take the bait."

"I heard." His fingertips dusted across the underside of my jaw, slipped down the slope of my throat. He hooked a couple fingers in the top of my tank top, fisting the material in his hand and pulling me closer. The back of his knuckles caresses the rising swell of my breasts.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, very aware and very not caring that Dante was on the other side of an open door.

Remy's grin wrecked me. My knees almost buckled at the promise and lust in his eyes.

"They'll be back soon," he said softly, bending to kiss the side of my neck chastely.

"Remy."

His mouth opened, and he nipped at the claiming mark, his teeth scraping against the freshly healing skin.

The shudder that tore through my body, starting in the roots of my scalp and curling my toes, made me sway. I blindly grabbed onto his forearm for balance.

"We need to get ready for the party," he explained softly, like he was telling me about the weather. The wet heat of his tongue licked over my collarbone as one hand came around my back, grabbing my ass and squeezing.

My eyes slid shut, my head dropping back as I swallowed a moan.

"But tonight," he continued, his fingers dragging across the exposed swell of cleavage from my tank top, "you're mine."

"Lock the door, skip the party," I panted, desperate for those talented

fingers to dip lower inside my shirt.

He lifted his head, a teasing frown on his face as he lightly tsked under his breath. “We can’t do that.”

“We can totally do that,” I countered, a raw growl in my throat. Arousal hummed through me, heating my blood. “It’s *my* birthday party. Consider yourself the only one invited.”

“Your friends want to celebrate with you,” he reminded me, a single digit tracing the shape of my mouth.

“I don’t need friends,” I said breathlessly, “I have you.” I bit his finger, adding a little more force than just being playful. Enough that his pupils dilated and his eyes snapped to the stairs.

His returning grin was full of carnal promise. “There isn’t enough time for me to do all the things I want to do to you now.”

“Tease,” I muttered darkly.

Something in his gaze shifted and he hauled me against the front of his body. The very hard line of his erection pressed into my stomach, sending a whole new wave of delicious anticipation racing through me.

“Does this feel like I’m teasing?” His voice had gone soft and growly, and I had to remind myself—again—that Dante was standing a few feet away and the door was open.

My eyes closed as I tried to reign in my hormones and my wolf, who wanted nothing more than to be with her mate.

He kissed my eyelids. “Tonight.”

I nodded mutely. The cool air that whipped between us as he stepped away did absolutely nothing to help the raging inferno of my skin.

I crossed the room and dug a bottle of water out of the mini fridge, twisting off the top and taking a long drink, ignoring Remy’s laugh full of total male pride.

I dribbled some of the water in my palm and swiped it across the back of my neck as I walked outside to join Dante, flicking the droplets in Remy’s face as I walked by him.

He laughed harder, but didn’t follow me. Probably because there would be no telling how turned on he was if he stepped outside.

I smiled, loving that he was just as hot and bothered as I was.

Dante was standing several feet away from the cabin, his gaze on the line of houses across the lake, waiting for the first glimpse of Tate.

He gave me a smile as I joined him. “Thank you again.”

“You don’t need to keep doing that,” I said, squirming uncomfortably. I wasn’t used to gratitude or the spotlight it thrust me into.

“I still remember the day Luke brought her home,” he admitted softly.

“How old were you?”

“Eight. My birthday was the day before. Ryder had spent the night, and we were outside playing. Luke drove up, and pulled her out of the truck. Her hair was so short, and she was all legs and arms and big, hazel eyes. Her eyes were what got my attention first.” A rueful smile stretched across his face, and he rubbed his jaw at the memory.

“Maren was the only girl our age in the pack, and she was coddled by her parents and grandparents. She was the first girl born in our pack in a decade, so everything was pink and soft and girly.” Dante grinned wryly. “Ryder tried to get her to play with us by throwing a snowball at her, and she started to cry. Every boy in the pack under the age of fifteen got a lecture about protecting Maren.” He laughed, the sound warm and inviting.

I smiled back.

“Tate was ... She was *nothing* like Maren,” his smile deepened, a rare dimple flashing in his cheek. “The second she looked at us in the front yard, you could tell she was hell on wheels. All fire and fight.” He glanced down at me. “A lot like you.”

“Me?” My brows lifted.

“First time I saw you standing by that bonfire, I knew you were different,” he confirmed. “You weren’t like the other girls.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said slowly, snorting. My early days with the pack at GPA had been rocky. “I was shell-shocked and terrified.”

“You were ballsy as hell,” he argued. “Sitting on a log with Caleb, staring his punk ass down. Protecting Larkin, accepting Katy and Maren ... You know, Tate told me you two were going to be friends that night when we got home.” Another dimple appeared. “I’m glad she was right.”

His eyes narrowed before a full blown grin broke across his face. “There she is.”

Three people were making their way around the side of the lake towards us, the two bigger builds were obviously Luke and Gabe, and the tiny spec between them, now running ahead, was Tate.

I nudged his shoulder, still grinning. “Go get your girl.”

He winked at me and took off across the open lawn, his long legs eating up the ground between him and Tate. When she was still several yards away,

she leapt into the air, launching herself at him. He caught her with a grin, spinning her around once, twice, and then setting her on her feet and kissing her hard.

I heard Remy's feet come down the stairs behind me, a second later his arms slid around my waist, hugging my back to his front. He rested his chin on my shoulder.

My hands settled atop his, tracing the tendons and knuckles of his hands.

"You made that happen," he said quietly, his breath a whisper against my ear.

I leaned back against him, letting him absorb my weight. "I'm glad she's back."

"But?"

"But," I added reluctantly, "I'm worried what else Linden will pull. No way Tate's parents sought out Damien and Norwood for a quick payday."

"There's probably more to it," Remy agreed. "We'll have to figure it out."

"I feel like there's a lot we need to figure out," I whispered, letting the fears that had been weighing me down out. "I'm scared we're not going to be able to find all the answers before someone else gets hurt."

"I know." He sighed behind me. "But let's focus on the good. Tate's back, and tonight we're going to be with our friends, celebrating you."

A small smile teased my lips. "The last time we planned a fun night out, I punched Preston in the face."

He tensed behind me. "All the more reason you deserve a do-over."

I angled my head to smile at him. "Punching Preston was fun. I wouldn't hate it if he was strung up like a piñata tonight."

He laughed hard, his forehead dropping to my shoulder. "God, I love you."

I giggled. "It could be a great party game."

I peeled away from him as Tate got closer. She dropped Dante's hand and ran, throwing herself into my arms.

"Thank you, thank you!" She wrapped her arms around my neck, squeezing me hard. Pulling back, her hazel eyes sparkled. "You're freaking brilliant."

"I'm freaking lucky," I corrected dryly. "I had no idea the creatures who birthed you would be ranting and raving a few doors down. And it helped that Daniel distracted Trace so I could snoop around."

“Yeah, I owe him a big thank you, too,” she said. Her face split into a grin. “Trace was cursing up a storm about something he broke.”

Dante pulled her away from me once we were done hugging, tucking her against his side. I had a strong feeling she wouldn’t be leaving his side anytime soon. But, judging by the way she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into him, she didn’t mind.

Gabe and Luke finished closing the distance to our group, and Luke surprised me by hugging me. He lifted me off my feet in his giant embrace, his arms thicker than oak trees as he held me.

“Mighty thankful my girl has a friend like you,” Luke said as he set me down.

Gabe grinned at me, pulling me in for a sideways hug. “That’s why she’s my favorite kid.”

“Right here, Dad,” Remy muttered, shaking his head.

Gabe looked over my shoulder. “I don’t remember you figuring out a way to free Luke and save Tate.”

“I recorded the message!” Remy said with a laugh, shaking his head.

“It’s not a competition, son,” Gabe told him with a dismissive frown.

Remy threw his hands in the air as we all laughed. But judging by the grin on his face, he wasn’t too upset.

“Thank you, Remy,” Tate said, leaning around Dante with a smile.

God, laughing felt good. Laughing with my family and friends. A moment of levity in a week that had been full of suck.

My wolf was getting tired of being cooped up with no space to run, but right now I couldn’t let her out. We needed to survive the last week of the Summit. When we were home, we would be free to run. She could run and play and bond with her mate on the mountains of Blackwater.



GABE AND REMY had arranged to rent out one of the restaurants inside the lodge for my birthday party. The space had been transformed by silver and gold balloons and streamers, and a giant sign that read, “Happy Birthday, Skye!”

I stepped into the middle of the room, really thankful Katy had convinced me to pack an emerald colored dress that matched my eyes and simple black

heels. I had laughed when she tried sneaking them in, but she kept saying, “Just in case” until I caved.

Thank God I had caved, because *just in case* had happened tonight.

“You like it?”

I turned to look at Remy, reminding myself that other people were coming and I couldn’t rip off the black pants and black button down shirt he wore. But when he rolled the sleeves up past his forearms, the tendons and muscles flexing, I had to bite my own lip to keep from biting him.

“This is like a dream,” I admitted, looking around the room.

“We’ll have a bigger party when we’re back home,” he promised, tucking a loose curl behind my ear.

“I don’t need one,” I said quickly. This was more than enough.

He smirked. “Katy and Larkin have been planning it for weeks.”

My eyes went round and wide. “They have?”

He pressed a finger against my lips. “Shh. I never told you that.”

I rolled my eyes with a laugh, turning my head to see Luke walk in. He smiled at Gabe, who was standing off to the side, quickly discussing something with the waiter.

Luke crossed the open floor to me, looking good in a simple button down and black pants. He tugged at the collar of his shirt, and I worried the seams on his arms would burst for a second. “Damn monkey suit. Thought for sure I had taken this out when Tatum tried packing it.”

“You look great,” I said helpfully.

“I look like an old man in a monkey suit,” he deadpanned, but his gray eyes sparkled. “But you, my dear, look incredible.”

I blushed, ducking my head.

Luke smiled fondly. “You remind me a lot of my Regina. She was my wife. Tate was little when she ...” He swallowed, suddenly emotional.

“Tate told me,” I said softly. “She said from what she remembers, your wife was kind to her.”

Luke’s gaze was trapped in the past as he shook his head. “Gina always wanted a houseful of kids. She loved Tate. She was always finding excuses to babysit Ryder and Dante. She’d have been a good mom. Had a big heart, and spirit of fire.” His gaze focused on me. “Like you.”

“Thank you,” I said, touched by the comparison.

“Yeah, well,” Luke shrugged off the emotion gruffly. “I could use a drink. Tate and Dante will be by in a bit. She was calling Ryder, making sure

to check in with him after today.” He rolled his eyes. “Lord knows how I would end up with a baby girl with two boys chasing her. Always figured she'd eventually pick one.”

He shrugged again. “Just as well she didn’t. I love those little shits like they were my own kids.”

I giggled, covering my mouth as Nero and Allie came in.

“Excuse me.” Luke winked. “There’s a bar over there with my name on it.” He clapped Remy’s shoulder on the way to the bar.

“You look stunning!” Allie squealed, pulling me into her arms. “Green is absolutely your color. And where have you been hiding those legs?”

“How are you?” I asked when she stopped hugging me. “How’s the baby? I’m so sorry about the other night. I was going to get Nero and—”

“—and some dumbass attacked you?” Allie frowned, shaking her head. “Honey, this baby and I are *fine*. More than fine.” She reached back, finding Nero’s hand.

He stepped up, pressing himself against her back and taking a subtle sniff of her hair before kissing her.

Allie’s dark eyes danced. “You guys will never guess what happened last night.”

“Well, you’re already pregnant, so ...” I trailed off with a grin.

“We bonded,” Allie whispered excitedly, her dark eyes dancing.

Remy’s jaw dropped, his gaze snapping to Nero. “What?”

Nero grinned. “We were out for a run last night—”

“—sometimes I get this weird burst of energy at night from the baby,” Allie added, rolling her eyes. “Pregnancy is so weird.”

“We had been out for about an hour, and ... *wham*. It was like being hit by lightning.” Nero chuckled, breathless.

Allie smiled at him, her hand absently stroking the top of her shirt, where I would bet my ass was a claiming mark.

“That’s amazing!” I sputtered, happy for them. I hugged Allie again.

Remy shook Nero’s hand. “Congrats, man. I’m happy for you guys.”

Nero rolled his eyes, hip checking his wife playfully. “I don’t know how happy I should be. First thing I realized after we bonded was how much I was craving dipping pickles in yogurt.”

Allie shrugged. “Pregnancy cravings. Now he can experience them anytime we shift.”

I exchanged a look with Remy. “Was that all that happened?”

Allie tilted her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“You couldn’t ... hear each others’ thoughts?” I asked hesitantly.

Nero shook his head with a smile. “No. Just a weird craving, and knowing this girl was my everything.” He pulled Allie close, kissing her softly.

“Besides,” Allie added when she turned to look at us, “most bonded mates don’t get the telepathic bond until they’ve been together for over a decade or longer.”

“Nero, Allie,” Gabe greeted as he came over, shaking each of their hands. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

Allie’s hand covered her nonexistent baby bump. “In so many ways.”

