



REJECTED MATE

FERAL SHIFTERS BOOK 1

CALLIE ROSE

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OceanofPDF.com

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CHAPTER 1

Three Years Ago

EVENING HUNTS ARE THE BEST.

I live for them. I live for the way the Montana sky spreads overhead, larger than even seems possible in a watercolor of purples and oranges. I live for the cold wind coming off the mountains to ruffle my fur and for the scent of our prey floating on that same breeze.

I live for the pursuit.

For the takedown.

For the thrill of it all.

So what the *fuck* is wrong with me tonight?

Amora, take the left, Ridge orders from somewhere close by. His voice is just as low and gruff in our telepathic mind-speak as it is in his human form.

I don't have a visual of him since we've spread out around the herd of deer in the growing twilight. Carter's crouched in the weeds about ten feet away—a massive chocolate brown wolf with blue eyes and an almost preternaturally keen sense of smell. Beyond him, I catch a glimpse of Luna's golden fur as she inches forward, low to the ground. She's not the greatest hunter among us, but she's light and quick, which is always a plus on a team hunt.

Right now, *I* don't even feel like the greatest hunter among us. I shake off the antsy, unsettled feeling that's been hovering over me for the last hour and follow my alpha's orders, moving fast and low to the left.

Two young deer are grazing alone on the outskirts of the herd. As I close in, their heads pop up and their ears swivel toward me. I drop to my belly and

slow my breathing, waiting out their unease.

Yeah. I feel you, deer dudes.

My own ears swivel toward the sounds of the forest around me. The unease I've been feeling since before we shifted to head out on the hunt grows. It's like I'm feeling the strange charged sensation that fills the canyons when a storm is brewing over North Pack lands. The sky is clear, however, and there's not a hint of rain on the wind. It's either all in my head or... it's only something I can feel.

I don't know which of those possibilities is better, really.

Ridge barks out another order in mind-speak, this time to Carter, and our pack moves ever closer to the unsuspecting deer.

Dammit. I can't fucking *focus*. I keep closing in slowly, manning my corner of the herd as best I can even while my body tingles, itching to race off into the trees somewhere else. There's no reason for me to feel like this. It's not *like me* to feel this antsy. I'm laid back to a fault. Go with the flow. Easy as fucking pie.

Usually.

Tonight, I'm wound as tight as a nun's legs.

Of course it would be now, when my focus is shot to shit, that the largest buck in the herd takes off in my direction.

His sudden dash causes chaos to erupt throughout the herd. The deer scatter and my pack lunges into motion after them, baying into the silent evening. The buck leaps past me, nothing but power and grace and thick thighs that make my mouth water.

Unfortunately, I'm such a hot disaster that my own leap is a split second too late. I sail right past his stupid fluffy white tail—narrowly avoiding a hoof to the snout—and hit the ground face-first, skidding much less elegantly across the underbrush with all four paws splayed.

Motherfucker. Wile E. Coyote can't hold a candle to you, Amora, I think bitterly. You ass.

There's grass in my snout. I huff, discharging blades and dirt like I'm a damn lawnmower.

Just in time for Ridge to slide to a halt in front of me.

Lovely look on you, he says with an undercurrent of amusement. Ridge's fur is pale brown with a hint of auburn most noticeable in the light. He's not the biggest wolf in the pack, despite being the alpha, but he's scrappy and strong. His honey-colored eyes twinkle with mirth.

Oh fuck off, I reply, huffing again. *I'll knock that smirk right off your face.*

Ridge laughs and takes off through the trees, hightailing it after the herd. *Get off your ass, Mo. Do some work!*

I snarl after him in what I hope is the promise of retribution, then haul myself to my feet, shake it off, and follow. Nothing's hurt but my pride.

Luckily, my inability to time my attack correctly doesn't ruin the hunt for us. Within moments of the initial chaos, other members of the pack take down two deer—a young buck and a doe—and the rest of the herd bounds off into the sunset to live another day.

Once dinner is safely secured on the sled and hooked up to two of the biggest wolves, we head back toward the village.

Ridge usually takes the lead on the way home, but this time, he falls behind to walk beside me, shooting a glance at me as he falls into step on my left. *All right. What's up?*

Shit. I should've known he'd call me out. Ridge has been my best friend for years, since we were little pups playing in the yard together while our moms drank sangria and bitched about the other neighbors. He knows me too well not to notice when something is weird with me.

If I were in human form, I'd shrug. That's harder to do in wolf form, so I settle for glancing at him with as much nonchalance as possible. *Nothing's up.*

My ass, he shoots back.

I have no interest in your ass, up or otherwise.

Ridge bares his teeth, and the flutter of his eyelids makes it obvious he's rolling his wolf eyes at me. *Yeah, that part I already knew. I was talking more about the hunt tonight, and your... uh, unique landing style.*

A sharp breath huffs from my nostrils. *I'm never gonna live that down, am I?*

Not anytime soon. His jaw drops open as his tongue lolls out in a wolfish grin.

I shake my head in annoyance, but I guess that's fair. I give him shit about plenty of things.

You form a lot of bonds in a pack as close-knit as ours. Friends, family. Enemies, even. Some of them are stronger bonds than others, and my relationship with Ridge has always been one of the strong ones. A friendship that transcended a run-of-the-mill acquaintanceship and has become a

partnership formed of respect and affection.

But not love. Not the sexy kind, at any rate.

The whole pack expected me and Ridge to form a mate bond from the word *go*. We knew pretty early on that it wasn't in the cards for us, which was kinda nice actually. It took the tension of being a girl and a boy out of our friendship. We were just Ridge and Amora, and Ridge's little brother Lawson was always with us too. I was barely out of diapers when my parents died, and Ridge became my only family.

Twenty years later, here we are.

I'm fine, I insist. Just unfocused.

He doesn't seem satisfied with that answer either, but I get a reprieve as we reach the outskirts of our village. This place is home—always has been, probably always will be. We're born pack, we die pack, and that's just the circle of shifter life. I guess it's a nice place given the circumstances. Situated in the middle of nowhere, but it's beautiful. Roofs over our heads, a self-sustaining lifestyle, cut off from the dangers of the human world. Rustic, sure. But it's all I've ever needed.

Ridge sends the deer off to be prepped for dinner, then he gives us a rousing *great job, team* speech that makes me want to coach him on public speaking. He does this thing where he gets inside his own head sometimes, although I think only those closest to him can probably see it. The elders in the pack say it's because he hasn't found his mate yet.

I think he's just awkward. God help the woman who lands this catch.

We all shift to human form, and while the rest of our hunting party breaks off to head back to their homes, Ridge pads back to me in his bare feet.

I mean, fine, I take it back—he's pretty good-looking, even if I'm not the right girl for him. Nudity is a given around here, since the magic that allows us to shift to wolf form and back doesn't exactly work on clothes. So I'm no stranger to a naked Ridge. He's broad and muscular, with ash brown hair and a constant, unmanageable scruff on his face. Some great girl will come along and snatch him up in the bond he deserves.

"You, me, beer, and poker," he says, the two of us falling into step together as we head toward our houses.

I grin. "Still salty about that fifty bucks I took from you last week?"

"I deserve a chance to reclaim my dignity. And my money." He smirks. "Odds are good I'll win. You're not staring down a good track record tonight, Stumbles."

“Just because I fell on the hunt doesn’t mean I wouldn’t wipe the floor with you, Scooby,” I shoot back, using the old childhood nickname he hates. “But not tonight. I’m going to head into town. Blow off a little steam.”

“Oh, yeah. ‘Blow off some steam,’” he says pointedly, then makes a crude gesture with his hand and mouth that leave no room for interpretation.

I hate how there are no secrets in this friendship.

“Don’t blame me for needing a little fun in my life, grandpa,” I quip as I turn toward my house. “While I go ‘blow off some steam,’ you go ahead and enjoy re-reading your favorite copy of *Popular Mechanics* before you drink Earl Grey and go to bed before nine.”

“I don’t even like Earl Grey!” he calls after me.

His laughter follows me up the two shallow steps to my front door, then he adds, “Be safe out there.”

“I will,” I call back, then disappear inside.

My cabin isn’t much. Most days, I don’t even feel like it’s really mine. It was my parents’ place, and I inherited it when they died. Lived here with a caretaker through my youth, then alone once I was old enough.

I’m always alone.

I grab a quick shower since I haven’t had one today, dry off and wrap the towel around my body, then brush out my long dark hair. No use trying to style it when I’m going to shift to get to town. Good thing the “windblown waves” look is popular.

My closet creaks like a dying deer as I throw open the door, and I glare at the old metal hinges for a moment before stomping off to my kitchen for the WD-40. I oil up those bad boys and give the door a few test swings. I’ve been considering replacing the whole thing since the door’s a flimsy piece of shit with some warping on the bottom. Maybe Grady would let me borrow his truck for a trip to Home Depot.

Not a problem for tonight though. Tonight, I’m on the prowl.

I flip through hangers for the perfect *fuck me* dress. I’m not big on dresses; it’s not really my aesthetic. I like soft cotton, tight jeans, and tank tops. But guys like dresses, especially when they’re short, tight, and leave very little to the imagination.

The number one rule of hunting—other than “don’t fall on your face”—is to know your prey.

I pick out a short, strapless red number and shove it in my pack, then find a pair of black kitten heels tucked into the very back of the closet. I add a

tube of mascara, an eyeliner pencil, and red lipstick to my pack, then take one last look around before I head out.

Where the gravel roads meet the wilds on the edge of the village, I slip the pack over my shoulders and shift. The straps hung off my back when I was in human form, but they fit snugly around my broad wolf's torso. After shaking out my fur a little, I sprint off into the darkness, giving myself over to the power in my legs.

Nothing beats being in wolf form as I race through the open plains flanked by snow-capped mountains. Cool wind ruffles my fur as my body heats up, and the pounding of my paws on the dirt creates a steady rhythm—there's a beauty in it that has no match in human form.

The nearest town to North Pack lands is a dinky, one stoplight kind of place that takes a while to reach. I'm not even sure I know what the place is called, and frankly, I don't care. If I go into this particular town, I'm going for one reason and one reason only.

I see the lights before I smell the humanity, and I come to a halt behind an old horse barn to shift and dress. The red tube dress fits my body like a second skin, emphasizing my height and my lithe curves. I swipe on my makeup as I squint into a tiny compact by the light of the stars, but I've done it enough times before that muscle memory takes over.

Once I'm all dolled up, I leave my pack on the ground behind the barn, hook my finger through the straps on my heels, and walk into town.