“Allie and Nero bonded last night,” Remy added.

Gabe’s eyes went wide before his face broke into a smile. He hugged them both, congratulating them. “Seems like this night is full of good news for a change.”

“We heard about Luke being released and Tate being returned,” Allie said with a grimace. “What was Norwood *thinking*?”

“Damien’s claiming he was duped by Tate’s birth parents,” Gabe replied with a sigh. “Both of whom have disappeared.”

“What?” The question flew out of my mouth.

Gabe pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded. He gave Allie and Nero a polite smile. “If you’ll excuse us, I need to talk to Skye and Remy for a moment.”

“Of course,” Nero said, pulling Allie away and towards a group of people Griffin was walking in with.

“What’s up?” Remy asked when we were by ourselves.

Gabe took a deep breath, looking both of us in the eye. “One small business item, and then I want you two to actually have fun tonight, okay?”

We nodded.

Gabe sighed. “The Council is going to hear our petition to have Long Mesa investigated for their crimes tomorrow. They’ll also vote on whether or not Addie, Zara, and Bella can stay in Blackwater.”

It was like a black hole opened under me. “Tomorrow? I thought it would be a few days.”

“Why now?” Remy asked, his hand finding mine and squeezing reassuringly.

“After this stunt with Tate’s parents, the Council is sick of the back and

forth between our packs. The whole Summit has turned into a damn warzone. I think they're hoping they can make their decision and salvage the rest of the Summit. Focus on the more pressing issue, which is all the women who have been kidnapped or gone missing the last year."

I swallowed, trying to reign in the overwhelming terror threatening to consume me.

So, my fate would be decided in a few hours.

No pressure.

"Hey." Gabe touched my shoulders. "Kiddo, I think you missed what I said."

"Have fun tonight," I muttered. "Deal with people deciding my life tomorrow."

Gabe smiled, actually smiled. "Honey, they're deciding on your mom, aunt, and cousin tomorrow. Not you."

I frowned, my brain struggling to piece that puzzle together..

"Does that mean ..." Remy trailed off, his own smile starting.

"The Council officially recognizes you two as bonded mates. Linden and Long Mesa have zero claim on you, Skye."

Remy's arms wrapped around me, lifting me off the ground and twirling me in a dizzy circle before he set me down. His hands grabbed my hips, his forehead dropping to mine.

"You're ours," he whispered, joy suffused in his grin. "You're Blackwater. No one can take you away."

My choked laugh turned into a soft sob. I pulled him into my arms, my body trembling against his as I cried. He cuddled me against his chest, peppering kisses on the top of my head.

For the first time in my entire life, I was officially free.

THE PARTY HAD LASTED INTO THE EARLY MORNING HOURS, MORE AND MORE allies of the pack trickling in. Remy and Gabe introduced me, but all the names and faces started to blur together. Tate and Dante showed up late, their clothes and hair a barely tamed mess, cheeks flushed with happiness.

I had forgotten half the people who smiled and wished me a happy birthday, but their platitudes were icing on the I-finally-had-a-home cake. I had taken a million pictures with my phone, excited to share them with Mom when I got home to Blackwater.

Remy and I had tumbled into bed after the party, our hands and mouths moving restlessly on each other, until he surged inside of me, reminding me with his body that I was home.

I rolled over the next morning, ready to pick up where we had left off, but Remy's side of the bed was empty. I smoothed a hand over the cool sheets, propping myself up on one elbow, looking around the room for him.

The bathroom door was halfway open, and the shower was running.

I grinned, tossing the sheets off my legs and planning to join my mate in the shower.

Which was when my phone rang.

I picked it up, thinking it was Mom. We'd been playing phone tag the last few days, and I missed hearing her voice, especially on my birthday. She had left a voicemail, her sweet voice singing me happy birthday while I was tangled up in bed with Remy.

I flinched. I was the worst daughter. Then again, maybe if I could convince the Council that Mom belonged in Blackwater with me, away from

Long Mesa, I could make up for it.

But it wasn't Mom calling; it was Larkin.

I glanced at the clock. It was barely seven, which meant it was even earlier in Washington. I swiped my thumb across the screen of my phone.

"Hey, Lark," I greeted, sitting back down on the bed and tugging the sheets around my naked body. "Everything okay?"

"I don't ... Jesus, I don't even know how to say this," Larkin stammered, her voice shaking.

"What's wrong?" I stood up, the sheets fluttering back to the bed. I glanced at the shower. "Do you want me to get Remy?"

"Yes. Wait, *no*. Oh, my God."

"Larkin, you're scaring me," I said softly. "Talk to me."

"No, Skye, it's *good*. It's ..."

She trailed off with a sniffle.

"You're crying!"

"I'm *happy*!" she replied with a laugh.

Panic swirled with impatience. "Dammit, Larkin—"

"Rhodes and I bonded last night."

Those four words shook me, rocked me like a capsizing boat in a stormy sea.

"You *what*?" I didn't mean to half-shout the words, but they came out way more high pitched than I had intended.

The water shut off in the shower a second before Remy called out, "Babe?"

"I'm good," I yelled to him absently, turning my back on the bathroom and focusing on the giggles coming from Larkin.

"Lark, what do you mean you *bonded* with Rhodes?" I demanded. I looked around the room. Shit, I need clothes on for this conversation. I jerked on a pair of pajamas I had set out the night before but never used.

"The pack went out for a run last night," Larkin said softly. "Rhodes and I decided to take a detour and Skye, it was like magic. Everything in my world went upside down, and I knew. Rhodes is my mate. He's my ... He's *mine*. We spent the night together, and ... Holy shit. I can't believe this is real."

The door to the bathroom kicked open, and Remy appeared, a towel wrapped low around his dripping body. He came around to where I was standing, his expression worried as he looked at me.

I couldn't even appreciate all the hard, wet muscles on display like a

damn buffet because my head was spinning with Larkin's announcement.

"Larkin ..." Tears filled my eyes. I was beyond happy for her, for both of them.

"Skye," Remy whispered urgently, his dark eyes narrowed with concern. He was seconds from pulling my phone away from my ear. "What's wrong?"

"Lark, hang on." I laughed and wiped my eyes. "Remy's here, and I need to explain why I'm crying."

"You go. I know you have a lot to do. I know Rhodes was going to call Remy in a few hours, but I couldn't wait to talk to you. Call me later," Larkin said quickly, and then hung up.

I stared at the phone in my hand for a long beat before looking at Remy.

"Larkin and Rhodes bonded."

He looked just as thunderstruck as I had felt.

"What?" His voice was barely above a whisper and full of stunned awe. "They did?"

I nodded. "She's so happy, Rem."

A laugh burst out of him before he grinned, rubbing his jaw. "Holy shit."

"Yeah," I agreed, my laughter joining his.

He pulled me against him, the front of my shirt absorbing the lingering water from his shower. "Jesus, what are the odds?"

"Larkin's even younger than we are," I added, pushing aside that small fact to lick a rivulet of water from between his pecs that caught my attention. I loved this taste of his skin on my lips.

All thoughts of my best friend and her new mate flew out of my brain as I focused on *my* mate.

A low groan rumbled out of him. "Skye ..."

I grinned up at him through my lashes, my hand reaching for the front of his towel. "Yes?" My tongue licked up another trail of water before swirling around a nipple.

"Remy, Skye! Get down here!" Gabe yelled from the floor below.

I jumped away, the backs of my legs hitting the edge of the bed. I looked at the door with guilt, half expecting Gabe to open it even though I knew Remy locked it the night before, plus Gabe gave us all the privacy we could want.

"God fucking dammit," Remy hissed, his eyes squeezing shut. "My dad is the worst cock-blocker ever."

I tried not to laugh as I shrugged. "To be continued?"

His dark eyes snapped open, glaring at me. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

I hid my smile as I turned and stripped, pulling on actual clothes instead of jammies. I didn’t dare look at Remy as I did it, but I felt his eyes on my ass as I pulled on my underwear. I might have given my hips an extra shimmy as I pulled my jeans on, silently laughing as he groaned again.

We got dressed in record time and headed downstairs.

Gabe was pacing, on the phone, at the landing with his back to us.

My hand drifted along the rail as I paused. “Gabe?”

He looked up, his blue eyes wide and incredulous. “Mal, let me talk to the kids. I’ll call Elias and see if he’s ever heard of something like this.” He smiled into the receiver. “I will. Love you, too, sweetheart.”

“She says hi,” Gabe said offhandedly, turning and sitting down in one of the chairs.

Remy and I sat on the couch in front of him.

“What’s going on?” I asked softly. “Is it about the meeting later?”

“No.” Gabe exhaled hard. “Something strange happened last night. There was a pack run in Blackwater.”

Remy and I exchanged looks, grinning.

“We know, Dad,” Remy said with a laugh. “It’s pretty cool.”

“Pretty cool?” Gabe echoed, confused.

“Rhodes and Larkin bonding,” I added.

His eyes went huge. “Rhodes DeWitt and Larkin Dawes *bonded*?”

Remy shot me a look. “Yeah. Isn’t that what you were talking about?”

“Jesus Christ,” Gabe muttered, dropping his head and rubbing his temples. “That makes twelve.”

“Twelve what?” Remy leaned forward.

Gabe looked up at us, completely baffled. “Twelve pairs that bonded in Blackwater last night during the pack run.”

“Is that ... normal?” I asked softly when no one spoke. I knew there were bonded mates in Blackwater, it was how I had first heard of it, but I wasn’t sure if bonding was something that happened sporadically or in batches.

Babies were often born in batches in a pack as fertility cycles linked up. It could have made sense that bonds happened in groupings, too.

“It’s definitely not normal,” Remy said quietly. “Before you and I bonded, it had been over a year since a pair bonded in our pack.”

“Closer to two years,” Gabe confirmed.

“So, twenty four shifters bonded to their mates last night,” I said, needing

to say it so I could wrap my mind around it.

“What are the odds of that?” Remy mused.

Gabe scoffed lightly, leaning back in his chair. “We’d have better odds if the twenty four pack members got struck by lightning at the same time.” He shook his head again in amazement. “I’m going to call Elias. This is his field of expertise.”

“Sounds like the best idea,” Remy agreed. “What time is our meeting with the Council?”

My stomach swooped, ice water flooded my veins.

Oh, yeah.

That.

My fate may have been decided, but I still needed to make sure the Council didn’t send my family back to Long Mesa. And I needed to do whatever I could to stop Linden once and for all.

“Not until one,” Gabe replied. “I’ll see if Elias is free to join us. Remy, why don’t you order something for us to eat?”

“I’m going to take a shower,” I said, standing up.

I was beyond happy for my friends and my pack, but the sobering reality was I wasn’t done fighting yet.

I had to convince a room full of Alphas that my mom, aunt, and cousin deserved the same freedom I had been given by baring my darkest secrets. All while the guy that I loved more than life itself listened.

It was going to be a long day.



MY DAMP HAIR hung in a long ponytail as I left the bedroom to go back downstairs. I paused at the landing, my eyes going wide.

Elias had come, along with Daniel and Tate, Luke, and Dante. The shifters were all talking loudly, throwing out different ideas.

“But it’s happening here, too!” Dante said, his voice catching a lull in the conversations.

“What’s happening here?” I asked, coming down the stairs.

Tate turned, her face bright, excited. “Dante and I were having breakfast in the lodge and we overheard some Alphas talking. One of them bonded with his mate last night! He brought her here for the Summit. They were out

running, and *bam!*” She clapped her hands together.

“Allie and Nero,” I said. “They told me at the party.”

“No,” Tate said, shaking her head. “*Not* Allie and Nero. Another pair.”

My jaw dropped. I swung my gaze to Remy on instinct, but he could only shrug. He was just as mystified as I was.

“This is very exciting,” Elias agreed, his voice vibrating with enthusiasm. “Something must have triggered such a monumental change in the balance of our world.”

“Are we sure they’re all actually bonded?” Luke asked from where he sat. “I mean, maybe they all ate a bad patch of berries on their run last night, Gabe.”

“But that wouldn’t explain pairs bonding here,” Tate argued pointedly. “Also? I don’t think that’s how it works, Dad.”

I moved around the group towards the food Remy had ordered, snagging a piece of bacon and popping it into my mouth.

“There’s only one common denominator,” Elias said slowly. “One factor that connects both Blackwater and the Summit, as well as the timing of events.”

Curious, I turned and gave him my full attention.

Elias smiled, his eyes catching mine with interest. “Skye and Remington consummated their bond.”

I choked on the bacon.

“Fucking hell,” Daniel muttered, standing closest to me. He splashed water into a glass from the pitcher and thrust it at me. “Tact, Elias. Try it before someone dies.”

I coughed down the liquid, a chunk of crispy bacon scraping my throat raw. I swallowed more water, my eyes watering.

“Are you okay?” Remy asked, concern filling his gaze.

I blinked away the tears in my eyes as I nodded. “Yeah. That just ... caught me wrong.”