The main street is quaint. Two strips of shops line either side of the road in a rustic log cabin kind of architecture. The sidewalks hold large barrel planters of colorful flowers, and the streetlights are decorative with soft glowing globes. I pause next to a planter and use the rim to balance as I tug on my heels, then continue to the bar area at the end of the road.

Being such a small place, there are only three bars to choose from, and none of them have the most desirable clientele. I'm not picky though. I decided a long time ago not to fuck around with wolves from my pack. It just makes shit messy later on when mate bonds form. I'm not interested in being the bitch that fucked someone's soulmate.

I head for the better of the three bars—a little hole in the wall called Keggers that tends to have a younger crowd and a comfortable atmosphere for women. The bartender-slash-owner is a woman named Barb who looks like she could kick even Ridge's ass, so creepy dudes don't last very long in her establishment.

The party's well underway when I arrive. The place is packed to the rafters, dim and smoky. An auto-tuned dubstep song blasts from the sound system over the noise of chatting, laughter, and clinking glasses. I wind my way through the high top tables dotting the middle of the floor and find an empty chair at the long dark wooden bar.

Barb sidles up to me, tossing a stained white rag over her shoulder. She's built like a semi with a cute face, dark hair buzzed short, and shrewd brown eyes that miss nothing. "What'll it be?"

"Gin and tonic. Top shelf," I add.

Barb winks at me. "You got it, sis."

While she slaps my drink together, I take a moment to peruse the wares. Lots of groups here tonight: a few college-age kids looking for a good time; a group of construction workers in dusty boots and Carhartt jackets; a couple tables holding out-of-towners. I can always tell when they aren't from around here. They have a different smell, for one thing. And they always look confused, like they aren't clear on how they ended up in the middle of nowhere Montana. This state could swallow you, if you let it.

Barb slides my glass across the smooth, sticky bar in front of me then bustles off to the next customer. She'll start me a tab. She always does.

I sip my gin and tonic slowly, scanning the room with my best "bored but approachable" look. It's never let me down before, and this time is no different.

One of the construction workers catches my eye and raises his glass in a toast to me. He's not exactly a male model, but he's cute enough. Boots muddy from the worksite, a plaid shirt peeking out from beneath the open khaki jacket. He's deeply tanned, a little aged from his work in the sun, but his lips are nice.

I raise my glass too, returning his gesture.

He says something to his buddies and grins, then leaves the table to come join me.

"Can't help but see that you're all alone," he drawls, leaning an elbow on the bar between me and the occupied chair beside me.

"Noticed that, did you?" I cock my head, laying on the teasing in my tone. I know the buttons to push. The secret looks to use. The way to pitch my words so that he knows I'm interested.

I came here looking to blow off some steam, and this guy will do just fine.

“Can’t imagine why a woman as beautiful as you would be alone on a night like this,” the man says, his gaze sweeping my face. “What’s your name, sugar?”

Before I can decide whether to give him one of my patented fake names or just play coy, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Goosebumps race over my skin a split second before a cool breeze rushes through the bar from the open door.

I glance over at the newcomer and my heart ceases beating.

He takes up the entire doorway—tall, massive, tattooed, hotter than the Montana sun in August. Everything about him screams danger and sex, from the way his dark hair looks like he’s run his hands through it a few times to the tattoos that climb his neck and arms from beneath his white t-shirt. I can see the shadow of more tattoos beneath the thin cotton and my mouth waters because I want to fucking lick every inch of that hidden skin.

His gaze moves over the crowded bar looking as bored as I feel, and then his eyes lock onto mine.

Thick lashes cradle deep brown eyes with an intense ring of gold around the pupils. I’ve never seen anything like them.

The noise in the bar.

The music.

The laughter.

All of it fades away the moment our eyes meet. Desire unfurls in me just from the way he *looks* at me, and I press my knees together as my greedy imagination feeds me images of what he might look like naked.

He walks into the bar, and the door slams shut behind him. But the cool breeze doesn’t fade away—it follows him into the room, blowing his scent toward me.

Whiskey and woodsmoke. Jack on the rocks and a campfire and my fingers on his bare skin.

A dull ache starts between my legs, and I throb with every step he takes. His gaze remains locked on mine like he can see right through me, like he can *smell* my lust, and fuck if I don’t want to bend over the bar and demand he take me right here.

The first guy, the construction worker, is a distant memory. He seems to notice something is up too, because he steps away from the bar, glances between me and the stranger, and cuts out back to his party.

It’s fine, buddy. I wouldn’t want to tangle with a giant, either.

The tattooed stranger takes his time reaching the bar. He steps up beside me and taps my neighbor on the shoulder. The guy sitting on the stool to my right is an older, accountant-looking dude in wire-rimmed glasses, and the poor man takes one look at the sinful Adonis standing behind him and skitters off like a startled cockroach.

Up close, this gorgeous, tattooed hunk of man is almost overwhelming. His whiskey and smoke scent is intoxicating. It covers up the stale beer and fried food scent of the bar until I feel like I'm drowning in his presence.

He's hardly settled on the stool before Barb shuffles down the bar. "What'll it be, Rambo?"

The man flashes an amused grin that's almost feral. "Whiskey. Neat. Top shelf."

I fight the urge to moan. Fucking hell. A man after my own tastes. He has a deep rumbling voice that sends my desire into overdrive.

Barb nods. "Comin' right up."

I stare at him. God help me, I can't *stop* staring at him. They don't make men like that around here. He's a force of nature; he's got his own god damned gravitational field, and I'm a meteor without a prayer.

Barb returns with a rocks glass half-filled with amber liquid. "You wanna run a tab?"

The man palms his glass, nearly enveloping the entire thing in his huge hand. "Please. Why don't you go ahead and make another gin and tonic for my companion here and add it to my tab."

My eyebrows rise a little as I realize he's talking about me.

Barb turns to me and cocks an eyebrow as if she's silently double-checking that I want to accept a drink from this stranger.

A drink. A kiss. His cock. I'll take it all, please.

I nod at her, and she reaches for the Tanqueray.

The man angles on his stool to face me, one palm wrapped around his whiskey and the other resting comfortably on his knee. His gaze latches on mine again. "What do they call you?"

I love the blunt way he asks. He skips the pleasantries and the lines, doesn't wax philosophical about my beauty. He just asks what he wants to know. It's refreshing.

"Amora," I reply, offering him my hand.

He takes the tips of my fingers and presses a kiss to my knuckles, and I swear to God, I feel it all the way down to my clit.

His eyes gleam a little brighter, as if he knows what that slight pressure of his lips on the back of my hand did to me. The gold in his irises is gorgeous, like sunshine manifested in his gaze.

“I’m Kian.”

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CHAPTER 2

KIAN.

The name rolls around in my head. It's just as magnetic, just as relentlessly sexy as the man himself.

His luscious lips are still within inches of my hand, and I have this wild urge to slide my finger between them. I want to feel his mouth on me and his tongue wet against my skin. Just the idea sends another pulse of need through my core. I'm already turned on, and all he's said is his name.

I came out tonight hoping to get laid by someone passably attractive, and now I'm going to walk out of this bar with sex incarnate. When did I start getting such good luck?

It's almost enough to make up for the fact I fell on my face during the hunt.

"Pleasure to meet you," I say, peeling my fingers away from Kian's to pick up the new glass Barb has set next to my empty one. My fingertips damn near seem to spark from his touch.

"No, I think the pleasure's mine." Kian's gaze sweeps over my body. He licks his lips, his eyes bright as he takes in the low-slung dress barely containing my breasts, and the way I've crossed my legs so that the hem rides high enough for him to see the curve of my hip.

Yeah, I'm naked under this dress, golden eyes. Don't you wanna unwrap me?

He clears his throat and sips his whiskey before he asks, "Come here often?"

I drain half my glass in my lust-induced thirst, then place it back on the coaster.

“Sometimes,” I reply, going for coy. “What about you?”

Kian shakes his head, turning a slow circle with his glass on the countertop. “I’m just passing through.”

A tight pang lances through my chest, startling me. I’ve never wanted anything more than a one-night stand with anyone, but I’m not a fan of the idea that Kian will disappear after tonight. But, hell, I can’t dwell on that. I didn’t come here for a forever situation. What he gets up to after I’m done with him isn’t my business. The only thing I’m interested in is what he’s hiding beneath those tight jeans.

I lean over, closing some of the space between us as I put my hand on his knee. “Mm. What a shame. You better not waste your time while you’re here, then.”

A devastating smile spreads across his face, and he closes in on me, his lips close to my ear as he replies, “I absolutely agree.” His breath fans over my neck with his words, eliciting a shiver from me. Kian pulls away, and I feel his absence in every corner of my body. “So you’re local?”

“In a sense,” I hedge. I want to fuck the guy, not give him my backstory. So I redirect the conversation. “What brings you to town?”

“Business,” Kian says, his eyes flashing. One corner of his lips turns up. “And a little adventure.”

A deaf and blind woman would have gotten the hint. I lean into him, pressing my breasts against his arm as I whisper, “I’m always up for adventure.”

Another waft of his whiskey and woodsmoke scent swirls around me. I want to roll around in that smell and mark my body with him. It’s an odd reaction—I’ve never wanted to mark myself with a sexual partner’s scent before. It’s a very... wolfish response.

Could Kian be a shifter? It might explain why I was ready to climb his body to the highest peaks the second he walked in here.

Maybe. I’m not the best at picking up hints when someone is an expert at hiding their true nature.

His gold-rimmed gaze searches my face for a long moment. He slides an arm around my waist, and his fingers on my back are searing, even through the fabric. With his other hand, he dips a finger in his drink. Then he presses his wet finger to my collarbone and begins to trace a path down my skin.

“Baby, I’m starting to think you’re more adventure than I know how to handle,” he says, his voice thick and his eyes hooded.

My heart rate kicks up a notch as his finger crests over the swell of my breast. I'm drowning in whiskey—the scent of him and the scent of the alcohol wetting my skin, both meshing with devastating consequences. I watch his finger as it slides over the top of my dress. We're both watching it, and I know he can see the way my nipples are straining against the thin fabric. His thumb brushes over one pebble. I shudder like he's slipped his fingers inside me.

A crowd of twenty-somethings starts cheering across the room, snapping us both out of our private moment. I glance over to see they're egging on a guy who's chugging a thirty-two ounce beer, and wrap my hands around my glass to anchor myself.

I'm shaking with need. Holy fuck. I've never felt like this before.

Kian drains his whiskey and holds up a finger to get Barb's attention. "Another round."