Daniel smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. “You mean you didn’t plan on discussing your sex life over breakfast? Weird.”

Elias sighed, waving a hand. “I apologize. That came out wrong.”

Daniel snorted. “You think?”

Elias glared at Daniel, who made a big show of eating a piece of bacon, chewing quietly.

“What would Remy and Skye have to do with any of this?” Gabe

demanded.

“Forgive me” Elias murmured, slowly sitting down, “but we can all agree, nothing of their bonding has been normal. From their age, to their advanced levels of healing and awareness of one another. Even their recently discovered talent of experiencing the other’s memories.”

“How could that make a difference in our pack? Or packs here?” Remy frowned.

“I don’t know,” Elias admitted. “But I would like to be permitted to run some tests.”

“Tests?” I repeated, not sure I liked the sound of that.

“I would like to test the limits of your bond,” Elias explained, waving a hand. “It’s unusual. I would be willing to wager that your bond is even stronger than you know.”

“No,” Remy said flatly, not taking his eyes off of me. “We’re not guinea pigs or circus animals.”

“No one said you are,” Luke interjected. “The doc’s just saying there might be more to your bond than meets the eye. That being said, if you ain’t up for pokin’ and proddin’ and studyin’, the answer’s no, Doc.”

Elias grimaced. “Our species is on the precipice of natural disaster, Alpha. The most promising leads we have found are from bonded pairs. Packs where females have been given position and influence instead of just relegated to a familial role. Skye is worth studying.”

My shoulders tensed, and Remy moved to angle his body in front of me.

“We said no,” he told Elias evenly.

Elias looked down, his features pinched with frustration. “Remington, I understand your need to protect your mate. But you and I have discussed this at length.”

That was news to me. They had talked about me *at length*?

Remy glared down at the older man. “No, you and I discussed the value of women in the pack hierarchy. We talked about furthering women’s rights in the packs, and even setting aside positions inside the pack to foster and encourage female leadership. We *never* discussed my mate, and definitely not the way you’re making it sound.” He practically growled the last words, the meaning implied.

He didn’t like that Elias had insinuated something that would potentially drive a wedge between us.

Yeah, well, neither did I.

“Forgive me,” Elias stammered, shaking his head. “I didn't mean to imply that Remy was speaking about you behind your back.” He gave me an apologetic smile. “But can't you see how remarkable you are, Skye? You are unlike any shifter I have come across in years.”

“I don't want to be remarkable,” I said softly, wrapping my arms around my waist. “Right now all I want is to protect my family from a Council that would send them back into hell. I want people like my uncle to be held accountable for what they've done.”

Grimacing, Elias opened his mouth to argue.

I took a deep breath, my spine turning to steel as I held up a hand to cut him off. “I value your opinion, Elias. You've helped me in more ways than I can explain over the last year. But right now, I need to focus on myself. I get that Remy and I have this unique bond that you're curious about, and so am I. Maybe in a few months, when things settle down, we can test our bond or whatever.”

“The time is *now*,” Elias urged vehemently. “While things are still in motion.”

“In a few hours I have to convince a room full of people that an Alpha, a man some of them respect, is a monster. I have to recount the horrors I grew up with, what I saw and lived through every single day of my life.” I shook my head as Remy wrapped an arm around my waist. “I need to focus on that. I'm sorry, my answer is no.”

“Skye—”

“She said no, Elias,” Gabe said firmly. “Her mate said no, and she said no. As her Alpha, I'm saying no, too. We respect your opinion and appreciate the work you've done for all of us, but Skye has earned the right to live her own life, with her mate, as they choose.”

“You're making a mistake,” Elias said softly, sadly. He got to his feet.

“I think it's time for us to go,” Daniel said, his voice unusually even as he helped Elias collect the papers and briefcase he had spread out on the coffee table. He assisted Elias to the door and turned, flashing me a quick, grim smile.

I exhaled hard when the door shut, hating that I had disappointed someone I cared about. Elias had helped me find my wolf and bond with her, he had sat at my bedside with Remy when I was in a coma. He was the person I turned to when I needed help with anything shifter related.

“Maybe I should've said yes,” I murmured, absently rubbing my lips and

walking towards the door.

“No,” Tate spoke up, shaking her head. “Skye, you’re pretty awesome, but you aren’t the savior of shifters everywhere. You’re allowed to live your life.”

I leaned back against the wall. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Remy moved in front of me, his hand skimming down my arm before holding my hand. “We have enough going on right now without this. Shifters bonding is a *good* thing. It’s okay to table that while we make sure the rest of our family is safe.”

Our family.

Not just us, but he was including my mom, aunt and cousin as part of his family. Remy accepted every part of me as part of him.

I nodded and hugged him, ready to do whatever it took to protect our family.

I TRIED TO SUBTLY SHIFT MY WEIGHT, ADJUSTING THE ANGLE I WAS SITTING, but nothing short of a masseuse and a week in bed, preferably with Remy, would work the stiffness out of my back and shoulders.

Everything in me was tense, my bones dipped in unforgiving steel, my muscles encased in concrete, as I waited for the men around me to get their shit together and start my portion of the hearing. My butt had long since gone numb, and I was getting used to the rolling waves of dizziness and nausea.

When I walked into one of the meeting rooms for the hearing, I had somehow visualized a mini courtroom I had seen on a TV show. My brain hadn't figured on a long table with the Council lined up across from me on the other side like we were in a boardroom.

Remy and Gabe sat against the far wall, both looking as uncomfortable as I did.

Linden and Preston were on the other side of the room from them, separated by the length of the table.

I had assumed this was everyone who would be in the room, but then Daniel and Elias slipped in, quietly conversing with the Council before taking their own seats behind the alternates. Elias had given me a small, sad smile. Daniel hadn't met my gaze.

The most disturbing part, though, had been the screen behind me. I hadn't turned and looked when the first video started playing, my mom's account of life in Blackwater being projected for everyone to witness.

Her soft voice wobbled a few times as she bared it all. She glossed over my birth, but told the camera about the years she spent in the omega house.

The years she had spent servicing pack members. She talked about other omegas who had lived, and died, in the house.

Humiliation burned in my chest as she told the camera how she knew one day her daughter would be forced into the same life. That if I ever had a child, it would either endure my fate or be ripped from my arms and given to the rapist who fathered it.

That caused a wave of nausea that had me seeing spots as I struggled to breathe. I had never really considered a child I might one day have being forced into the same life or being turned into a monster itself.

Then Zara spoke. She detailed the abuse she had suffered at her husband's hands. She talked about the practices and law Linden and his council enforced. The sentences he had passed on other shifters. The humiliating punishments frequently meted out. The forced matings.

I kept my eyes focused on the closed door as they both took time explaining, with almost clinical precision, what life in Long Mesa was like. Not just addressing the omegas, but the treatment of the pack, the squallor most pack members lived in, the daily cloud of fear that covered the compound.

Their voices faded to background noise as I focused on breathing. Every time I had an urge to look at Remy for comfort or glare at Linden in anger, I studied the closed double doors.

There was a scuff in the lower left corner of the door on the left. A thin scratch marred the shiny wood of the door on the right. The handles were a brushed pewter, the reflection of the screen behind me a distorted swirl of muted colors as my family told their stories.

When Bella spoke, I had to close my eyes.

The video skipped in several places, cutting past what was likely minutes or hours of sobs as she got her story out in more detail than she had ever shared with me.

Linden was at a meeting with his Council when Cassian, Preston and Marc showed up. She thought Cassian was there to hang out. She had been sad since her mother had been taken away, charged with pack treason for aiding our escape.

Cassian had ranted and raved about my leaving. Marc had complained about there being no more omegas since the house burned to the ground days earlier, the faulty wiring finally igniting a spark that set the shack ablaze. Maisie and Shane had been executed for treason weeks earlier, so no one had

been there to stop the fire from consuming the entire building.

Her voice hitched as she quietly explained that seemed to change the energy in the room.

My hands curled around the seat of my chair when Cassian again mentioned how he had waited years to *be with me* and been denied.

Bella had tried to laugh it off. Tried to remind Cassian that she was still here and in a few years they would be married. Mates.

Then Preston casually mentioned if I was still there, he wouldn't need to wait. Cassian would have been able to fuck me any time, any way, any place. It would take the edge off until Bella could be his wife.

The cold look in Cassian's eyes as he turned on her. *One Markham is as good as the next.*

Preston held her arms, Marc held her legs. The tearing of fabric. Screaming, crying, begging, and pain. So much pain. Her voice shook, wrecked by the memories as she tried to explain what had happened to her.

They took turns, slapping her when she cried too loud until Preston finally shoved her shredded underwear into her mouth like a gag.

What she endured was what I would have endured. What I knew would have happened to me had I stayed, and I hated myself.

I hated myself for being relieved I hadn't stayed. That it hadn't been me.

With each whimper from Bella, I laid another brick around the wall of my heart.

Every sob that passed her lips, I set another sandbag in front of the rising tide of my emotions.

I locked my wolf back in the cage I had shoved her into years ago to keep her from rising up and killing the man responsible for all of this.

Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't fall apart with the first actual question someone asked me.

I had known today would suck beyond measure, but I wasn't prepared to be emotionally flayed first by the stories of my family.

I blinked when the dimmed lights came on, their bright fluorescence piercing and sharp. Bella's final words echoed in the air, haunting the silence around us.

Why, Daddy?

Papers were shuffled as the Council members looked through photographs and medical reports on Mom, Zara, and Bella.

My gaze dropped, stupidly, when a paper slid across to my side of the

table.

My brain saw the words “*significant trauma and tearing*” before it was snatched back by Tobias’s shaking hand. He was the only Council member, and an alternate at that, who would look at me with anything but stoic apathy.

Vincent cleared his throat.

I fixed my gaze back on the door, mentally already on the other side of it. Anywhere but in this room.

I had spent years training my mind to float away when things were too much to handle, too much to process. I honed that skill with my face pressed in the dirt with a knee digging into my spine. I sharpened it on the days I would be casually and violently shoved into the rusty metal of a locker.

It was the only way I had been able to survive day after day in that hell. It was the only resource I had to protect me now.

I could feel Remy’s eyes on me, begging me to look at him. Rage was coming off of my mate in barely controlled waves, but I also knew the second my gaze collided with his, I would fall apart.

I couldn’t afford to fall apart. Not yet. Maybe tonight when it was just us, locked in the quiet sanctum of our room, cradled in the strength of his arms, I could lose it. I would let him carry the burden with me.

Linden’s glare burned into me, hot and unrelenting, also demanding I look at him. But the moment I would let my eyes see him, I knew I would shift. My wolf would rip free of the tedious cage I had tucked her into, and I would hurl myself across the room and rip his throat out the way I had Dane Loomis.

The gravity of the hearing was lost on no one. Everyone had been ordered into silence before the first video began to play. Failure to comply would result in immediate termination of the hearing, with the side violating the silence order being removed.

So, I stared at the door, seeing through Vincent and another Council member seated in front of it. And I waited for my turn to be flayed alive.

“Skye,” Vincent began finally, a small thread of compassion hidden in the rasping tapestry of his voice. “May we begin?”

I jerked my head. I wanted to look him in the eye. I needed to know if there was any humanity in those watery blue eyes, but I wasn’t an Alpha. I was nothing more than a female, and a former omega. Looking him in the eye would have been a challenge.

My wolf huffed, annoyed and barely controlled.

I looped another layer of barbed wire around her cage, nestled her deeper into the recesses of my soul, and prayed she could stay leashed until this was over.

“Is there anything you would like to say?”

I barely stifled a snort. I wanted to say nothing and everything.

Where to begin?

“If I may, Sir,” Tobias said hesitantly, leaning forward. “This may be more prudent if we ask Miss Markham direct questions so as not to overlap with the information in the recordings. In the essence of time.”

I appreciated the *Miss Markham*. Tobias was trying to be polite and professional, but I didn’t need the reminder that I shared that name with my uncle.

The Markham name was forever tied to the Long Mesa pack.

Skye was better.

“Very well,” Vincent huffed, clearly annoyed at the disruption. “Skye, do you feel the accounts we just heard provide an accurate depiction of the Long Mesa pack?”

“Yes,” I replied without an ounce of hesitation.

Inhale. Exhale.

I could do this.

“Did you, yourself, experience any ill treatment while you were a member of the Long Mesa pack?”

“Daily.” I kept my tone clipped, brief.

Inhale. Exhale.

Huh. There was a small chip of wood missing half an inch below the handle on the right door. I had missed that in the shadows before.

“Could you elaborate in a particular instance?”

There were so many options, I struggled to grab onto one memory. They had all been dipped in oil, sliding through my fingers as soon as I grabbed on.

I zeroed my attention on the missing chip.

It was almost the size of the scar on my calf.

“There’s a scar on my leg from where Preston bit me.” The words didn’t sound right. My *voice* didn’t sound right. “I ... I was the last one to shift for a pack run. Preston ... bit me.”

The small noise from Vincent was barely audible, but I heard it nonetheless.

A tiny little grunt. Incredulity laced with ... amusement.

Because what I had just described could be dismissed as play between packmates. A small aggression by a beta to get me to hurry up and join the others before we were left.

The memories were over-exposed pictures, too bright and hiding the shadows.

“Skye.” Vincent was hiding a smile, clearly trying to indulge the overly emotional female in the room who probably misconstrued the first seventeen years of her life.

Inhale.

I closed my eyes and let the memories pull me under one last time.

“My first kiss happened when I was ten. The man who kissed me was Preston’s father. He was thirty-five, and had just come out of another omega’s room. I was playing on the front steps, and he picked me up by the front of my shirt. I could smell the blood and sweat sticking to him. He told me he couldn’t wait until I was older. That I looked just like my mother. Then he pressed his mouth on mine before he dropped me.”

Exhale.

“I had my first concussion when I was twelve. I smiled when a girl told Marc he was stupid. He grabbed my ponytail and swung my head into a metal pole.”

Inhale.

“I’ve had food poisoning more times than I can count from spoiled, rotting food. It was all we were given to eat, and after not eating for four days, you get kind of desperate.”

Exhale.

“I learned how to sew when my mom needed stitches. One of Linden’s friends from another pack visited her, and he had a thing for knives. She has a scar from her left breast to her right hip. I was thirteen when that happened.” My jaw flicked to the file that had her name on it. “I think you saw the picture of that scar in there.”

Inhale.

“When I was fifteen, I got a note from our principal telling me to go home from school early. I was halfway home when Marc grabbed me. He cornered me, told me the toll I had to pay for using the road was my shirt. He finally ripped it off of me when I wouldn’t give it to him. A mile down the road, Preston was there. *That* toll was my shorts. You can use your imagination for what the last toll was when I ran into Cassian.”

Exhale.

I opened my eyes, locked my gaze on Vincent's. I released the death drip on the bottom of my chair and rested my hands on top of the table.

“Should I keep going? Do you want to know about the time Preston held my head underwater until I almost drowned because I was stupid enough to use the public lake when the pipes burst at our house and I needed to shower?”

I leaned forward slightly, the numbness that had been insulating me burning away in a firestorm of caustic memories. “Or maybe tell you about every single time I was groped, grabbed, pinched, kissed, or touched against my will by Cassian, Preston and Marc? If you want that list, you may need to order in for food, because it adds up over the course of a decade and we'll be here awhile. Plus, that's not counting the number of adults that touched or made inappropriate comments to me while I was growing up. Most of them were part of Linden's council.”

I watched Vincent's throat swallow, the sagging skin bobbing for a moment before his eyes dipped away for a heartbeat of a second. I couldn't decipher the movement from submission or apology.

Either way, my eyes were back on the door before he realized what he had done.

I focused on my breath again, ignoring the sound of Remy—or maybe Gabe—grinding their teeth hard enough to crack and shatter enamel.

“I think that is enough,” Vincent said, his voice more subdued. He coughed, and more papers rustled.

“Elias?”

My eyes jerked to the older man in the corner behind Tobias.

“You have visited the Long Mesa pack,” Vincent went on. “Can you confirm or deny the accusations as they stand?”

Elias sighed, shaking his head sadly. “I can confirm that, in the past, Long Mesa's Alphas have been known for their harsh views on punishment as well as, what some would call, a gross neglect of their omegas. That being said, I have not personally visited the pack in well over two decades so I cannot attest firsthand to the accounts heard today. I cannot say, with complete honesty, that Miss Markham's account is true or false.”

Besides him, Daniel's eyes closed. His face was a strange combination of horror and fury. When his eyes opened, the iridescent green of his eyes was filled with hate as he glared in the direction of Preston and Linden.

“Alpha Gabriel,” Vincent said, turning his attention to Gabe.

I started counting knots in the woodgrain of the doors as I heard Gabe stand.

“Does your pack still wish to proceed with the original claims against Linden Markham?”

“More than ever,” Gabe gritted out, his voice shaking with fury.

Vincent sighed softly. “And you will provide sanctuary for the displaced wolves who have requested it?”

“Yes.”

Vincent craned his neck, sighing deeply when each member of the Council gave a short nod.

“The Council will not order any shifter currently seeking sanctum from Long Mesa to return. Furthermore, we will be sending delegates to monitor and review Linden Markham’s claim to Long Mesa at the conclusion of the Summit.”

“Wait a minute!” Linden exploded from his seat, green eyes full of fire. Preston looked stunned to see his Alpha on his feet, but he didn’t move to join him.

“Alpha Linden—”

“Am I not even allowed my own defense against these heinous accusations?” he snapped, ignoring Vincent’s attempt to silence him. He slapped an open palm on the table.

“Do you *have* a defense?” another Council member asked slowly, turning to look incredulously at my uncle. “Even if you did not willfully participate in any wrong doings, you have failed to protect your pack.”

Linden flushed. “These are all *lies*. Sick, disparaging lies—”

“And the medical reports?” Tobias interrupted coolly, lifting a manilla folder of papers and pictures.

“A fabrication,” he spat.

“Is the scar on my leg a fabrication, too?” The question slipped out before I could censor myself. “Do you want me to show it to you?”

His gaze snapped to me. “You lying bitch.”

Linden took a step towards me, and Preston’s eyes narrowed into slits of hate.

Before I could stand up to defend myself, Remy was between us, shoulders heaving as a warning growl vibrated deep in his chest. Every single muscle was locked and poised to attack Linden at any second.

“Enough!” Vincent yelled, pushing to his feet. “Alphas, control yourselves.”

I glanced around. Gabe had moved to stand on my other side. Surprisingly, Daniel was on his feet as well, hands clenched into massive fists as he glared at Linden and Preston.

Linden’s gaze flickered to me again, but Remy adjusted his position so he couldn’t see me, shielding me.

“Everyone sit down *now*,” Vincent thundered.

The Council looked around. Some were concerned, one looked curious, others were leaning forward in case things took a violent turn.

My wolf was in favor of violence.

Inhale.

Linden sat down first, throwing himself hard into his chair with a petulant growl. Elias nudged Daniel pointedly until he sat. Gabe’s fingers ghosted across my shoulder before he went back to his own seat.

Remy pulled out the chair beside me and sat down, still between Linden and me, clearly no longer interested in sitting on the sidelines.

The only indication Vincent cared about Remy’s new seat choice was a slight tightening around his mouth, but he quickly masked it.

“You will have a chance to prove your innocence when we observe your pack, Alpha Linden,” Vincent said calmly, like the last minute of testosterone fueled fury had never happened.

Linden glowered, teeth flashing. “We welcome the Council to our pack any time.”

Vincent grimaced. “This meeting is now adjourned.”

Exhale.

THE WALK BACK TO THE CABIN WAS MADE IN TOTAL SILENCE.

Remy had reached for my hand, but Gabe pulled him back, saving me the trouble of pulling away from him myself.

It wasn't him, it was me. It was all me.

My skin was stretched too tight over my bones. My wolf was on the verge of a full blown riot. Everything in me was raw and exposed. I was a bomb with fraying, tangled cords.

I was going to detonate soon, and not in a pretty way.

If Remy touched me, I would lose it in front of everyone. I needed to hold it in until I was behind the walls of our cabin, then I could fall apart. I could lose myself to the fear, the grief, and the pain before he could put me back together.

All the barricades I had erected to keep my heart and emotions safe had been torn down piece by piece in that room. Brick by brick, memory by memory, I had sacrificed and bared chipped pieces of my soul until I was stripped bare. I had survived, but I was one small breeze away from shattering.

I slowly started the ascent of the stairs to our cabin, opening the door and wandering inside. I stopped in the middle of the living area, not sure exactly what I wanted to do.

When the door closed, I turned around. Surprise flashed through me when I realized Gabe was the only other person in the room, which meant Remy was still outside.

Maybe because now he knew. He knew just how utterly, desperately

damaged I was.

My heart sank, wondering if he was rethinking being with me. If all the broken, damaged bits inside of me were finally enough to make him see how completely far out of my league he was.

“I asked Remy to give us a minute,” Gabe said softly, moving to sit in one of the overstuffed armchairs. He motioned to the other chair. “Please sit?”

My wooden legs carried me to the chair, cracking in half so I could half sit, half fall into the chair.

He loosely rested his forearms on his denim encased thighs, leaning towards me. “First, I’m so damn proud of you, sweetheart.”

I swallowed, not expecting that. The hot prick of tears burned behind my eyes. I curled my hands into fists. The pain of my nails cutting into my palms held off the impending storm of tears. For now.

“What you did back there took a hell of a lot of courage. I really need you to hear this,” he said, taking a deep breath and holding my gaze. “No one, not me and especially not Remy, think anything less of you because of what happened to you.”

My heart cracked open, and I blinked, twin tears falling. My jaw wobbled, and I locked my teeth together.

“Did Remy ever tell you about my father?” he asked suddenly.

I shook my head.

Gabe sighed and leaned back in his chair. “He was an asshole, really, but he helped shape Blackwater into what it is today. It was his idea to start a school for the packs. But he wasn’t the best father. Truthfully, I don’t think he knew how to be, especially after my mom died.”

I toed off my shoes and pulled my legs up to my chest, turning sideways in the chair and leaning against the back.

“He died right after the twins were born,” Gabe went on. “But he had very ... firm expectations for the pack, and for me. He was cold, but a fair Alpha. I respected him, but there was no love lost between us. I resented him for spending more time on the pack than with his son. The only time he spoke to me was if it was about pack business.”

My breath caught in my throat. That guy was the opposite of Gabriel Holt. There was no denying he absolutely adored his family.

“I knew that when I became a father, I wouldn’t put those expectations on my kids, or on my pack. But still ... I was impulsive as hell, got in a lot of

fights growing up. What helped more than anything was Mal.”

A soft smile graced his lips. “She’s everything I’m not. Patient, smart as hell, kind. I guess what I’m trying to say,” he said, meeting my gaze once more, “is I spent a lot of time pushing her away, not wanting her to see the parts of me I was ashamed of. The darker parts of me. I was so scared when Remy was born that I would treat him the way my father treated me.”

“You’re not your father,” I told him, shaking my head.

“No, I’m not,” he agreed. “My childhood made me the man I am today, but it’s not all I am. Mallory helped me see that.”

He drew in a long breath. “Don’t shut Remy out. I know how scary it is to open up the most vulnerable parts of yourself. But it’s worth it. You’re bonded for a reason. You don’t have to carry around the darkness by yourself anymore.”

I closed my eyes, more tears falling. Every part of my heart was bleeding out between us as he easily shredded the last bits of my resolve.

Gabe stood up slowly, holding out a hand to me. I placed mine in it, letting him pull me into his arms. He hugged me tightly as I wrapped my arms around his back.

“Don’t forget you have a lot of people who love you, honey,” he told me quietly, rubbing my back in soothing circles. “I don’t care how or why you came to our pack. You’re one of us now. And you’re part of my family. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I mumbled against his shirt.

He pulled back, kissing my forehead. “You want me to get Remy? He’s probably seconds away from losing his mind outside.”

A strangled laugh escaped me. “Yeah. Tell him I’m upstairs, okay?”

“You got it,” he said, letting me go.

I turned and crossed the room, heading up the stairs and going to my room. I stepped inside the bathroom and turned on the light, bracing my hands against the counter and looking at my reflection.

I looked paler than usual, my green eyes ringed in red. I turned on the faucet and splashed water onto my face, blotting off the excess with a hand towel.

I flipped off the light and headed back into the bedroom, freezing when I saw Remy sitting on the edge of our bed waiting for me.

He would always be waiting for me.

The kindness and love shining brightly in his eyes was my undoing.

My face crumpled, all the emotion and stress of the day finally breaking the last dam in me. I ran across the floor to him, diving into his arms. I wrapped my arms and legs around him like a spider monkey, burying my face in his neck as the first sob ripped from my chest.

“Shh,” he murmured, his arms wrapping around me. “I’m right here, okay?”

I cried against him, his body absorbing every tear, every sob, every shudder. Until, exhausted, my body went limp against him. I turned my head, my cheek resting on a wet spot of his shirt, soaked with countless tears.

“What do you need?” he asked softly, still holding me tightly.

“You.” My voice was broken and raw from sobbing. “I just need you.”



MY EYES blinked open hours later, disoriented by the dark. My body swayed gently, lifting with every breath Remy took.

I lifted my head and looked around. At some point, I must have fallen asleep, emotionally drained from the day and from crying. Remy had moved us so his back was against the headboard of the bed, but my body was still wrapped around his. Even in sleep, his arms were anchored around me.

My hands slid down to rest on his chest, my shoulders aching from having spent the last several hours with them wrapped around his neck. I leaned back, watching him in sleep.

A small frown furrowed the skin between his brows, and I couldn’t stop myself from trying to smooth it out with my thumb.

His eyes fluttered open, a lazy smile spreading across his face when he saw me watching him. His hands moved down to my hips.

“Hey.” The rough timbre of his sleep laden voice slid over me like water over river rocks.