A third drink is the last thing I want, but considering I just lost myself enough to let a man fondle me in public, maybe it's what I need. Barb makes my drink first, and it gives me something to do with my mouth while I watch Kian. I didn't notice at first, but he has a scar above his right eye that cuts through his thick eyebrow. It adds to his devil-may-care allure.

"How'd you get the scar?" I ask, motioning to his eyebrow with my glass.

Barb gives Kian his drink, and he takes a sip before he answers. "Got it during a hunt."

Ah. Shifter confirmed.

He wouldn't have outed himself if he thought I was human, which means he's already guessed right about me.

"I almost took a hoof to the face during a hunt tonight," I tell him, then immediately flush.

I have no idea what made me say that. Maybe because for the first time ever, I'm sitting with a male shifter I didn't grow up with, and I already feel a deep connection to him. I want to connect more.

But could I have picked a more embarrassing story if I tried? *Shit.*

Kian chuckles. "Been there, done that."

The sound of his laugh is as smooth as the whiskey in his glass. It pours through me like a drug, making my fingers tingle with the need to touch him and feel that sound inside my body.

Feel *him* inside me.

I lift my gin and tonic to take another drink and realize the glass is empty.

Again. I barely remember drinking it, but the alcohol buzzes through my veins, reminding me it's there. I'm not drunk—shifter metabolism is a little too strong for that. But it's enough of a buzz to heighten all my senses and deepen my arousal.

There's not a chance in hell he can't smell how much I want him.

Kian cuts his gaze to my empty glass. "Do you want another?"

No. I want you.

Instead of answering with words, I set my glass down decisively and slide off my stool. We lock gazes again, and I hold him there for a moment before I walk away toward the back of the bar.

I don't need to look back to know he's following me.

A back hallway leads to restrooms and an alley exit, cut off from the bustle of the bar by a sharp right-hand turn that takes the corridor behind the kitchen. My high heels tap loudly on the shiny concrete floors, under a song heavy with bass as it pipes from the stereo anchored near the ceiling.

I don't even make it halfway down the hall before I feel his heat behind me. The delectable scent of him surrounds me in the split second before a strong arm catches me around the waist and yanks me back.

For a moment, I'm airborne. Kian whips me off my feet like I weigh nothing, and despite my height, maybe I *don't* weigh anything to a man his size.

He yanks me against his hard body, one hand curling around my hip while the other fists in my hair. There's a wild look in his eye that borders the line between lust and hunger. The way he dominates me, towering over me all brawn and heat and that intoxicating whiskey smoke...

Fuck, I'm lost.

Heat pools between my legs. I rock my hips against his and gasp as I feel the hard length of him pressing against me through his jeans.

Then our lips crash together.

The sparks that have been dancing between us since the moment he walked into the bar explode into an inferno of fireworks.

He tastes even better than he fucking smells, and I don't know if it's the lingering burn of the alcohol on his lips or just *him*, but I feel like I'm already addicted from just one taste. His mouth is firm and warm against mine, and he slides his tongue across the seam of my lips as if demanding access to what's already his.

I open for him, and the second I do, our tongues meet in a fierce clash.

Our teeth knock together, almost like we're half biting, half kissing in our desperation for *more* of each other.

When his teeth clamp down on my lower lip, I moan hoarsely, and he growls in response. As he lifts me in his arms again, I wrap my legs around his waist without a second thought.

I'm barely aware of where we are anymore, but somehow, Kian manages to find the door that leads to the alley behind the bar. He shoves it open, making the cool night air hit my feverish skin like a blast of ice. My nipples draw up even tighter than they were, and I wrap my arms around his neck, plastering my body to his as I soak up the warmth that radiates from his broad frame.

I didn't bother with panties tonight—they didn't seem necessary, given what my goal was—and I can feel the hard ridges of Kian's stomach pressed against my core. Only his shirt separates his skin from mine, and I grind against him, probably leaving a wet spot on the fabric.

With another low growl, he shoves my back against the wall of the ally, pinning me there as his hands roam my body. I unwind my legs from around his waist, and the second my feet find the ground, his large hand lands on my thigh, working its way upward with a deliberate motion. He reaches the apex of my thighs and just cups me there for a moment, his calloused hand covering my entire pussy in a gesture so dominant and possessive that it makes a needy whimper fall from my mouth.

The heat of his palm is searing, and when he draws back a little, the rings of gold around his irises almost makes it look like they're glowing.

"You came here tonight knowing just what you wanted, didn't you?" he murmurs, his voice heavy and thick.

"Yes."

"Did you find it?"

"You tell me," I shoot back huskily, pushing my hips away from the wall a little to press against him.

The heel of his hand brushes my clit, and I chase the feeling, arching my back even more. Kian grunts, slipping two thick fingers inside me as he works his hand over my clit, giving me exactly what I need—what I've been begging for without words.

His lips find mine again, and he kisses me like he owns me as his massive body pins mine against the wall. His fingers are moving in and out of me faster and faster, relentless and forceful. I'm so fucking wet that there's a soft

squelching noise every time he slams his fingers back inside me, but I don't give a fuck. My gasps and moans are so loud that they nearly drown it out anyway.

I'm close, and I know he can feel it. My toes are curling, my leg muscles tensing as I try to brace for the rush of pleasure building inside me.

"Fuck. I can feel you clenching around me. You trying to milk my fingers, baby? You wish it was my cock?"

His words are low and rough, and I groan out some response that might be a "yes." I honestly can't tell anymore. I don't think I could form a coherent sentence right now to save my life.

Kian's free hand slides up my body, squeezing my breast before trailing up my neck. He grabs a fistful of my dark hair and wraps it around his hand, jerking my head back at the same moment he drives his fingers even deeper inside me.

My mouth drops open, my gaze locking with his as pleasure rips through me like a bolt of lightning. He keeps a tight grip on my hair, tugging at the strands and not letting me look away as the orgasm floods my body. He slows the tempo of his fingers just a little, somehow managing to prolong the crest of pleasure until my knees are shaking from it.

I still haven't closed my mouth, and even though my jaw is hanging wide open, I can't seem to get enough oxygen. All I can do is stare up at him and gasp as aftershocks of pleasure ripple through me.

Kian takes advantage of my slack-jawed state, dropping his head again to kiss me. He sucks on my tongue before exploring my mouth with his own tongue, and when we finally break apart, he drags his fingers out of my pussy. Slick arousal coats my thighs, and his fingers and knuckles are shiny with it as he lifts his hand, breathing hard.

He's still got a tight grip on my hair, so when he tugs my head forward a little and holds his fingers in front of my lips, it's no secret what he wants.

And I give it to him.

Or maybe I just take exactly what *I* want.

Opening my mouth, I wrap my lips around his two fingers, sliding up and down on them a little as I lick up my cream. I hollow my cheeks as I do, dragging my tongue over every inch of skin I can reach, and the reaction from Kian is immediate.

His nostrils flare, the look on his face shifting from hungry to almost angry, like he's pissed off that I'm doing this to his fingers and not his cock.

Well.

There's an easy solution for that.

I release him with a wet slurp, then shove at his chest, pushing him back a step. I think my action catches him by surprise, which is probably the only reason he actually moves—that, or he's already figured out what I plan to do.

It's reckless. Even more reckless than letting my one-night stand finger me in an alley behind a bar. But I'm so far beyond caring about that, I can't even see it in the rearview mirror. He's right. I came here knowing exactly what I wanted.

And I don't plan on wasting a fucking *second* of tonight.

I sink down to my knees in front of Kian, ignoring the way the rough pavement digs into my skin. His eyes darken as he stares down at me, and he widens his stance a bit to bring his crotch closer to my eye-level. I keep looking up, holding his gaze as I reach for the waistband of his pants and unbutton them. I drag the zipper down, and I can already feel how fucking hard he is.

He's going commando just like I am—it's a common shifter habit—and his heavy cock practically leaps into my hand, the velvety flesh hot and hard against my palm. I fist him, still watching his face as I dart my tongue out and run it over the tip of his crown. He's thick and long, and I want to look at his cock, to fucking study it while I drag my tongue up and down his length.

But right now, I want to see his expression more.

I'm entranced by the way his jaw clenches, his nostrils flaring as he sucks in a sharp breath. It's shadowy and dark in the alley, but I can still see his eyes blazing, almost like there's a fire inside him that burns hotter with every stroke of my tongue.

Slowly, I wrap my lips around him, then start to work my way down his shaft. It takes a few strokes before the skin is fully slicked, and I start to use my hand as I move a little faster, hollowing my cheeks and swirling my tongue.

"Fuck," he grunts, his lips pulling back in something like a snarl as one of his large hands settles on the top of my head, tangling in my hair. "Those fucking lips. That fucking mouth. And your gorgeous goddamn eyes. You look like a filthy angel sucking my cock, baby."

I let out a low moan around his shaft as my core clenches.

Jesus. What the hell is it about this man?

I've never particularly liked it when guys try to call me pet names in bed

—but maybe that’s because none of the guys I’ve hooked up with in this little blip of a town know how to do it right. When Kian murmurs filthy words to me while I blow him, it makes me almost as hot as it did when he had his fingers stuffed inside me.

With one hand following the movement of my mouth, I brace my other hand on his thick thigh, feeling the muscles contract under my palm as he starts to meet my movements with thrusts of his hips. It’s like he can’t help himself. His grip on my hair tightens until my scalp stings, and his cock hits the back of my throat with every thrust, cutting off my air and making my heart beat faster. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes, and I gasp for breath every time he pulls out, relaxing my throat and repressing my gag reflex every time he thrusts in again.

This isn’t just a blowjob.

He’s fucking my mouth—pushing me right to the edge of what I can take.

And on that knife’s edge is a kind of pleasure I’ve never experienced before. Something animalistic and raw, a deep, primal need that urges me to take my hand off his shaft and grip his ass, urging him deeper as drool and precum dribble down my chin. It’s just my mouth on him now, and he’s controlling the movements, his hips thrusting toward me as he uses his grip on my hair to hold me in place.

“Amora...”

He groans out my name as his cock swells against my tongue, and the first jet of his release hits the back of my throat. I swallow instinctively, then swallow again as more salty cum fills my mouth. He barely softens at all as the orgasm finally dies out, and I run my tongue over his slick shaft to clean him off, then wipe my chin as he slips out of my mouth. He releases his grip on my hair and grabs me by the shoulders to help me up, but he doesn’t even give me a chance to find my balance before he’s on me again.

His large hand splays across my jaw, tilting my head up at just the right angle as he drops his lips to mine for a fierce kiss.

My back hits the wall again, and as my body arches into his touch, a giddy sort of relief fills me.

It doesn’t matter that I just came, or that he did too.

We’re not done yet.

CHAPTER 3

WE BARELY MAKE it back to the hotel room Kian is staying in.

The town is small enough that it's in walking distance from the bar, but we keep getting held up as we stop to kiss and grope at each other like horny teenagers. The only thing keeping me from dragging him into another alley and demanding he fuck me right there is the fact that I want more room to maneuver. I want to be able to see him naked—every single damn inch of him—and that's harder to accomplish in a dingy alley than it is in a hotel room with a door.

The door in question almost comes off its hinges when we burst into the hotel room like a hurricane, and Kian slams it shut with so much force that I swear I hear the wood crack. But the integrity of a hotel room door is the furthest thing from my mind now that I've got what I want.

Kian. Alone.

We crash through the room in a chaotic tangle of limbs, running into walls and practically knocking over a dresser as our hands roam hungrily over each other's bodies, lips locked in a kiss that doesn't allow for such trivial things as oxygen. I grab the hem of his shirt and tug it off over his head before dragging my fingernails down the sculpted ridges of his abs. He growls, a sound that's somewhere between a warning and a noise of pure pleasure. When I start fumbling with his pants, he yanks my hands away and then peels my dress off in one smooth motion.

It's no fucking fair, because that was the only article of clothing I had on besides my shoes, and now I'm naked and he's not. I'm about to whine my displeasure, but the sound morphs into a yelp as he picks me up and tosses me onto my back on the bed. I toe off my shoes, and he kicks them under the

bed as he approaches, shoving his pants down over his hips. His cock juts out from his body, as hard and thick as it was before I put my mouth on it not that long ago. I want to make some comment about his stamina, but I seem to have lost the power of speech again.

The curtains are open, allowing ambient light to spill into the room, but I suddenly wish we'd thought to turn on a light when we first crashed into the room. I can see him pretty well in the low light, but everything I see just makes me want to study him in more depth. I want to memorize every damn detail, because I'm pretty sure it would fill up my spank bank for the rest of my life.

His waist is lean and muscled, and with the way the shadows fall over his washboard abs, I can count every single ridge on them. His torso broadens out into a wide chest, with muscular shoulders and arms covered in the tattoos I got a peek of earlier.

He's... breathtaking.

Gorgeous.

Like nothing I've ever seen before.

And that's saying something, considering that a lot of shifter males are muscular and attractive. But Kian? There's something about him that makes my pussy clench just *looking* at him. Maybe it's the way he's looking at me like he can guess every single thought in my head and likes what he's seeing. Maybe it's the way he crawls up onto the bed with me and spreads my legs without a moment's hesitation, like a hunter claiming his prize.

His strong fingers dig into my thighs, and he presses my legs so wide that my muscles ache from the stretch. Then he drops his head and slides his tongue through my folds. He ends on my clit, flattening his tongue so that it drags over the sensitive nub in a way that makes me quiver.

"You taste even better than you smell," he mutters, not even bothering to stop lapping at me as he speaks.

He nips at my clit as if I taste so good that he's tempted to eat me up, and my thigh muscles clench as my legs instinctively try to wrap around his head. He lets out another low growl and presses them apart again, pinning me in place as he takes his time sliding his tongue up and over and around my clit until pleasure is burning through my veins like kerosene.

Despite his tight grip on me, I writhe beneath him as much as I'm able to, my hips shifting on the bed as my breath comes in short gasps.

I'm close.

So fucking close.

I'm about to come all over his face—
—when he stops.

A strangled sound pours from my lips as I wrench my head off the bed to look down at him. He licks his lips, then drags a hand over his chin, his glittering eyes finding mine in the darkness.

“Don't come until I give you permission,” he says in that deep fucking voice of his.

My eyebrows shoot up, and I'm about to ask what the hell he's talking about when he hooks his arms under my knees to drag me closer to him, then drives into me with a single hard thrust.

Whatever I was going to say turns into a scream as my body reacts to the intrusion, my pussy walls clenching hard around him as every nerve ending in my body lights up. The deep, burning pleasure of an orgasm starts to build in my core, and Kian's large hand wraps around my throat.

It's not tight enough to cut off my air supply entirely, but it's enough pressure to send my pulse skyrocketing, and the shock of it halts my orgasm in its tracks.

“I said don't come until I tell you to,” he murmurs roughly. “It'll be better. Trust me.”

His cock is still buried to the hilt inside me, but he doesn't move—as if he knows that even a single thrust right now will send me over the edge. I stare up at him, my throat convulsing beneath his palm as I swallow hard. I'm hovering right at the precipice, so close, so fucking desperate to come.

But some part of me wants what he's promising more.

Some part of me wants to give over to him entirely.

To let this man control my pleasure.

So I suck in a breath through my nose, letting my nostrils flare wide as I fill my lungs. I breathe out on a shaky exhale as my core squeezes his cock again, my toes curling as I fight back the pleasure that hovers in every corner of my body like a tsunami waiting to strike.

Kian waits, giving me a chance to master myself, and when he can see that the edge of tension has left my body, he nods in satisfaction. “You good?”

I nod, the gesture tiny with his hand still wrapped around my neck. He loosens his grip just a little as a devastating smile spreads across his lips.

“Good,” he murmurs.

Then he drags his cock out of me, withdrawing almost entirely before slamming back inside.

I almost scream again, my entire body tensing up as all the pleasure I thought I had gotten a handle on comes rushing back through me in an uncontrollable torment.

Kian chuckles deeply, giving me another second to gather myself before he draws out and thrusts again. But then he stops waiting. He starts to fuck me like he means it, setting a deep, punishing pace that has me biting down on my bottom lip so hard I taste blood.

Fuck. I'm gonna come.

I can't stop it. I can't hold it back. Not with his cock filling me so perfectly every time he drives into me. Not with his muscled body straining and flexing over mine. Not with the way he's looking at me, and the way his hand still wraps around my throat.

"Kian," I gasp out. "I can't—"

He bares his teeth, his own chest heaving as he leans down to shut me up with a kiss. There's something about the almost violent way his tongue strokes against mine that tells me he's holding himself back too, and that makes me try harder to keep myself from falling over the edge.

I cling to him, digging my nails into his back so hard they have to be leaving crescent shaped marks on his tattooed skin. My heels are digging into his ass, my body arching beneath his, and my clit throbs every time his cock spears into me.

When he pulls all the way out, I don't even have time to be disappointed before he flips me over onto my stomach and drags me up onto all fours. Then he slides back in and drives into me so hard that the bed creaks beneath us. The ancient metal frame smacks against the wall with each thrust, and even though there's less direct pressure on my clit in this position, I can feel him *everywhere*.

I'm gasping—or maybe I'm sobbing, I'm not even sure anymore. All I know is that there's an electric current in my body, filling me up until I can no longer contain it. My arms are shaking, and when I let out a whimper, Kian's palm cracks across my ass. The shock of pain makes me grunt, and I feel arousal slide down my thighs as the pain turns into liquid pleasure, radiating out from the very pit of my stomach.

"Not yet," he warns, his voice taut and strained. "Wait for me. Fuck, you're too good."

I let out an unintelligible noise, throwing my head back as he hits a spot inside me that makes me see stars.

He curses again, then drapes his upper body over mine, his hot breath brushing over my ear. “Come with me, Amora. Now.”

And I do.

I don’t know if I could’ve lasted another second even if he *hadn’t* given me the command. My body has been teetering on the edge of ecstasy for too long, and the second I stop trying to hold it back, an orgasm comes rushing in, slamming into me like an eighteen-wheeler. I scream out my pleasure as Kian drives into me again and again, grinding his hips against me as his cock pulses and throbs.

Slowly, we stop moving, our heavy breathing the only sound in the room.

My thighs are wet when he pulls out of me, slick with a mixture of his cum and my arousal, and I realize that we never really talked about protection or any of that shit. Not that I’m worried about getting pregnant. My cycle is literally as regular as the moon, and I know there’s no chance of that happening right now. Usually, I make the guys I come into town and hook up with wear condoms, but I don’t think I would’ve let Kian do that if he’d tried.

I wanted—*needed*—to feel every inch of him, no barriers between us. I already miss the feeling of having him inside me, and I don’t think that’s something I’ve ever experienced after sex.

We both collapse to the mattress, lying sprawled out side by side with our limbs touching. I feel fucking *boneless*, like I could sink straight through the bed. It takes a few minutes for me to catch my breath, and another few minutes to work up the motivation to get up and slip into the bathroom to clean up a bit.

I grin at my reflection in the mirror, at the dazed green eyes and flushed cheeks and messy dark hair of the woman staring back at me. Then I wipe up the sticky mess between my legs and return to the bedroom, flicking on the light as I enter.

Kian is stretched out on the bed with one arm propped behind his head, completely naked. Even in this shitty lighting, he looks gorgeous. His skin is a dark tan color, and the tattoos that arc over his flesh are intricate and beautiful. His cock still hasn’t completely softened, and I let myself stare at it for a moment as Kian stares at me.

He seems completely unbothered by me ogling him like a piece of meat, probably because he’s running his hungry gaze over me in pretty much the

exact same way. I like the feeling of his attention on me, the way I can feel his gaze tracking up and down my form.

I saunter back into the room and crawl onto the bed, but instead of lying down next to him, I crawl up to straddle him, resting my knees on either side of his hips. His half-hard cock rests between us, trapped between my pussy and his lower belly, and he grins up at me.

Normally, I'd probably be looking for an excuse to leave right about now, eager to get back to pack lands after blowing off some steam. But I don't really feel like going anywhere, and from the possessive way Kian's hands settle on my hips, he doesn't seem like he's in a hurry to let me leave.

"And to think," I murmur, shifting my hips a little to drag my pussy over his cock as I rest my palms on his chest, "I almost settled for poker night tonight."

He chuckles, but something flashes in his eyes, darkening them a bit. "With who?"

I bite back a grin. "Just a friend. The alpha of my pack, actually. It's amazing he'll still play with me, considering how much money I've won from him over the years."

Kian's hands tighten on my hips. "I'm glad you let him keep his money tonight."

"Me too." I trace one of the tattoos on his chest. "I'm glad you came to Keggers tonight."

A smile curves his full lips. "I almost didn't. Thank fuck I changed my mind."

God, his smile is breathtaking. It cuts across his face, softening the hard lines of his features, and I can see it reflected in his gold-rimmed eyes. I drag my pussy over his cock again as I gaze down at him, watching heat flare in his expression. The friction and pressure on my clit feel amazing. I don't expect to come again after the intense orgasms I had earlier, but my body is still humming with pleasure, still hungry for sensation.