“Hi,” I answered, my own voice hoarse from crying. I cleared my throat, my hand fluttering to the base of my neck.

Awareness cleared his gaze. “What time is it?”

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “After eight. We slept for almost five hours.”

“Explains why I can’t feel my legs,” he admitted with a wry grin. I felt the muscles under me flex as he tried to get the blood flowing through his

limbs.

I started to move off of him, an apology already forming on my lips, but his hands clamped onto my waist, not letting me move.

“Didn’t say I wanted you to move.” He brushed a lock of hair from my face. “I love you.”

I leaned into his touch as he cradled my cheek in his large palm, his touch exquisitely gentle. “I love you.”

“You were amazing today,” he said quietly, his eyes taking me in with pride and love.

“I almost blew it,” I said with a sigh, shaking my head.

His brows rose. “You were incredible.” A devastating grin spread across his face, curling my toes. “My girl’s a badass.”

I laughed softly. “I can’t believe we’re free. My mom, Aunt Zara, Bella ... I should call them and tell them.”

“Dad did that,” he told me. “He knew you needed a break. You can call your mom now if you want to talk to her.”

I bit my lip and slowly shook my head. “I’ll call her in the morning. Right now? I really just want to be with you.”

A soft smile graced his mouth. “I’m right here, baby. I’m not going anywhere. You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.”

“Good,” I whispered, leaning forward and slotting my mouth against his, licking the seam of his mouth until it opened for me. I swept inside, tasting and sipping. My hand drifted up towards the muscled bulge of his shoulders, my nails digging in as I tilted my head, adjusting the angle of the kiss.

With a throaty masculine groan, he sat up, pulling my chest flush to his as he took control of the kiss. After several minutes of his mouth devouring mine, he pulled away, chest heaving.

“Skye.”

“I need this. I need *you*,” I said, feeling it in my bones.

Remy was my anchor in every storm. Right now there was a Category 5 hurricane blasting through me. I needed the safe harbor he provided.

He kissed me again, his hands working under the hem of my shirt and lifting. I pulled back long enough to rip the shirt off over my head, my mouth already crashing into his before the material hit the floor.

His hand swept up my ribs and around my back, deftly undoing the clasp of my bra. It fell between us, his hands caressing, kneading, and squeezing the newly exposed skin.

He dropped kisses along my jaw, down my throat. His teeth nipped and his tongue soothed. He lingered at the claiming mark on my shoulder, pressing hot, wet kisses as he mapped the raised, scarred skin with his tongue.

I shuddered, rolling my hips against his, my hands tangling in his hair. Desire and want flared in my blood, igniting a fire that pooled low in my belly. With a whimper, I rocked against him again.

Groaning, Remy rolled me under him, his weight pressing me into the mattress. His head lifted, eyes searching me to make sure I was still with him. That I hadn't slipped into another memory.

I lifted my head, my mouth claiming his in a bruising kiss. A hand found the waistband of my jeans, deftly undoing the button and tugging the zipper down before slipping inside the lace of my underwear.

My head fell back, a hoarse cry falling from my lips as a finger slipped through my wet folds, finding my entrance and circling it with dizzying precision. The finger pressed inside as his tongue teased a circle around the tight peak of my nipple.

My hips jerked when he added a second finger, the heel of his hand grinding against the bundle of nerves between my legs. My back arched off the bed, my mouth falling open in a wordless gasp as his mouth closed around the tight peak of my nipple and sucked hard, sending me catapulting into my release.

The powerful muscles of his wrist flexed as he thrust his fingers in and out of my core, wringing out the last twitches of my orgasm.

I tugged at the soft material of his shirt until he helped me pull it off. He sat back and my eyes lingered on his bare chest, chiseled and sculpted by the shifter gods.

He stood up, tugging off my jeans and underwear in a hurried rush of jerky movements. His hands smoothed up the inside of my legs, spreading them as his eyes devoured the length of me.

I smiled as his gaze heated, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips. Pushing myself up, I reached for his pants, helping him shove them past his hips and laying back as he stepped out of them.

Hooking his hands under my knees, he jerked me to the edge of the bed, lining us up and thrusting deep inside of me in one fluid motion.

I cried out, the sudden pressure of him inside of me, filling and stretching me, causing my brain to fritz and sputter.

He dropped over me, his hands braced on either side of my head and his lips found mine. His hips moved in slow, unhurried strokes as his lips teased mine open, timing the slide of his tongue against mine with the snap of his hips.

I gasped, arching into him, meeting every thrust. Pushing as he pulled, taking as he gave. A riot of sensations exploded in me, hurtling me into a blinding rush of ecstasy.

REMY KISSED ME AGAIN, HIS HAND TANGLING IN MY HAIR AS HE GROANED AND reluctantly pulled back.

His dark lashes blinked, clearing the haze of need and hunger from his eyes as he looked down at me. A finger traced the outline of my lips.

“I love you,” he murmured.

I smiled, sated and happy. “How many meetings do you have today?”

He sat on the edge of the bed having already dressed and showered while I had slept, still exhausted from the events of yesterday. But my heart was lighter today, likely the result of spending the night with Remy, who took the time to remind me (frequently) how much he loved me and that I belonged with him. To him.

His hand grazed my bare arm, unable to stop touching me. “A few this morning, and another this afternoon. Dante and I are working on getting a few more packs to help us reopen Granite Peak.”

A pang of sadness echoed in the cavern of my chest. We would graduate this year and wouldn’t be back. But I knew the importance it held for future pack relations.

“Make sure you eat something,” he reminded me, tapping the tip of my nose.

“You could stay here and I could make a meal out of *you*,” I suggested, grinning as I lay back against the pillows.

He groaned softly, his head falling back. “I fucking wish.”

I laughed, feeling his frustration myself. “We should spend a week in bed when we get back. Maybe go back to the cabin in the woods by your house.

Lock ourselves in there for a month or five?”

His smile slipped as he grew quiet. His fingers played with my hair, sifting the soft strands between his fingers.

“What?” I pressed, my mood turning serious as I pushed myself up onto my elbows to look at him better.

“How would you feel about moving into the cabin with me when we get back?” he asked quietly.

That caught me by surprise.

“You don’t need to answer now,” he said quickly, flashing me a warm smile meant to alleviate the butterflies that had taken my stomach by storm. “Or we could get a place in town if you want to be near your mom. I just ... I don’t know if I can go back to not seeing you next to me every morning.”

We weren’t even out of high school, but I knew what he meant. Since we had bonded, *really* bonded, the idea of not seeing him or sharing a space and a bed with him, seemed wrong. Abhorrent, even. I hated just the idea of waking up with him on the other side of Blackwater.

My wolf hated it even more.

He leaned over, kissing me softly. “Just think about it. We’re still here for another week. There’s no rush, even when we get home. Take all the time you need.”

Home.

Home wasn’t a place; it wasn’t the apartment with Mom or Granite Peak or even Blackwater. Home was the man next to me.

“Yes,” I said quietly.

His eyes went wide, his eyebrows lifting.

“Yes,” I repeated, my voice firmer. “I love you. The idea of not being with you ...” I shuddered.

He grinned at me, the sight breathtaking. “We can figure out where later on when I get back.”

“Deal.” I pushed myself up and kissed him again. “I’m going to hang out here. I need to call Mom.”

He nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll see you later.”

I didn’t get up until after I heard them leave for their meetings. I took a shower, ordered breakfast and grabbed my phone, munching on a piece of bacon while I waited for Mom to answer the video chat.

Her face filled the screen a second later, her emerald green eyes swimming in tears. “You did it, baby.”

Emotion immediately swelled my throat closed, a new wave of tears threatening.

“Gabe called last night,” she added. The phone jostled as she sat down, and I recognized the backdrop of the wall in our living room. “I’m so proud of you, Skye.”

“Did he tell you the Council is going to investigate Linden and Long Mesa? He may lose the pack.” If the Council saw even a fourth of what we had been through, they would have no choice but to strip him of his Alpha title.

Mom nodded, a smile wobbling on her full lips. “I spoke to Mallory yesterday, too. She told me ... She told me that you and Remy completed your bond. I’m happy for you.”

I frowned at her words. “Mom, why didn’t you tell me that the bond wasn’t complete until we ... You know.”

A sad smile drifted across her face. “I didn’t want you to feel pressured, honey. You have already been through so much ... Remy and I-”

“You and Remy *talked* about this?” My jaw dropped open.

She grimaced, realizing her mistake. “Not in *detail*. I wanted to make sure he was being patient with you. Skye, after everything you went through, I didn’t want you to feel pressured in any way.”

I groaned, nearly dropping my phone. “I can’t believe you discussed my sex life with my boyfriend.”

Mate, my wolf reminded me, a bit smugly.

Mom sighed again, shaking her head. “Honey-”

“Did you know it was *Linden* who told me we weren’t bonded in the eyes of Pack Law?” I asked, betrayal a sharp sting in my chest.

She looked down, absently rubbing the scar on her throat the way she always did when she was upset or anxious.

“Skye,” she whispered my name, exhaling hard. “Honey, you have to believe me that I never thought Linden would bring that up. That he would be so manipulative-”

“You are aware who we’re talking about, right?” I cut in sharply. “Your *brother*? My uncle? The guy who routinely lent you out to his buddies?”

She winced and sucked in a sharp breath.

Okay, that was a little below the belt. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Her hand closed over the scar on her neck, and she leaned her cheek

against her forearm. “No, I deserved that.” Her green eyes found mine. “I’ve been so busy trying to protect you that I haven’t let you live your life.”

“I wish you would have told me,” I admitted.

“I should have,” she replied gently. “I’m so sorry I put you in a position that gave Linden any more power over you. A mate bond is sacred. Watching you and Remy together, there’s no denying you’re mates. Consummating it seemed ... what’s the word Katy always uses? Archaic?”

My lips pulled into a smirk. “Yeah. That’s definitely a Katy-word.”

Letting out a heavy breath, she rubbed her neck again absently. “A mate bond ... It transcends every other law packs are bound to, Skye. I’m happy you and Remy have each other.”

A warm feeling lit me from within, but a second later, I narrowed my eyes, focusing on her hand as it traced the scar. “Mom?”

Another heavy sigh. “Baby, I know you’re upset, and you have every right to be.”

“Mom.”

She looked at me curiously, her hand still pressed to her neck.

My hand drifted up, settling over a nearly identical mark on my own skin.

“The mark on your neck,” I whispered.

Her eyes went wide and she snatched her hand away. “Honey-”

“Is that ... “ I swallowed hard, pieces of a long forgotten jigsaw puzzle fitting into place. “Mom, were you bonded?”

I could see the struggle in her eyes. The warring between lies and truths.

Finally, she answered simply, “Yes.”

“Who?” I scrambled to find an answer, sifting through countless memories of all the men in Long Mesa.

I was met with silence.

It couldn’t have been someone in Long Mesa. No way. There was no way anyone would let their mate suffer the way my mother had day after day, year after year.

The only other person ...

“My dad?” All the air left me in a rush. “Your mate was my father?”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “Yes.”

It all made sense, and yet, nothing made sense.

“Mom, if he was your mate, why did you stay in Long Mesa?”

Remy would have torn the world down to get to me, and I would have walked through the gates of hell to get to him. No mate would ever let their

mate suffer the way my mother had.

Tears gathered in her eyes. "It's complicated."

I wanted to scream. I *hated* that word. I was beyond sick of the damn word.

"Honey, we can talk about it when you're home. Please. I don't want to have this conversation with you now. Not like this."

My gaze hardened, turning accusatory. "No, Mom, you never wanted to have this conversation at all."

She flinched away, the screen tilting as her hand shook holding it.

"You could have told me," I seethed, anger flaring brightly again. "You could have told me when I bonded with Remy or anytime since then, and you didn't. How could you keep this from me?"

She shook her head in fast, jerking motions. "I was going to tell you everything when you came back."

"I don't know if I believe you," I admitted. "All you do is keep secrets from me, Mom, and the secrets you keep aren't helping me. You're doing it to protect *you*, not me."

She flinched, my words landing like a physical blow. "Skye."

A knock at the door was all the interruption I needed.

"Mom, I have to go."

"Skye, don't hang up on me. We need to talk about this!" The desperate pitch of her tone broke my heart, but I was too angry to stop and listen to her right now.

"Yes, we do," I agreed. I swallowed around the heavy emotions clogging my throat, cutting off my air. "But I can't do that right now."

Another knock, this one more insistent than the first.

"I'll talk to you later, Mom."

"Skye!" Her voice was pleading now, but I couldn't bring myself to keep talking.

Maybe I was a bitch, but I needed to digest the fact that my *father* was my mother's *mate*. That they had bonded. That my mom, the one person I thought always had my back, had lied to me multiple times.

My chest ached from the realization that she had been keeping so much from me for so long.

I ended the call and shoved my phone deep into my pocket as I headed to the front door, wrenching it open.

Daniel's green eyes narrowed when he saw my face. "Are you okay?"