I pick up my pace a little, rolling my hips to get more friction on my clit as Kian's hands start to roam. He slides them up to cup my breasts, tugging at my nipples and making me bite my lower lip. I switch up the rhythm of my hips, making a sort of figure-eight pattern as I use the velvety hardness of his dick to bring me pleasure.

"Gorgeous," Kian murmurs, releasing my breasts after one more sharp pinch of my nipples. His hands move downward again, his thick fingers

gripping my ass.

Then he grabs a handful of my ass cheek in one hand, spreading me open a bit as the fingers of his other hand press against my back hole.

I yelp, my drooping eyelids flaring wide open, and he lets out a laugh that sends vibrations straight to my clit.

I scowl at him, swatting at his chest. “Hey. Warn a girl next time before you—”

Whatever else I was about to say gets lost in a groan as he pushes his finger deep inside me.

“I’m going to finger your asshole,” he says belatedly.

I try to scowl again, but my face can’t quite figure out how to do it. I really didn’t think I could come again, but sparks are dancing through my body, and the throbbing in my clit intensifies as I grind against his cock.

Kian stares up at me, his gaze devouring every little expression that crosses my features as he toys with my asshole the same way he did with my pussy earlier—like he fucking owns it.

My eyelids flutter, falling shut as I arch my back a little, sliding up and down over his cock as he works a second finger into my ass. I’m smearing my wetness all over him, but he doesn’t seem to mind at all, and I glide easily over the hard length of his shaft as I swivel my hips. When I come, I can feel my ass tighten around his fingers, and although it’s not as intense as my last orgasm, it rolls through me in hot waves that feel like they’ll never end.

I’m catching my breath, my eyes still closed, when Kian’s deep voice draws my focus back to him like a magnet.

“Amora,” he rumbles. “Put me inside you.”

Fuck. He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I rise up on my knees a bit, fisting his cock to line him up with my entrance, and when I ease down onto his length, I feel even more full than before with his fingers still buried in my ass. He thrusts up a few times, matching the rhythm of his hand and his hips, but after a while, that doesn’t seem to be enough for him anymore.

He slides his fingers out of my back hole, grabbing my hips to lift me and slam me back down on his cock.

“Shit, that’s good,” I breathe, my mouth falling open.

He’s gonna make me come again. He won’t even have to work that hard for it either. I should be a puddle on the fucking floor by now, unable to even move, let alone orgasm again, but I can feel another one gathering low in my

belly.

“Wait for me,” he commands, and I recognize that tone from earlier.

“Then hurry up,” I shoot back, reaching up to tweak my nipples as he picks up his pace, thrusting harder into me from below.

He growls. Then he moves so fast the room around me becomes a blur. The next thing I know, I’m on my back, Kian’s body covering mine as he settles between my legs and fucks me like he’s trying to leave a permanent reminder of this night imprinted on my body.

Like he’s trying to ruin me for anyone else.

His cock drives into me hard and fast, and he rests his forehead against mine as we both pant for breath. I lose track of which are his inhales and which are my exhales, and I can feel his heart slamming against his ribs, mirrored by my own.

Despite the feverish desperation of our bodies as they collide, there’s something so intimate about this moment, as if we’re wrapping ourselves up in a little cocoon that blocks out everything but each other.

My body is straining, building toward another orgasm, calling on reserves of energy I didn’t even know I had as sweat drips down the side of my temple.

“Almost there, baby,” he murmurs, his voice raw. “So fucking close.”

“Me too,” I gasp. “Please. Kian, fuck, please...”

I want to come for him.

I want to come *with* him.

I want to feel pleasure pour through us both, and I never want it to stop.

Because he’s mine.

That thought—that *certainty*—hits me square in the chest, nearly knocking the wind out of me.

He’s mine.

Kian is my mate.

A rush of emotions surge in my chest, matching the flood of pleasure racing through my veins, and combined, it’s all too much. I bury my fingers in his hair and buck beneath him as white-hot pleasure erupts inside me.

He lets out a deep groan, pounding into me before burying himself to the hilt. His face drops to my shoulder, and he bites down on the spot low on my neck, sending another jolt of sensation shooting through me.

“Mine,” he grinds out, and the word sounds like it comes from the depths of his fucking soul.

His.

Mine.

He knows it too. He felt the same thing I did.

Our sweat-slicked skin sticks together as he rests on top of me for a moment, then he slowly pulls out and collapses to the mattress next to me. Breathing hard, I stare at a crack in the ceiling, trying to focus on slowing my heartbeat and getting control of my breaths. Every part of me aches in all the best ways, and that transcendental orgasm still quivers through me in tiny aftershocks.

I had no idea sex could be this incredible. That *anything* could be this incredible.

Kian rolls over and wraps his arms around me, tugging my body against his. He peppers kisses along my shoulder, though his eyes are half-closed. He nuzzles my neck and buries his face in my hair, going still.

We've fucked each other into total exhaustion. I can barely think, let alone move.

Still, giddy happiness and nerves race through me.

I've found my mate.

I have a mate.

I guess I never thought this would happen; it seemed like something that happens to other people, not to me.

I know we need to talk about it. No matter what, our lives are going to be changed irrevocably from here on out. Will I have to leave my pack? Or is Kian a lone wolf who'd feel comfortable joining us? So many questions, so many details to work out.

But that can all wait a little longer. It feels too good to just lie here in his arms right now, surrounded by his warmth. I turn farther into him and bury my face against his tattooed chest. Whiskey and woodsmoke and sex.

"I think I might love whiskey," I murmur.

If he replies, I don't hear it as I fall asleep in his arms.

WHEN I OPEN my eyes again, pale sunlight filters through a tiny crack in the curtains and slants across the beige carpet toward the bed. I'm in a cocoon of blankets, and the soft down comforter is much more decadent than the hand-

stitched quilt I use at home. I know I didn't pull the blankets up before I passed out last night, so Kian must have covered us up at some point while I slept.

I'm sore in delicious places, including muscles I didn't even know I had. The aches bring back memories of Kian's hands on me, of the way he touched me and the way he dominated my pleasure. I could get used to a lifetime of that kind of intense connection.

I stretch out the kinks in my body and roll over, reaching out for him. Worn out body or not, I'm ready for another round.

My hand hits empty sheets.

I sit up, and the comforter falls away from me as I glance around the empty room.

"Kian?" I call, leaning over to peer into the bathroom. The light's off, but I shove the blankets aside and crawl out of bed to double check anyway.

I flip the switch, and the bathroom light flickers on with an audible hum. Nothing's out of place—a towel is draped over the curtain rod, but otherwise it's clean and empty.

Maybe he went for coffee, I tell myself with a shrug. Or breakfast. Shifters have notoriously large appetites, and after the workout we gave each other last night, he probably woke up starved. Hell, *I'm* starved.

I cross to the coffee pot and check the selection of Keurig cups for something potable. Last night, I walked past this table and noted a nice gold watch and a handful of change lying next to the Styrofoam cups. The change is still there, but the watch is gone.

Watches are meant to be worn, I remind myself, even as a sinking feeling starts to settle in my stomach. *He put it on. That's all.*

I open every drawer beneath the television, my heart racing. Then I hurry back to the bathroom area and check the built-in closet—the hangers are empty, and so is the closet.

All of Kian's possessions are gone.

I locate my dress draped over a chair, then find my high heels under the bed where I remember Kian kicking them in his haste to get me on the mattress. Pausing by the large mirror next to the television, I smooth my hair down, take a few deep, centering breaths, then leave the room.

The front lobby has very little natural light thanks to the giant overhang out front, and the fluorescents tinge everything a sickly yellow. My high heels clack too loudly on the cracked linoleum as I bypass a sad "continental

breakfast” display of bagels and fruit and head for the front desk.

I recognize the short, squat, toad-looking man behind the counter as the same individual who was here when we stumbled in last night. His shiny blue Oxford shirt is rumpled with a pale stain near his breast pocket, and the dark circles beneath his eyes look big enough to drown in.

As I sidle up to the desk trying to look like I’m in control of the situation, he leers at my breasts and asks, “May I help you?”

Ugh. Lecherous old creep. I know I still look thoroughly fucked, and anybody with eyes can see it, but I’m not here for his goddamn entertainment.

I snap my fingers near my face. “Eyes up here, buddy. I’m looking for Kian—” I break off, realizing I don’t actually know Kian’s last name. “The guy in Room 112. Have you seen him?”

The clerk shrugs. “Lots of people staying here.”

I briefly consider reaching across the desk and slamming his face onto the keyboard, but I refrain. “Perhaps you could check the computer?”

His eyes narrow, but I don’t think he’s tough enough to wanna rumble with me. He grabs the mouse and clicks a few times, his rheumy eyes on the glowing screen. Then he grins—a little too happily—and says, “Room 112. David Neal. Checked out this morning.”

“Dav—” I shake my head. “No, his name...”

Trailing off, I swallow hard. Am I supposed to be surprised that Kian gave a false name when he booked this place? I mean hell, he’s a shifter. We’re paranoid on the best of days, especially when surrounded by humans.

The clerk’s smile widens. “What’s wrong? Did he leave without paying your fee?”

“Go fuck a bridge,” I tell him sweetly, then slip out the door before I lose even more dignity than I already have.

Dark clouds race quickly across the horizon. A storm is brewing over pack lands, which means I’ll be running right into it on the way home. The electric charge in the air reminds me of the feeling I had last night during the hunt. The unsettled sensation that sent me into town to get laid.

To get my heart broken.

By the time I reach the barn where I left my pack last night, the strange, tingling feeling I’ve felt since I realized Kian’s things were gone has turned my stomach to rock. I can’t breathe—the rock is pressing on my lungs, and my heart is an aching, twisted knot. As I strip from my heels and dress, I

struggle to get a full breath.

Kian's gone.

He left, and I have no way of finding him. I don't know his full name. He didn't leave me a note. A number.

As I shift to wolf form, I expect the ache to go away, but it doesn't. Not even when I fall into a sprint over the plains. Not when the rain begins to fall. Not when I reach a speed where I can't tell where my legs end and the earth begins. I'm flying, flying, and my heart is frozen.

My mate has left me. I know that's what he is; I know he felt the moment we made the connection, too.

But he left anyway.

My mate has rejected me.