I blinked, stunned to see him standing there. “What? Yeah. I’m ... I got in a fight with my mom.” I shoved down the residual emotions and tried to focus on the man in front of me.

His eyes narrowed, the motion barely perceptible. “Is Remy here?”

I shook my head and backed up to let him in.

“Fuck,” he breathed, jaw clenching as his gaze swept the room. His fist tightened around the file tucked in one hand.

“What’s that?” I motioned to the manilla file as I closed the door.

He ignored my question. “What about Gabe? Is he around?”

“They’re all in meetings,” I replied, worry beginning to unfurl in my gut. “I’m not sure where they are.”

His eyes cut to me, and I could see the indecision warring in his eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded, my tone slightly harsher than I intended. But my nerves were shot from the argument with my mom, and I was more than sick and tired of people being all cloak and dagger and shit.

“What about Dante? Luke?”

I held in a growl. “All in *meetings*. What the hell is going on, Daniel?”

He raked his free hand through his inky black hair. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Remy’s number. It rang once before Daniel pulled it out of my hand and ended the call.

“No,” he said sharply, dropping my phone on the table. “I don’t know who’s around him, and I can’t have people overhearing what I need to tell him.”

Fear spiked in me. “What’s going on?”

He spun, his gaze piercing as he looked at me and then down at the file in his hands before finally settling on me again. “Do you know where they are? Maybe I can get to them.”

I reached out, my hand closing around his wrist as he went to turn away for the door.

He jerked back, the folder falling to the ground and papers fluttering out. I bent to scoop them up, but froze when I saw the name on the page:

SKYE MARKHAM

There were pictures mixed with the papers.

At least a dozen of them. Some in Blackwater, some in Granite Peak. Several with Remy, and at least one of me in Long Mesa.

My hands shook as I looked up at Daniel. “What the hell is this?”

He dropped to his knees, quickly trying to scoop up the evidence, but it

was pointless. I had seen it.

I snatched a photo from his hands. It was Remy and me, taken at GPA, wrapped in each other's arms, our lips a breath away from connecting as snow swirled around us.

It would have been beautiful if it wasn't such a creepy, total violation of privacy.

I shot to my feet, backpedaling from Daniel so fast that I nearly tripped over the coffee table. "What the *fuck* is going on?"

My eyes shot to my phone, but Daniel was between me and the lifeline it offered. He was also blocking the front door. I could make a break for the back door, but odds were he could catch me.

Instead of reaching for me, he stood up slowly and took a step back. He raised his hands innocently. "Skye, I need you to calm down and listen to me."

"Why the hell do you have a freaking file on me?" I raised the photo. "You have *pictures* of me! Have you been watching me?"

"No," he said quickly, shaking his head. "Skye, I need to talk to Remy and Gabe."

I opened my mouth, but he cut me off.

"And you," he added. "I know you have questions, but I'm not the bad guy here."

"You have pictures of me in Long Mesa," I whispered.

How had I been so wrong about this guy? He had protected me from Preston, befriended all of us ... How had I missed this?

He rubbed his jaw, the muscles in his neck straining so hard I worried they would snap. "Skye, I didn't take these pictures."

"Does Elias know?" My voice rose shrilly. "Does he know that you've been spying on me? On my friends?"

He's been spying on my friends.

Terror, unlike anything I had ever experienced before, drenched me like a five gallon bucket of ice water. My whole body shook, the cold freezing my bones and blood from the inside out.

"You took the missing shifters." I could barely make my lips form the words.

His gaze sharpened. "Skye, I need you to trust me right now. We need to go."

"I'm not going *anywhere* with you," I fired back, jerking away when he

reached for me.

“To find Remy,” he ground out. “We need to find *Remy* and the others.”

“You expect me to just go with you?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Give me one good reason why I should,” I snapped.

He inched forward, jerking his chin at the picture in my hand. “Because I found that file in Elias’s shit. *He’s* the one who’s been keeping a file on you, Skye.”

MY EYES DROPPED TO THE PICTURE I CLUTCHED IN MY HAND A SECOND before lifting them to meet Daniel's gaze. "Why would Elias have a file on me? Pictures of me?"

He snorted and folded his muscular arms across his broad chest, pulling the fabric of the gray t-shirt tight around his biceps. "Probably because he's obsessed with you."

"He isn't obsessed with me," I countered. "He's been *helping* me. He's my friend."

"Yeah, well your *friend* has been keeping tabs on you and your boyfriend," he retorted coldly.

"Mate," I corrected instinctively.

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Mate. Fine. The point is, Elias has been keeping tabs on you since you first showed up at that school last year. He even went as far as to dig into your history in Long Mesa. It's all there, Skye."

"That makes zero sense," I snapped, narrowing my eyes. "He's been helping me since I met him."

"He's been *studying* you since you met him." Daniel scoffed, tossing me a look that was part pitying and part annoyed. "You can't tell me you haven't noticed how he's constantly trying to get you and Remy to 'test your bond' or watch you or some other creepy shit."

"It's not creepy; it's his *job*," I replied emphatically. "And aren't you supposed to be working with him? Isn't that the whole reason you're even here? Because you're helping him with his research?"

He growled, the sound low and ominous. “Jesus, wake the fuck up, Skye. I’m not helping him—I’m trying to figure out what his angle is. Elias isn’t the guy you think he is, or the guy my pack thinks he is.”

My spine stiffened. “You said your pack was gone. That you were the last one left.”

“I lied!” He threw his arms wide. “It was a fucking lie that Elias came up with as a cover story. Are you catching on yet?”

I glared at him, my wolf snarling and ready to attack. “Then who the hell are you?”

His arms fell to his side. “A friend.”

“A friend who happens to kidnap women?” I asked archly, still fully aware that he stood between me and the door.

“I’ve never kidnapped anyone, and neither has my pack.” He actually seemed offended at the suggestion. “If you’re talking about kidnapers, you might want to look a little closer to your own circle. Pretty convenient that all the girls who recently went missing are from your school.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” I demanded.

“It means, princess,” he seethed, taking a step forward, “that your good buddy Elias has been absent every time one of those girls went missing.”

“Elias is an old man,” I answered coolly, rolling my eyes. “And I was there when two men, neither of whom were Elias, tried to kidnap one of my best friends.”

His jade eyes glittered. “Right. One of them killed himself, right? Blew his brains out in the snow?”

I flinched back at the reminder of the way the crimson sprayed across the freshly fallen snow. The grotesque image was seared into my brain.

“How did you know that?”

“Because his name was Daniel Christopher,” he replied smugly.

My breath caught. “That’s *your* name.”

“No, that’s the name of a guy Elias told me to be,” he fired back. “An identity he set up for me because he knew a dead man wouldn’t be using that name. A lone wolf he hired to kidnap your friends.”

I started shaking my head slowly. “You’re lying.”

“You know I’m not.”

“No,” I said stubbornly, refusing to pull at that loose thread. If I did, I had a feeling everything would unravel around me.

“My name is Dimitri Dashkov,” he said softly. “I’m from a pack in

northern Russia in the Ural Mountains. Dr. Samuels approached my Alpha three years ago when he found out we had been making progress with the fertility issues plaguing all the packs. He wanted to study our methods. We stupidly let him in, and he's spent the last year bastardizing his own version for *his* pack."

My knees shook, threatening to give out. I blindly reached back for the edge of the couch before perching precariously on the arm. "No way."

"Skye," he crouched down in front of me, the move putting us almost at eye level, "I need to find Remy or Gabe and tell them about this."

"Tell them about what? That you're a liar and Elias helped you?"

His jaw clenched. "You haven't asked one of the more important questions, you know."

I glared at him. "Enlighten me, asshole."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I'll let that slide. What you should be asking is: 'What pack is Elias from?'"

"He's never claimed allegiance to any pack," I replied. It was what allowed him to move freely between packs and conduct his research.

"His nephew is Damien Valois."

My head snapped up.

"Elias Samuels is from *Norwood*," he said slowly.

I shot to my feet. "No!"

"Think about it, Skye," Daniel—no, *Dimitri*—hissed. "All the girls who went missing are from your school. Who knows the security systems and protocols of that place better than Dr. Samuels and the packs that left? They knew exactly how to get in, unseen, and take the girls they wanted."

"Maren," I gasped, my hand flying to my throat. "You're saying they took Maren?"

He frowned. "I don't know the names of all the ones they took. But if she went missing from the school, then, yeah. Odds are she's in New York, inside the *Norwood* territory."

"And they did this because of the theory that *your* pack came up with?"

"It's a little more involved than that, but yes." He glared at me. "The North American packs aren't the only ones who have felt the strain of what's happening to our species. But our Alpha had a theory, and so far? It's working. It isn't a full fix, but it's enough to buy us more time."

"What's the theory?"

"Skye, I'll tell you all of that, but right now? I need to find your Alpha or

your mate and tell them something is going on.”

The gravity in his voice shook me. Something that looked like fear lingered deep in his eyes.

“They’re probably in the main building,” I muttered.

He turned on his heel. “Stay here. I’ll find—”

“Like hell,” I snapped, following on his heels.

He pulled open the door and paused, but I shoved him enough that he stumbled through the doorway and I could slip outside.

His hand clamped around my wrist, and the animalistic growl that ripped from my throat was a barely controlled warning from my wolf.

He had no right to touch us.

He held eye contact with me, but slowly removed his hand and stepped back to put distance between us.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, and it sounded sincere. “I shouldn’t have touched you.”

I rubbed my wrist. It didn’t hurt, but I didn’t like the feel of anyone else touching me that wasn’t Remy.

And my wolf *definitely* didn’t approve. She was currently Team Rip-His-Throat-Out.

“It’s probably safer for you if you stay here,” he added quietly.

“Safer?”

“Yeah.”

“*Safer* means Remy could be in danger then, right?”

He barely nodded.

“Then I’m coming with you.” I turned and stormed down the stairs, trying to swallow the rising tide of panic. “Keep up.”

He started to mutter something under his breath, his boots stomping down the floorboards of the steps like they had personally offended him, when someone yelled my name from the right.

“Wait up, guys!” Tate called, jogging to cross the distance between us. The smile on her face slipped as she looked at us. “What’s going on?”

“Have you talked to Dante or your dad?” Dimitri demanded by way of greeting.

Tate’s eyebrows rose, her gaze flitting to me. “Not since they left this morning. Are you guys headed to the lodge?”

“Yeah. Apparently something is going on that *Daniel*,” I grimaced, “needs to talk to them about.”

“Yeah, I do, and it would be better if you both waited here,” he snapped back.

“You said Remy’s in danger,” I retorted coldly. “That means I’m coming.”

“Whoa!” Tate yelled, stepping between us with her hands up. “What kind of danger?”

Dimitri looked ready to explode. “The kind that will probably happen if we keep standing around here talking about it. I’ll explain everything, but first we need to find them.”

“My dad and Dante are in trouble, too?” Tate asked softly.

“Honestly? I think we’re all in trouble.”

“Then I’m done waiting,” I replied, spinning around in the direction of the lodge.

I made it three steps before the world exploded in front of me. Glass, stone, and wood flew in every direction as the main lodge erupted into a fireball.

The force of the explosion knocked me clear off my feet, hurling me backwards. My head hit the ground and everything went black.

PAIN RIPPED ME OUT OF THE DARK. I GASPED, MY EYES OPENING AND THEN squeezing shut against the bright light around me.

“Easy,” a warm voice admonished.

I managed to crack an eye and saw Daniel perched on the edge of the chair across from me.

No, not Daniel.

Dimitri.

I swallowed a wave of nausea that burned up my throat. My bones throbbed and ached, my joints were swollen and stiff. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Maybe I had fallen off another cliff.

The sound of the top twisting off a plastic bottle filled the air. “Drink this.”

“What is it?” I asked, my voice a ragged murmur.

“It’ll help with the pain.” He pressed the cold bottle into my hand.

I struggled to clear the haze of pain and fog from my memories. “What happened?”

He sighed softly. “A lot.”

“I don’t—”

“Drink it,” he ordered, thrusting the bottle under my nose.

I jerked back, the sudden movement snapping the last of my control. Thankfully he must have read my mind because an empty trash can was shoved onto my lap just in time for me to vomit into it.

Dimitri sucked in a sharp breath and waited for me to stop heaving before

pulling the bucket out of my hands.

With a pitiful, humiliating whimper, I screwed my eyes shut, willing the pain away. I sank deeper into the buttery soft leather of the chair that cradled me.

“Now will you drink this?” he asked, exasperated as he tried handing me the bottle again.

I would have drank arsenic if it got rid of the pain.

I fumbled for the container, tilting it awkwardly until the thick liquid touched my lips. It had a strangely minty taste, and even stranger, I felt better after I swallowed the first mouthful.

By the time I drained the bottle, the pain had receded enough that I could sit up. The cobwebs of my memories started to clear.

Oh, God.

I wished I had just drank arsenic.

I didn't bother stifling the cry that ripped out of my throat as I remembered the last few seconds before I lost consciousness.

The memory of the explosion tore apart my mind, fragmented memories became shrapnel that shredded my soul.