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CHAPTER 4

Present Day

MY MOTORCYCLE PURRS like a tiger beneath me as I lean into a curve on a remote highway, taking the turn a little too quickly. Adrenaline skitters through me, and I laugh out loud when I can sense the road only inches from my leather boots. Danger makes me feel alive, more than anything else has in years, so it's par for the course for me to take a few chances here and there. Once through the curve, I straighten out on a long stretch of empty road as flat as a board beneath a sunset sky.

I like sunset in New Mexico. It's the only time I see color in this desert country. Everything's brown—brown mesas, brown dirt, brown rocks, green shrubs that are so dry they're a hair shy of brown. I miss the green mountains of Montana, the colorful wildflowers, the big blue sky. The sky here isn't ever brown, but when temps soar into the nineties, into triple digits, the sky turns colorless. Might as well be riding my bike on Mars.

I open up the throttle and shoot forward, taking advantage of the empty stretch of this two-lane highway. My ass has been on this seat for a big chunk of the day, and my tailbone's sore. My body's stiff. I'll need a damn shovel to peel my thighs off this bike when I finally stop. A road sign whips past—*Oscura, 5 mi.*

As good a place as any, I guess.

For now, I take pleasure in the speed and in the wind whipping through my hair. It's the same excitement I feel while running in wolf form, except turned up a notch. The power between my legs, the total control over my machine and my own destiny. Hell, even the lack of control is a turn on. I

could hit a deer right now and unwillingly learn how to fucking fly.

A wreck at this speed would hurt. Maybe not kill me; shifters are pretty tough. But it would definitely fuck my day up.

But what's pleasure without danger? These little things are all I have left.

That's my fault, though. I'm the one who walked away from everything I've ever known and left my pack.

For six months after Kian disappeared, I tried to go back to normal. I never told anyone what happened that night in town, and nobody was ever the wiser that I'd met my mate. I did such a good job shoving all my emotions away and pretending that everything was hunky fucking dory that even Ridge never noticed I'd been broken inside.

It helped that some other shit came up to distract me. A major threat to my pack—to all the packs in our region, actually. There was loss. And war. We made new friends and rediscovered old ones. In the end, all three packs stood united and defeated our common enemy. Through it all, I perfected the art of pretending Kian had never happened, and I thought life would go on when the battle ended.

But it didn't. Not for me.

Who the hell would ever have thought *I'd* choose to become a lone wolf? I guess I wouldn't have, though... if not for the witch.

Gwen. I can still recall her face in as much detail as I can picture my own. She's seared into my memories like a boogeyman. A moment in time I'll never forget that rocked me to my core and changed my life forever.

She told me I don't just have one mate.

I have three.

A memory ripples through me, so strong and sudden that it's like I'm reliving that moment in real-time. I'm back there again in the sunshine while the people I love are celebrating our victory. Ridge is celebrating his new mate, Sable, who has become one of my best friends. Everyone is happy, despite the loss of life in battle. It's a new dawn.

But I'm fucking hollow inside.

In my mind's eye, Gwen leans in, her lips close to my ear.

"Three mates, Amora," she repeats, driving the point home. "And they're capable of bringing destruction to the world. Ruin. Death."

I purse my lips and slow my bike as her words filter through my head. I dream of them often. I hear them in the quiet moments. The moments where I'm desperate for a reprieve from this weight on my shoulders.

It wasn't just the words the witch spoke to me. There was... magic involved. Or something. I couldn't explain it then and I can't account for it now, but as she whispered her dire warning, I got a flash of knowledge. A vision, like a glimpse into the future.

The earth was burning, and my mates were at fault. I saw so clearly what they were capable of doing to this world.

I knew I couldn't let that happen. I *can't* let it happen, no matter what it takes.

So now I hunt for my mates.

Not to find my happily ever after, but to stop them.

I slow at a red light where an arrow points me right to Oscura, look both ways, then roll right on through as I make the turn. Civilization comes back in pieces. A few ranches with crude wooden fences and grazing cattle. A big box store and a giant parking lot, then a grouping of fast food joints that make the air redolent with oil and spices. I hit the downtown area—quaint, Spanish-style courthouse, a strip mall, people on the sidewalks going about their day. Oscura looks like every other small town I've stayed in over the past two years.

They all blur together. I started my search for Kian and the other two elusive mates close to home, back in Montana. Then I worked south, following my gut instinct and “leads” that led me nowhere. If I wasn't so damn stubborn, I'd give up.

Yet here we are.

I pull up to the first motel I see and park my bike near the front door. My knees are wobbly as I slide off the seat, and I pause to stretch my arms and legs. Usually, I try not to be on the road so long, but shit happens.

The glass door is so light that a strong breeze could throw it open. I yank it shut behind me, then pass under a flickering light and wrinkle my nose at the very obvious scent of mildew beneath the pungent odor of bleach. Just another run-down hovel clinging to capitalism, like all the dozens of other places I've lain my head.

“Need a room,” I greet the guy at the front desk.

At first glance, I think he's young. But when he smiles, his eyes fold into laugh lines. His tan is too dark. Not “I spend time outside” dark but “I'm terrified of getting older so I bake in a sun bed every other day to halt my existential crisis” dark. There's a white line on his left ring finger. Recently divorced, or pretending she doesn't exist on the off chance he can stick his

dick in someone else. Any roll of the dice would do.

“Just you, gorgeous?” His grin widens, and he sucks his teeth before adding, “I could keep you company if you’re feelin’ lonely.”

I roll my eyes and reach into the holster beneath my leather jacket, then flip open my switchblade and lay it pointedly on the Formica counter, tip facing him. “Call me gorgeous again, and you’ll be comping my room with a few less fingers.”

The poor sap rolls his dinky little stool away from the counter, putting some space between his orange face and my blade.

“Hey, sorry. My bad,” he says, stumbling over the syllables. “I’ll get you checked in ASAP.”

I return the blade to its holster with a smooth, practiced movement, then lean my elbows on the counter and hover over him as he works, silently menacing him to type faster. My ass is tired. I want to drop my bag and go find something hot to eat and cold to drink before I kick up my dusty boots for the night.

I can already tell that Oscura is going to be one more useless domino in a long line of them. Not a single one has fallen and revealed Kian. I’m chasing shadows through the goddamn night without a flashlight. I don’t know why I ever expect any town to be different, to offer up its secrets or give me a leg up on Kian’s or my other mates’ location.

Still, I keep searching. Keep going.

What the fuck else am I going to do?

Finally, cheap plastic keycard in hand, I leave the front office for the dry, hot evening and grab my duffel bag from the back of my Ducati. Pretty much everything I own fits in a single bag, and none of it is worth much. Traveling the country by bike on a quest to chase down and kill three men doesn’t set a girl up for a decent wardrobe. Three pairs of jeans. A few t-shirts. Some cotton shorts. One modest slip dress in case I need to get dressed up. One pair of motorcycle boots. Underwear, in case I ever decide to wear it.

Drifter fashion.

I use the keycard to swipe my way into a room at the end of the motel’s single-story row, then kick open the metal door and flick the light switch on the wall inside. A dull, amber bulb in a ridiculous gold sconce illuminates a room that has seen a lot better days than this one.

Venturing inside, I drop my bag in an armchair hulking in the corner and blow out an irritated breath. Flat blue carpet stained by God knows what.

Rust stains in the bathroom sink, mildew on the shower curtain. Watercolor beach portraits, like I want to be reminded that I'm landlocked in the fucking desert.

"The Four Seasons, it is not," I mutter, then shove my wallet in my back pocket with the key card and head out.

My ass is still chafed from my eight hour ride, so not even an ounce of me wants to straddle my bike again to go searching for sustenance. Luckily, the motel is centrally located, and I can see a large strip mall dotted by free-standing restaurants across the street and down a side road behind a thicket of evergreens. So I shove my fingers in the pockets of my blue jeans and set off for the crosswalk.

The strip mall is a happening place. The O'Charley's parking lot overflows with giant pickups and tiny electric coupes, which is as New Mexico as it can get. Rednecks and hippies living semi-harmoniously. There's a barbecue joint next door with a dozen people waiting on the patio. The idea of smoked ribs makes my mouth water, but if the crowd outside is any indication, it would be way too long of a wait.

I cross the lot, immediately shutting down the idea of grabbing fast food from either of the boxy chain restaurants, because I really want a drink. The strip mall behind the food places holds the usual bric-a-brac of small town America—a cheap grocery, a local hardware store, a math tutoring clinic, and a Big Lots. But at the very end of the row is the quintessential corner bar.

My kind of place.

I speed walk across the main thoroughfare before some douche in a lifted truck can mow me down, then hop up on the sidewalk, making my way for Joe's Bar and Grill.

The front door is open to the evening air, spilling the mouthwatering scent of fried food and beer into the lot. I bypass a large group standing around just inside the doors, all of them with glasses in hand, then weave through a sea of high top tables to get to the bar.

The bar's magnificent—dark, heavy wood that's as aged as a fine wine. The same rich wood lines the wall behind the bar, planks intersected by mirrors and shelves holding rows and rows of liquor. It gives the whole area a kind of rustic, pirate ship feel.

I'm not even seated on one of the high-backed stools before the bartender comes to greet me. He's a tall, lanky man with limbs that seem too stretched for his body and a head full of thick gray hair. His name tag declares him

“Joe.” The owner, maybe.

He tosses a white rag over his shoulder and gives me a lopsided smile that seems more genuine than I’m used to. “You look like a whiskey girl.”

Just the word whiskey sends fury racing through me.

It’s an immediate, visceral reaction. If my anger could manifest as flames, Joe the bartender would spontaneously combust.

“I don’t drink piss water,” I bite out, trying to temper the chill in my voice. It’s not his fault I hate whiskey. All he sees is a leather jacket, tight jeans, and a face that’s a little harder than most girls. Girls like me usually *do* drink whiskey. “Gin and tonic. Top shelf.”

Joe raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment on my rudeness. His voice is even and pleasant as he says, “You got it.”

As he walks away, I shove my hands back through my long dark hair and castigate myself for being an ass to the man who’s going to serve me dinner. It was seriously uncalled for. My grudge against Kian has nothing to do with Joe and his attempts at conversation. If the old man decides to spit in my burger, I probably deserve it.

Joe returns a moment later with my glass, and I order one of the specials written on the blackboard above the bar. He enters my order in his computer then goes to wait on the next customer, leaving me to my solitude.

There’s no denying that Joe’s Bar and Grill is popular. The place is packed for dinner, and an even bigger crowd is chilling out on the side patio under a haze of cigarette smoke. Joe has tiny little twenty-somethings in crop tops and short aprons serving tables, and the two teen boys bussing tables look like they could be his kids. Or grandkids. Just another family-owned bar. Just another small town.

Just another day.

After so many years, I feel like I should be used to this level of monotony. Even moving from place to place every week, every two weeks, nothing changes. Every place looks the same. Every bar feels the same, every server the same, every bartender another guy just like Joe. Even my solitude is a never-ending feeling of sameness.

I don’t even feel like a whole person anymore. Like I’ve faded into the wallpaper. I’m a fucking tumbleweed blowing through the desert on a Ducati. Half the time, I feel like I’m a ghost in any room, no matter how crowded it is. Separate from this world but living in it all the same.

As I bring my glass to my lips for another drink, I feel a presence at my

side. A man leans in, wedging his body between me and my neighbor. Young, dark hair, dark eyes—a low rent Tom Cruise in his heyday. His elbow slides onto the bar, and his smarmy grin is leveled on me.

Dammit.

“Something’s wrong with my eyes,” he says, “because I can’t take them off you.”

I snort into my glass. “Oh, baby. That’s just fucking awful. Get out of here.”

Smarmy guy straightens and glares at me. “Well, fuck you too. Bitch.”

As he huffs off like a teenage girl throwing a temper tantrum, I give his back a little flippant wave with my middle finger and then return to nursing my drink.

I’m invisible, until I’m not. And no man has been able to cut through this veneer since...

No. Fuck that. I’m not thinking about that tonight.

I toss back the last of my drink as Joe sets my plate in front of me.

He palms my glass. “Another?”

“Please,” I say, hoping the forced smile takes away the fact that my first words to him were pissy. “And ketchup.”

I slather my steak fries in Heinz and make quick work on my burger. It’s average bar fare, which is to say it’s delicious. When Joe comes to take away my empty plate, I order a fresh drink. Three’s the limit. I’ll wash down dinner with this one then head back to the motel for some shut eye.

Last drink in hand, I pass Joe a fifty dollar bill, and he sidles off to make change at the register.

The ice clinks in my glass as I sip it, and I swish the licorice sweetness around in my mouth. It’s the one thing that reminds me of home. Nights beneath the Montana stars, sipping gin while murdering Ridge in poker. Dinners at his house, laughing and bantering with the four alphas of the pack, sharing secrets with his mate Sable, the closest I ever had to a sister. She’ll have had her baby by now. Maybe even more than one.

A pang hits me. *Fuck, I miss them.*

Suddenly, the back of my neck prickles.

I freeze, my glass still pressed to my lips. Electricity dances across my skin, sending tingles zinging along my spine.

No.

It can’t be.

Setting the glass down on the countertop, I sit up straighter and study the bar in the tiny reflections behind the bottles ahead of me. But the room's too dim, and too many people are moving around for me to make out anything more than swinging arms and moving bodies.

So I take a deep breath and swivel my chair enough to see the open front door.

And as I do, the domino falls.

It's Kian.

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CHAPTER 5

MOTHERFUCKER.

Of all the fucking bars in all the fucking cities in this country, Kian has to walk into *this one* when I *least* expect him. I'm three drinks in, filled to the brim with a burger and fries, and half-dead from traveling all day.

Things just got really complicated.

He's standing in the doorway, his gaze sweeping the bar for an open table. I'm transported back to Keggers in Montana, watching him walk into my life like a human wrecking ball. Here he is, doing the exact same thing in an obscure hole in the wall in middle-of-nowhere New Mexico like nothing's changed.

Things *have* changed though. In the three years since I last saw him, he's gotten harder, both in his face and in his sinewy, muscular body. His hair's longer with a hint of curl at the tips, like he's forgotten to get a trim. He still has broad shoulders and an imposing height as he looms in the doorway—a demon in black jeans. He's got more tattoos, too, swirling up both sides of his neck and down to his wrists on either arm.

The sight of those tattoos makes my body respond. I remember my fingers pale against that black ink. My lips trailing up the curlicues across his abdomen, my tongue ringing his nipple.

God, I can still taste the salt on his skin. The hot, wild, *intoxicating* taste of him.

His eyes, though, they haven't changed. His eyes are that same endless brown ringed by gold and framed by dark lashes. The same eyes that stared so lovingly into mine as he claimed me.

As he ruined me, heart and soul.

I've been dreaming of those eyes every night since we stumbled into his hotel room in a flurry of groping hands and hot kisses.

I want to stare into them forever—
—and jam my knife into both pupils.

Otherwise, he's still Kian. He's still exactly as I remember him.

Then he catches sight of me.

Time stands still. The bar disappears. No more drunk, shouting partiers. No more clinking dishes and raucous laughter. Just me and Kian and this vast ocean of hurt and need and absolute fucking fury.

I can't breathe. I cling to the back of the chair, my head whirling, my lust and anger meshing until I can't delineate between the two emotions. There he is like some dark god three years after he tore my soul from my body and left me to drown in the blood.

I want to fuck him.

I want to kill him.

While my heart's doing its damndest to escape the confines of my rib cage, Kian's expression doesn't even change. But he recognizes me. I can see it. I can *feel* it.

After a split second of eye contact, he turns away and makes his way across the bar to a small, empty booth, where he sits with his back to me.

Clearly, he intends to ignore my presence.

Pain ripples through me, his rejection of our bond like a knife slicing deep into old wounds. That old agony opens up, fresh as ever and ten times as hurtful. Isn't absence supposed to make the heart grow fonder?

But as hurt as I am, as cut as I feel, anger is right on its heels.

Fuck. This. Asshole.

If he wants to play this game, he's going to do it to my face.

I surge to my feet and snatch my drink off the bar, ice ringing against the glass as I whirl away from Joe's questioning gaze. The bartender's returned with my change, but I leave him standing there. I don't care about change.

I care about ending this shit once and for all.

Stalking across the room, I keep my eyes trained on Kian's bowed head as he reads the menu and imagine shoving the whole thing up his ass.

By the time I reach his booth, my heart's ready to give out. But I clench my jaw and slide onto the bench across from him, ready to stare him down with enough heat to melt his insides.

Kian drops the top of his menu and peers at me, his expression stoic and

unreadable. I hate it. I hate the way he looks at me like he doesn't even know me. So impassively, like I mean nothing to him after what we shared.

I just have to remind myself he means nothing to me either. My only goal from the moment I left home was to track him down and stop him. There's nothing else for me here, and there never has been.

At least the strong stench of stale beer and body odor is covering up his whiskey and woodsmoke scent. One less temptation to throw me off track.

Slouching casually against the booth seat, I grip my glass in one hand and go for my best bored voice. "You're a hard man to find."

Kian raises an eyebrow, then lifts the menu back up to peruse the selections. "You didn't find me."

I reach out and slam my palm into the laminated paper, knocking it to the table.

"What the hell are you?" I snap.

He purses his lips for a moment, the first sign of emotion I've seen on his face. "I'm a shif—"

"Bullshit," I cut in before he even finishes speaking. "You're not a shifter. You're more than that."

Joe appears next to the table and slides my change across the sticky surface. He glances between me and Kian, then raises an eyebrow at me. "You forgot your change."

"Thanks," I say and peel off a ten for him.

With one last suspicious glance between us, Joe leaves us to the rising tension.

Kian leans forward, lacing his fingers on the table top. With his elbows out and his chest so fucking broad to begin with, the position makes him loom, makes his body take up all the space in the little alcove. His voice comes out gruff, dark, and dangerous. "You're going to presume to tell me what I am?"

"Yeah," I bite out, then swallow my heartbeat in my throat. "You're a feral shifter."

A server arrives then, interrupting us *again*, and I consider screaming at her to go away so I can interrogate Kian in peace. But her bubbly energy displaces the tension hovering over the table. She's ridiculously young with a round face, huge eyes, and breasts that her little crop top can hardly contain. Her name tag says Brandee.

Kian doesn't even look at her. His thunderous gaze remains trained on me

as the words “feral shifter” hover in the air between us.

“Hiya!” Brandee chirps, pen poised over a little pad. “Can I start you off with a drink?”

Before Kian can speak, I shoot him a vicious smile, holding his gaze while I speak to the waitress. “He’ll have a happy hour whiskey. Cheapest you’ve got.”

“Coming right up!” she promises with a smile, then bounces away with her ponytail swinging.

A muscle ticks in Kian’s jaw, and his eyes glitter like aged gold coins. “Do you know what feral means?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah. Wild. Untamed.”

He nods as if that explains everything, then leans back, nearly mimicking my “pretending to be unbothered and casual” pose. He gestures to my glass. “Gin and tonic. Your tastes haven’t changed.”

“This conversation isn’t about me.”

“Oh, I think it is,” Kian murmurs. “Who told you I was a feral shifter?”

“A witch.”

“Hmm. What else did this witch tell you?”

I take a sip of my gin to calm my nerves. This version of Kian grates on me. The low, even tones. The disinterest. The way he almost seems to be talking down to me, like I’m a child who’s gotten a wild notion and he’s the grown up trying to make sense of my naïveté.

Where’s the man who looked at me like an equal? The mysterious, sexy man with the knowing smile?

Whatever. It just makes it easier for me to do what I came to do.

“This witch,” Kian prompts. “What did she tell you?”

“You’re going to destroy the world, and it’s my job to stop you.”

“And you believe her.”

“Knowing what I know about you? Fuck yes, I believe her.”

He tilts his head. “What do you know about me?”

I freeze, realizing I might have said too much. What I know about him is that he met his mate, bonded with her, then walked away like she was trash.

Any shifter capable of that wasn’t a shifter at all. But quite frankly, I don’t want to go down that road. There’s nothing to discuss.

“Just what she told me,” I say coolly. “That you’ll destroy the world.”

Brandee bounces back up like an excitable poodle and deposits a short glass on the table in front of Kian. “You folks eating?”

“That will be all,” he says without looking away from me.

“*O-kaaay*,” the bubbly server says, drawing out the syllables. “Just wave me down if you need me.”

In her absence, Kian picks up the glass and sniffs it, then makes a face before setting it back down, untouched. A small, petty part of me fills with glee.

Score one for Amora.

Kian sighs into his glass. “You have no idea what you’re messing with.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me?”

He raises his golden-ringed gaze to meet mine. “You should’ve taken the hint when I left you three years ago.”

His words slice deep, and an ache spreads through me, chilling me from the inside.

There it is. The elephant in the room. The source of the tension so thick between us.

He knew what was between us just like I did that night. He knows what he turned his back on.

I stare him down, every cell in my body on fire with loathing. Gritting my teeth, I promise myself that I *will* stop him. No matter what it takes.