Remy.

Dimitri saw the shift in my demeanor, his entire stance changing. “Whoa, hey, calm down.”

“There was an explosion!” Fuck the lingering pain. I scrambled to sit upright.

“I know,” he said softly.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded, looking around wildly.

An airplane.

I was on an airplane.

A private one, if I had to guess, slightly smaller than the Blackwater one. I craned my neck to look around. Two men sat towards the front of the plane, two more in the back. Tate was asleep in the chair to my right across the aisle.

As my anxiety ratcheted up a notch, mixing with my desperation, I reached out for my wolf, ready to fight my way out of this if I had to.

There was nothing there.

This was worse than when I had suppressed her in Long Mesa because even then, I could still feel her buried somewhere deep inside of me. Even if I couldn't always reach her, she was *there*.

Now there was just a silent void. An endless chasm of silence.

Chest heaving as I started to spiral into a panic attack, I glared at Dimitri. “Where am I? Where’s Remy?”

Dimitri held his hands up. “Skye, I can explain everything, but you need to calm down.”

“I’m on an airplane with people I don’t know, a guy who kidnapped me, and one of my friends is unconscious next to me!” I exploded. “Don’t tell me to calm down!”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “First? I didn’t kidnap you.”

“Then how did I get here?”

“What do you remember?” he countered, lowering his hand from his face slowly.

My fingers curled around the arm rests.

What did I remember?

I gasped as the memories swept in faster than a tsunami. “I remember looking for Remy. The explosion.”

He nodded. “It knocked you out. I picked you up and got you out of there.”

“Where’s Remy?” I whispered the question again, fear filling the hot places of fury with ice.

My eyes swept the cabin of the plane again, desperately hoping to see Remy somewhere.

Dimitri cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Skye, the main lodge was obliterated in the blast.”

I started shaking my head.

“Remy was last seen inside, going into one of the meeting rooms.” His tone was infinitely, uncharacteristically gentle.

“No,” I whispered, my stomach lurching.

I was going to be sick.

Again.

“I pulled you and Tate out,” he continued. He jerked his chin at Tate. “We had to sedate Tate to get her to come with us, but Skye, that blast took out most of the Alphas in North America. If not all of them. It leveled the building.”

“You’re wrong,” I replied desperately. My knuckles turned white as my grip tightened.

The pity in his gaze made me flinch.

“I hope I am,” he agreed. “I still have some people I trust looking for survivors. Getting you out before the authorities got *in* was my priority. Not Remy, not Gabe.”

“We have to go back!” I twisted in my seat, looking out the window of the plane. All I saw was white clouds and blue skies.

“We’re halfway over the Pacific,” he said with a frown. “We’re not going back.”

I leaned forward with a growl. “I don’t *care*. Take me home. Now!”

“I’m taking you somewhere safe,” he replied, looking away.

I slammed a fist against the wall of the plane hard enough that one of the men in front twisted to look at us.

“Take me home to my pack. *Now*.”

He gave me a slightly bored look. “Or what?”

“Or I’ll tear this plane apart and everyone in it,” I vowed, reaching again for my wolf.

His lips pressed into a thin line. “No, you won’t.” He jerked a chin at one of my hands. “That won’t let you.”

I followed his gaze to my left wrist where a silver bangle was molded around my skin, just above my hand. It was so lightweight that I barely felt it.

I lifted my hand, the silver glinting in the light that streamed in through the window.

“What the hell is this?” I twisted my arm, but I didn’t see a clasp or mechanism to take it off. It was a perfectly unbroken circle of metal.

“It blocks your wolf,” he explained.

My gaze rose to him. “What does that even mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure how the magic works, but it smothers the bond between you and your wolf.” He grimaced. “I had a feeling you wouldn’t be exactly stable once you woke up, and the idea of a wolf tearing through the plane wasn’t exactly smart.”

His lips twisted into a sort of smirk. “You might have survived falling off a cliff, princess, but none of us would survive a twenty-thousand foot drop from the sky.”

“Magic?” I repeated with a hollow laugh. “Maybe you’re the one who got knocked out in that explosion.”

“I wish,” he muttered darkly. “I know the doc told you about the origins of the original pack. How shifters were created.”

“That’s fiction,” I snapped. “Magic isn’t real. It’s a ... story.”

He arched a single dark brow. “Is it? Can you shift right now? Feel your wolf? Feel anything other than your basic humanness?”

I tried again, not wanting to believe him, but I couldn’t feel her. Worse yet, I couldn’t feel Remy. Our bond was just ... gone.

There was a hollow space in my chest where he once lived. Darkness crawled out from the vast emptiness of it, threatening to swallow me whole.

“Take it off,” I begged, changing tactics. If I could connect to my wolf, I could connect to Remy.

He couldn’t be gone. Bonded or not, I would know it. I would *feel* it.

Dimitri looked genuinely apologetic. “I can’t.”

I closed my eyes briefly, sucking in a deep breath. “I promise I won’t—”

“Skye,” he cut me off with a shake of his head, “I *can’t*. It’s magic. One of the witches will remove it when we land. I don’t have the ability to take it off. And short of cutting off your wrist, it’s not going anywhere.”

“Magic isn’t *real*,” I repeated stubbornly. I tried to slip a finger under the band, but there was zero give.

“Don’t be deliberately stupid, princess,” he told me. “It’s not a good look.”

“Fine,” I snapped, throwing up my hands. “Then we’ll let a freaking witch take it off when we land ... which is where, exactly?”

“My pack,” he answered.

“*Your* pack,” I echoed with a scoff, rolling my eyes. “You said your pack is from—”

I stopped myself as I quickly, soberingly, remembered where he was from. Where his pack was from.

Fresh panic clawed at my throat. “I can’t go to Russia!”

He shrugged. “Actually, you can. That’s where this plane is headed. Conveniently, you’re on it, so you’re going to Russia, too.”

“Why? Why are you taking me to freaking *Russia*?” I demanded, my voice raising an octave.

“I told you,” he replied, meeting my gaze levelly, “I had orders to get you out safely.”

“Orders from *who*?”

“My Alpha.”

“What the hell could your Alpha want with me?” I snapped. “I’m no one.”

“Actually,” he sighed and leaned back in his seat, “you aren’t, princess.”

My eyes narrowed. “You keep calling me that.”

A small smirk played on his lips. “Because that’s what you are.”

I snorted. “Right.”

“The Alpha of my pack is your father.”

My body froze. Everything stopped as the air whooshed out of my chest.

“I never met my father,” I finally said. “How the hell do you know who he is?”

“That file Elias had on you?” Dimitri gave me a grim sort of look. “He figured it out. He figured out who your father is. Even managed a DNA test and everything.”

“And who is he?” I twisted my fingers together on my lap to hide the way they shook. Hell, my entire body was shaking. Maybe it was a panic attack, maybe it was fear or adrenaline.

Everything in me craved the one person who wasn’t here.

Another piece of my heart cracked and broke away.

“He’s the Alpha of the Narodnaya pack in Russia.” He paused, whether for dramatic flair or because he was genuinely worried I was about to lose my shit, I didn’t know. “The Narodnaya pack is the first pack that ever existed, Skye.”

“And my ... father is the Alpha.” I tasted the words as I spoke them, digesting what he was saying.

“Nikolai Dashkov,” he confirmed with a nod. “As his daughter, that makes you royalty amongst our pack and the European and Asian packs.”

My head snapped up. “Dashkov? That’s your last name.”

Dimitri smiled at me, his eyes practically sparkling. “That’s because he’s my father, too. I’m your brother, Skye.”

EPILOGUE

Remy

ANOTHER ALPHA WAS DEAD.

I gently lowered the piece of plaster I had lifted off the man at my feet, setting it on the ground beside him.

“Shit,” I muttered, kneeling in the dirt and debris beside him.

I knew this Alpha.

Jack Carmichael had been the Alpha of the Elysian pack since before my dad took over Blackwater. I had seen him every year at the Summit since I was ten and started attending. He was one of our allies.

And he was dead.

My heart sank as I added his name to the list I was keeping in my head. Another pack I would have to call and inform their Alpha was gone.

I stood up, surveying the carnage and chaos around me. Only a few people moved in the wreckage. Most were buried underneath it.

It was only dumb fucking luck that Dante, Griffin, and I had stepped out of our meeting. We had been heading back when the building blew up.

“Remy!”

My head snapped up and I looked at where Griff was standing grimly.

“It’s Nero.”

Fuck.

Griffin glanced down at the body at his feet and slowly shook his head

before meeting my gaze.

Everything in me wanted to scream. The pressure in my chest was ready to crack me open, but I knew I would bleed out if that happened.

I fisted my hands and nodded back, swallowing my emotions. I had to keep moving forward. Dad and Luke were somewhere in this.

I couldn't lose them, too.

As soon as we realized the lodge had been blown to hell, Dante and I ran to the cabins. The panic that hit me when I realized Skye wasn't there had been crippling. I'd torn the cabin apart before running outside, hoping she would be somewhere.

The only thing I had found was her necklace. The clasp was broken, but the sun caught the diamond chip in the star nestled against the moon just right. The flash of light drew my attention down and stopped my heart.

When Dante found me and told me Tate was missing, we grabbed one of the people who worked in the kitchens, a terrified guy who had been taking a smoke break when the bomb went off.

He mentioned seeing Skye and Tate. It would be hard for any guy *not* to notice the two of them together. He had seen them out here talking to a man before everything went to shit.

I knew my girl. The only reason she wasn't currently by my side was if someone was keeping her from being there.

I sucked in a deep breath, ignoring the smells of burnt flesh and charred wood hovering in the air.

"Here!" Dante's voice cut across the wreckage. "They're here!"

I took off running, stumbling across broken stones and navigating spikes of rebar that protruded grotesquely from chunks of concrete. Glass crunched under my boots.

Griffin beat me to Dante by half a second, and when I looked down, my hands started to shake.

"Oh, God."

Luke and Dad were together, but pinned by a massive beam. It looked like Luke had taken the brunt of it. His body was covering half of Dad's. Almost like he had thrown himself in front of Dad when the world crashed down around them.

Dante's eyes met mine for a brief second, and I could see the same fears I had reflected in his gaze. It took all three of us to lift the beam up that had them pinned.

By the time we lifted the thousand pound weight, more staff who hadn't been inside had come from where they lived on the edge of the property to help. We managed to piece together a couple of crudely assembled stretchers to lift them up and out of the area.

Griffin led the others away to keep looking for survivors while I knelt beside dad, my fingers pressing against his throat until I found a pulse. Relief hit me hard and fast.

I glanced over at Dante and Luke.

Dante met my gaze. "He ... I don't know what to do. His pulse is weak."

They needed to get out of here. We all did. Someone had deliberately set off a bomb in the middle of the Summit. They had chosen a time packed with scheduled meetings for maximum damage.

And maximum casualties.

I wiped a hand down my face. "Get a car," I told Dante. Ours had been parked by the side of the lodge and was currently smashed under a slab of concrete and metal. "We need to get to the airstrip."

"What about survivors?" he asked, but was already standing.

I exhaled as I straightened, my gaze cutting across the mess. "I don't think we'll find any others. We need to get out of here before someone realizes there *are* survivors. I'm pretty sure none of us were supposed to make it out of this alive. I'll tell Griff we're leaving. He may want to come with us."

Dante gave me a grim nod and took off for the far parking lot.

I turned and started making my way back to Griffin. I made it four steps when a hand grabbed my ankle.

"Jesus," I swore, looking down at the bruised and dusty hand underneath a small mountain of rubble.

"Help," the weak voice called up to me. "Please ... help."

I bent and picked up the heaviest pieces holding the man down.

He blinked up at me, and realization slammed into me a second before rage filled my heart.

Preston fucking Loomis.

His eyes widened when he saw me. The bastard actually flinched away from me, and then cried out when the rebar skewering him to the ground in his stomach didn't give.

"Shit. Fuck." His curses were a mumbled mess. His eyes looked up at me, begging. "Just ... please, help me."

Despite the severity of what was happening around me, I couldn't help the chuckle that slipped past my lips. "*Help* you?"

If I didn't know for a fact that he was a bitch, I did now.

His face twisted. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. Can you help me? Please? It fucking *hurts*."

I dropped into a crouch beside him, my jaw tight. "How many times did Skye tell you something hurt?" I asked darkly, reaching for the rebar. "How many times did she need help and you fucking *hurt* her?"

"Shit, man," he whimpered, his face crumpling.

Jesus, was he going to start crying?

My hands curled around the metal holding him in place. The tiny movement of my hand touching the bar made him cry out in agony.

"Where's Linden?" I demanded, ignoring the way he started to tear up. "Was he with you?" My eyes scanned the area around him. Maybe, by some lucky twist of fate, Linden had been pulverized in the explosion.

"Gone," Preston gasped, a tear sliding down his face. "He ... I was on my way to meet him."

Everything in me went cold.

"He wasn't inside?"

"No. He told me to meet him in the parking lot." His face twitched as he struggled for another painful breath. "He was outside when the bomb went off."

Skye and Tate had been seen with a man moments before the explosion.

Skye was missing ...

... and so was Linden.

With a roar, I yanked the rebar from Preston's side and freed him.

He screamed, slapping a hand to his stomach as blood started flowing. It seeped through his fingers as he slumped back, panting.

"Thank you," he muttered, blinking up at me. He was surprised I had helped him.

I smiled. "Anytime."

And then I drove the rebar down through his throat. I stood up as he started to gurgle and choke, wiping my palms on my jeans as I walked away.

COMING SOON

The final installment in Skye & Remy's story, LEGACY, will be out Spring 2021. You can pre-order it now on Amazon:

[LEGACY \(Blackwater Pack #3\)](#)



BONUS SCENE



Larkin

I pawed the ground nervously, my ears flicking back and forth as I tried to separate the sounds of the night from the sounds of Rhodes sneaking around. Normally it wouldn't take much for my wolf to be able to find our prey, or boyfriend, but Rhodes was being frustratingly stealthy.

I huffed out an annoyed breath and sniffed the air once more as a branch cracked behind me.

Swinging around, I grumbled under my breath. A fox peered at me with wide eyes before whirling and disappearing back into the trees.

Down girl, I ordered my wolf, resisting the urge to give chase.

It was always harder to stop her when we were in wolf form, but ever since I was fourteen, and I lost control of her the one time she smelled a rabbit. I had chased the thing down and had it *in my mouth* when it let out a God-awful shriek.

I dropped it immediately, wishing like hell I could apologize as its fluffy butt hopped away.

A plaintive chorus of howls echoed in the distance. I cocked my head, listening to the echoes. The pack was on the other side of the mountain, probably headed for the valley near the lake.

This week had been unseasonably warm, and the ice cap around the lake would have melted by now, providing a lot of cold, clear drinking water.

It was exactly where I should have been, but I decided to follow Rhodes

when he broke off from the pack a few miles back. We had stayed together until he raced ahead, losing me in the trees.

Another twig snapped, the sound bouncing off the carpet of leaves and sticks that made up the floor of the forest.

Another howl rose up from the pack, and I sighed heavily.

Fine. I would go back and join *them*.

I turned around and startled at the large brown wolf staring curiously at me. His dark eyes glittered in amusement as he watched me, his tongue lolling out.

Growling, I headbutted Rhodes' shoulder.

Jerk.

He dipped his massive head, catching me lightly under my jaw and knocking my head up. His tongue swept against the pulse point in my throat.

Nudging my shoulder forward, he moved past me, walking slowly.

I followed behind him, as the treeline cleared, realizing he had led me to one of my favorite places in Blackwater.

There was a tiny, almost hidden, meadow that rested at the base of three mountains. It had the best flowers, and I often hiked out here to take pictures when I was home.

Rhodes stepped out of the way, and I froze, my breath catching at the beautiful sight in front of me.

The meadow was blanketed in a sea of atomic orange and royal purple, tinged with a silvery hue from the full moon hanging high above us. Daylilies were open and full, the petal-arms spread wide as they embraced the night sky.

I stepped further into the clearing, their sweet scent calling to me as I looked around in wonder. It was too early for them to bloom, and the first frost would shatter their beauty.

Fingers stroked the top of my head.

"I came by here last night on patrol," Rhodes said softly, "and they were blooming. I came up here earlier and brought your camera."

My head swung around to see him smiling down at me. Smiling and ... totally naked.

His eyes narrowed playfully as he shook his hair out of his eyes. "Don't look at me like that, or this trip will have a whole new purpose. I brought you here so you could finish that portfolio you were working on for your submission into the photography course for next year."

I had mentioned that course I wanted to take *once*, several weeks ago when we were hanging out in his garage. He was reattaching a carburetor or something, and was asking me what I was thinking about majoring in.

Education. I loved school, and I wanted to be a teacher like my mom.

But I also loved photography, and I wanted to take a few classes at college this fall. Maybe even minor in it.

And he remembered.

... and I was still staring at him in amazement.

Sighing, Rhodes dropped his arms at his sides, palms up. "Fine. One quickie, but only because you clearly need it before you can get any work done. You're insatiable."

Oh, *I* was the insatiable one?

Challenge, accepted.

I shifted easily, fluidly, standing up and arching my brows.

His gaze heated, sliding across my naked body, lingering on the swells and dips he loved to tease, torment, and devour.

He took a step forward, and I planted a hand on his chest to hold him off.

"My camera?" Thankfully, my voice came out steady because my insides were a jumbled mess of hormones and want.

Now he lifted his brows, his grin unstoppable. "Lark, that's kinda kinky. But sure, I'm down."

"Ha, ha." I rolled my eyes and dropped my hand, unable to keep my gaze from dropping.

Rhodes was anything but *down*.

"I need my camera for the *flowers*, Rhodes."

He looked mortally wounded as he clutched his chest. "Are you saying I'm not as pretty as a flower?"

I laughed, my head falling back. "You're the worst."

"I could *do* my worst," he teased, reaching for me.

I sidestepped his hands with a giggle. "Or you could get my camera so we can get back before the pack realizes we're missing," I retorted. I glanced around, thankful this place was several miles away from the perimeter of the Blackwater borders, so at least we wouldn't be stumbled upon by someone on patrol.

But my parents were running with the pack, and they would probably notice we were gone.

My cheeks heated. They would definitely have an idea of *why* we were

gone, too, and it probably wouldn't involve flowers.

He waved a dismissive hand. "We'll meet up with them on the ridge in an hour, and I told your parents I found this spot earlier. Your mom got me your camera from your room. It only takes fifteen minutes to meet up with them if we cut through the eastern path."

He had really thought this out. For me.

"I can't believe you did this."

His expression melted into something serious and genuine. "I'd do anything for you, baby girl."

My eyes closed as happiness exploded in my chest, all warm and fuzzy. I licked my lips as I opened my eyes with a nod. "Yeah, that'll do it."

His brow furrowed. "Do wha—"

I jumped at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and hooked my legs around his waist, as I pressed my lips to his, climbing up his chest like he was my personal jungle gym.

His hands grabbed my butt, holding my weight as his mouth opened. He gave me control of the kiss for almost a solid two seconds before he took over with a rough groan that set off a thousand tingles in my body.

He shifted my weight to one hand, the other coming up to cradle my jaw and angle my head so he could deepen the kiss while my hands tangled in the soft strands of his hair. He kept saying he needed a haircut, but I liked it longer.

The world spun for a second as he lowered us down, his hand leaving my face so he could balance us before laying me beneath him.

I winced as a rock dug into my back.

He paused, feeling me flinch. Chest heaving, he looked down at me like I was his own personal buffet. "Okay?"

I wiggled my shoulders. "Rock."

He made a face. "I probably should have brought a blanket."

"You brought me here to take pictures," I replied with a smile, "not have sex."

He barely blinked. "Baby girl, sex was always on the agenda tonight. Although, I kinda pictured it against a tree. We could try that."

"Tree bark is the last thing I need exfoliating my butt," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Fine," he said with a dramatic sigh. The world tilted as he rolled us. I came up on top as he laid against the ground.

I braced my hands on the hard planes of his chest, grinning down at him as I straddled his waist.

“Better?” he asked, smiling.

“Much,” I agreed.

Another long-suffering sigh. “The things I do for you.”

“You mean the things you do to get *laid*,” I corrected with a giggle.

His grin was brighter than the moon. “That, too.”

Still laughing, I leaned down and kissed him again. The laugh turned into a moan as his hands slid up my waist, cupping my breasts. His fingers teased my nipples, rolling the tight peaks between the rough pads of his fingers.

I lifted my hips, angling myself until I felt him nudging my entrance. There was no resistance as he slid inside. A delicious fullness filled me, stretching me to the limits, until he was all the way inside.

I broke the kiss with a gasp as sparks of pleasure exploded inside me. “Oh, wow.”

“I think I like letting you do all the work,” he said, his voice sinfully deep and throaty.

My nails dug into the hard muscles of his chest until he hissed. I lifted my hips and slid back down the length of him. My head fell back with a groan, the tips of my hair brushing his thighs.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Baby, you gotta move.”

I looked down at him. “Do I? Because it seems like when *I* say that? You go slower.” I rocked my hips against his once.

Darkness glittered in his eyes, his tongue sweeping across his lips. “Not always.”

“Hmm,” I hummed under my breath, rolling my hips again, watching the way his pupils flared.

His lips pulled back, baring his teeth, a second before he levered himself up, wrapping his arms around me until our chests were pressed together.

He kissed me hard, his teeth grabbing my bottom lip and tugging on it as he pulled away. His hands settled on my hips, lifting me up until he nearly slid out of me before jerking me back down.

My head fell forward onto his shoulder, my eyes screwing shut as I whimpered.

With a grunt, he thrust into me, completely taking the rhythm out of my hands until all I could do was take what he gave. Over and over and over.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, my nails gouging half-moons

into his rippling skin as he surged inside me, grinding me against him with every snap of his hips.

His hand slipped between us, the tip of his finger slipping easily against my clit. Two strokes and I was gone, my body convulsing around him, dragging him over the edge of bliss with me.

Panting, chest heaving, I sagged against him.

His hand traced the ridges of my spine and fisted in my hair, gathering it in his fingers and pulling my head back.

“Okay,” I managed to get out, a loopy, drugged smile on my lips, “your way works, too.”

He chuckled, the warm sound vibrating between us before he kissed me again, slowly. After a second, he lifted me off of him.

I shuddered, my knees shaking as I stood up and waited for him to join me.

He winced, rubbing his ass. “Yeah, next time I’m remembering a blanket.”

I snorted. “Next time, pack a tent. We can spend the night.”

His eyes lit up like a kid at Christmas. “I love your brain, Lark.”

“Good,” I said, kissing his shoulder. “Now where’s my camera?”

He kissed my forehead and headed for a tree, reaching behind it for the waterproof case I kept my camera in when it wasn’t sitting in its designated spot on a shelf in my room.

After unlocking the case, he handed it to me.

I turned it on, adjusted the settings and lens before crouching down and snapping a few test shots. I looked at the images I had taken on the small screen, analyzing the lighting as Rhodes came up behind me, sweeping my hair to the side and kissing my neck.

I smiled. “That’s not helping.”

“You taste good,” he muttered, his tongue licking across my skin in a long pass.

With a shriek, I twisted away. “Stop. I need to focus.”

Holding up his hands, he took a big step back. “Fine.”

Biting my lip to keep from laughing again, I focused on the camera, tweaking a few settings before settling in and taking a few pictures. Wide shots, detailed shots.

I lost myself to the beauty of my subject and the steady *click* of the lens shuttering.

“We need to get going soon,” Rhodes called.

I turned from where I had wandered to the middle of the meadow. His body was all angles and shadows, the moonlight catching a few places and hiding the rest.

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked softly.

“Anything.” There was zero hesitation in him as he answered me.

“Shift.”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you sure? Won’t your teachers ask how you got so close to a dangerous predator?”

“Not for them,” I replied, holding the camera to my chest. “These are for me. I want a picture of *you* in my favorite place.”

A tiny smile hooked up one corner of his mouth. A second later, his wolf was in front of me, watching curiously.

I lifted the camera again taking a few shots that would never make it into any public viewing. These were mine. I would look at them and remember this night for the rest of our lives.

Once I was done, I walked back to him, kneeling down to put the camera away.

His cold nose pressed against my shoulder, and I leaned into him, letting his fur warm my skin. I inhaled deeply, my eyes closed, as I committed this night to memory so I could relive it over and over.

I locked the camera case and put it back behind the tree. Maybe I could convince him to hike back up here with me tomorrow to get it. Or we could take one of the four wheelers the betas sometimes used to pack a picnic and hang out all day.

“I guess we should get back,” I said reluctantly, turning around.

His shoulders lifted and fell as he exhaled hard.

I crossed back to him and knelt until we were eye level before taking his face in my hands. I smoothed a hand over his soft fur.

“Thank you for this.”

He let out a rumbling groan, leaning his head into my touch.

I pressed a quick kiss against his muzzle. “I love you.”

His eyes met mine, and I could see that same love reflected back at me.

Closing my eyes, I focused on shifting. My bones warmed, twisting and reforming faster than I could track, until I was on four legs again.

As I shook out my fur, I opened my eyes to look at Rhodes.

My breath caught as the world shattered around us. The ground trembled,

and I almost fell over from the force of it. As fast as it happened, everything sucked right back in, imploding around us.

Everything fell silent. Even the trees stopped moving as the breeze disappeared.

My eyes locked on Rhodes, and it all made sense.

Mate.

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For anyone reading this right now? You're amazing. Thank you so, so much.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hannah McBride has been many things in her life: a restaurant manager, a clinical research coordinator, a dreamer, a makeup brand ambassador, an event coordinator, a blogger, and more. But at heart, she's always been a writer, and in 2020 she decided to make it official. Good luck stopping her now.



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