An explosion of glass and liquid next to our table startles me out of my vengeful thoughts. I jolt away from the splatter of alcohol and turn to find Brandee standing over an entire tray of shattered glasses, her big eyes shiny with unshed tears.

“I’m so sorry!” she squeaks. “The glass didn’t hit you, did it? It just slipped right out of my hands! I should have dried them off...”

I catch a blur of black out of the corner of my eye and realize Kian’s on the move.

“Fuck!” I leap to my feet to follow him.

Glass crunches beneath my boots as I run through Brandee’s mess. I slip on a puddle of sharp-smelling alcohol and catch myself on the back of a chair, then launch forward on Kian’s heels. He weaves through the crowd of bar patrons like he’s made of water, while I slam into three different guys roughly the size and shape of small mountains. Each blow sets me a few seconds behind, so that by the time I burst through the open front doors, he’s gained a lead.

Kian sprints across the parking lot toward the tree line where a Harley’s parked alone. Because *of course* he also has a bike. It only cements the whole

“we’re star-crossed soulmates” shit.

He tosses a long leg over his seat and revs the bike to life so quickly it’s like he’s one with the damn thing.

I reach him as he lifts his feet off the ground and rolls into motion. I lash out, grabbing for his t-shirt, but as he gives the bike gas, the cotton tears beneath my hand.

“Fuck!” I yell. Of course I chose not to drive over. Of course my bike’s across the fucking street. Because I’m an *idiot*. Three years of dead ends and false leads made me drop my guard too much.

I don’t hesitate. It’ll take him a minute, maybe two to get out of the busy lot, even if the light is green. Hauling ass through the trees, I sprint for the parking lot of the motel and my own bike.

The fucker isn’t getting away.

I dart across the street, narrowly avoiding a collision with a Jeep. The driver honks and yells something obscene out his open window, but I keep running. I’ve got my senses turned up, shifter hearing on high. Harleys are *loud*. They’ve got engines that roar, so they’re not the kind of bike you want when you’re trying to outrun someone.

They’re also not as fast as my Ducati.

I sail onto the back of my bike and get it in gear in the blink of an eye, before I whip out of the parking lot on a squeal of tires. Down by the strip mall, Kian’s Harley is just pulling through the red light, turning away from the motel toward the empty highway.

I look both ways, then run two red lights—earning a few irritated honks for my disrespect of traffic laws—and take a right onto the street behind him. Once I’m past the strip mall, the traffic thins.

So I open the throttle and speed.

The wind whips around me, and my long hair snags at my face and neck. Away from civilization, the air smells wild, like freedom and fir trees and the musk of dead things. I close the distance between our bikes and grin like a fool because I’ve got the faster one. There’s not a chance in hell he’s going to outrun me.

Four lanes merge to two. Even though there are fewer cars here as we leave *Oscura* behind, we still pass a few traveling the speed limit. Kian whips around them in the emergency lane, and I follow suit, praying I’m not about to blow a tire on a stray nail or broken glass.

We leave behind the outskirts of the town for open desert filled with

shrubs and lined by low hills painted red in the sunset. Another couple miles down the road, the desert gives way to deciduous forest, thick with spruce and fir trees.

He has to stop eventually. I've got a full tank of gas. I can go all night.

But then Kian veers off the road.

I cringe at the way his bike's suspension bounces over the rough embankment. Harleys aren't made for off-roading any more than they're made for speed.

My Ducati flies down the embankment like a goddamn champ, and I speed after him into the trees. It's the end of the road—literally. There's no path here. Only thickening undergrowth, giant tree trunks, and wilderness. Birds scatter from us, screeching their discontent to the forest. I bounce over a small fallen tree, then barrel right into a thicket of dead thorns, cringing at the paint damage. A sharp branch lashes at my cheek, and heat flares where it cut me, but I keep going.

I'll always keep going.

Kian brakes suddenly, letting his bike lay down on its side in the undergrowth. As it slides to a stop, he leaps off with deadly grace. Before he even hits the ground, he's shifted to wolf.

Motherfucker.

I really don't want to damage my bike more than necessary, but I want to catch Kian more. So I mimic his movements, laying down my bike and then using it as leverage to launch into the undergrowth before it can pin me beneath it.

When I hit the ground, I'm on four paws. I allow myself a brief second of despair for my destroyed leather jacket, then zoom after him.

The sun's hanging so low on the horizon that it's already night inside the trees. That works to my advantage, given my near-perfect night vision in wolf form.

Of course, that means Kian has the same advantage.

Kian's huge, muscular wolf crashes through the forest much faster than I expected. But despite his speed, he's loud. I can hear every thundering beat of his paws on the dirt, and the undergrowth rattles beneath him. I keep my vision trained on him, but I focus on my hearing.

Even if I lose sight, I won't lose him.

Then he stumbles.

It's luck. Pure dumb fuckery of luck. The wolf stumbles over something

on the ground, and he goes down hard. Kian rolls twice and lands with his legs splayed.

I'm on top of him before he can stand.

I latch my teeth to his scruff and use my momentum to throw him over my body. He slams into a nearby tree trunk, all the air expelling from his lungs. The blow doesn't stun him for long. He's on his feet with a low, furious growl before I can follow.

We leap at each other, teeth snapping. I grab hold of his ear and shake my head with the intent to rip it the fuck off. His teeth grab the soft underside of my neck and tighten on my windpipe without breaking skin. I hold out as long as I can, but I need to breathe. So I release his ear and back away with a snarl.

Kian stands his ground, teeth bared. But he doesn't make a move to attack. We eye each other in the dim light, and I feel like he's taking the measure of me.

I've already measured him and found him wanting.

I leap again.

We tumble together, and for several long moments, we roll and flail, biting and growling. His teeth pierce my shoulder, and I take a chunk out of his neck. The taste of his blood in my mouth is incredible—hot, tangy, laced with whiskey. I feel his essence in every nerve ending. For a split second, I hold there, completely consumed by the feeling.

He uses my moment of weakness against me.

Kian rolls, pinning me beneath his bulk. I'm wedged on my back between the branches of a fallen tree, and I can't buck him off. I can't even reach him with my teeth, and my claws don't do shit against his thick muzzle.

He bares his teeth, his jaw hinging open.

Jesus, he's going to kill me.

I glance around for *anything* to get me out of this situation, and I notice that the dead tree where he's pinned me against has multiple thick branches that have broken away from the trunk. Many of them lay scattered well within reach. I can't pick them up with my paws.

But I have hands too.

The magic that prompts my transformation washes over me like a cool mountain breeze. My limbs lengthen and thicken, and my torso stretches out beneath Kian's bulk. I toss out my arm and latch onto the nearest branch, then swing it around with all my strength.

It slams into Kian's head with a painful *crack*.

He yelps and ducks, his paws skittering on the ground around my torso.

I hit him again, then again, slowly backing him away from my body. Crawling to my knees, I continue the beat down, even as my heart aches and my wolf screams at me to stop hurting her mate.

I'll beat him to a bloody death if it means I can save the world.

Kian ducks a fourth blow, then leaps at me. He shifts in mid-jump, and my god, it's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen. His dark fur recedes like rain falling backward, and his body lengthens, grows, morphs like a work of art. Then his bare skin slams into mine.

I slam into the underbrush on my back with Kian's heavy weight on top of me. He rips the branch from my hand and throws it into the woods with an inhuman snarl, before turning his gold-ringed gaze on me.

Suddenly, it's not two wolves fighting in the trees.

It's me and Kian.

It's Kian's body pressed to mine. His knee between my legs, his left arm slanted over my neck to pin me to the dirt, the heat of his cock against my hip.

I know his body. I only had him for one night, but I know his body. I know the way it feels against mine. I know the rhythm of his hips, the bruising force of his fingers, the way he filled me when he sank between my legs.

Heat flares between us and desire swirls through my core. The last time we were in this position, he was buried inside me.

Something flickers in Kian's eyes. Heat. Desire. Longing. I swear I feel his cock hardening against me.

Then his forearm presses harder into my throat, cutting off my air supply.

"You'll never be able to stop me," he grinds out. "It's a mistake to even try."

Then his weight vanishes, and in the next instant, he's a wolf again. Racing away from me.

I scramble to my feet and struggle to get a breath. My throat's taken a damn beating, and I feel like I can't get enough oxygen in my body. I shift and fall into a sprint after him, where I leap to latch on to his fluffy tail. I drag him back, as he whips around and snaps at my snout.

What I don't count on is Kian's head being a lot fucking harder than mine.

As he lunges his upper body back at me to get me to release his tail, his head slams into mine. The blow is devastating—like he hauled a cinder block right at my skull. I yelp involuntarily and pitch to the ground, my vision fading out on a spray of sparks and black edges. Pain sends spasms into my body so that I can't feel my legs, and I kick uselessly, trying to find my footing.

For a few seconds, everything goes fuzzy and indistinct except the wind in my fur. Then my senses return in pieces—my vision fading back in, blurry but serviceable. My hearing returns to the chorus of nighttime crickets around me. And I manage to stumble to my legs, even though they're still tingling from the knock out.

I shake my head and almost fall over, barely catching myself on a numb paw. Then I glance around for Kian.

But he's gone. I don't even hear the sound of his big bulk crashing through the woods.

Growling irritably, I put my nose to the ground and sniff around until I catch his scent. Even in wolf form, he smells like whiskey and woodsmoke, so it's easy to find. Once I've got him, I take off through the woods, ignoring the throbbing in my head as I trail him.

Half a mile into the woods, however, his scent begins to grow strangely indistinct. It fades little by little until suddenly, I've lost his trail.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 6

I SNARL IN FRUSTRATION, the sound echoing through the woods. A flock of tiny warblers takes flight to flee my anger, then the forest goes still again but for the breeze knocking through the trees. Dusk has fallen to full dark, and I can sense all the nighttime creatures slithering fearfully away from me in the inky shadows.

But I can't sense Kian.

That son of a bitch.

I'm not sure he even meant to headbutt me, but it certainly gave him the advantage he needed to get away while I was incapacitated.

At the very least, I hope his head's ringing with a concussion too.

I sniff around a while longer, but I can't find a good trail. Turning circles in the dark isn't going to conjure the asshole up, so after a time, I begrudgingly set a trail back through the woods to my bike.

Kian's Harley is right where he left it next to mine. I shift back to human form and lift it up so I can dig around in its compartments.

Except the saddlebags are gone.

"That rotting pile of flaming trash," I mutter and let his bike fall back to the ground.

He came back and got his things, then took off.

Hauling up my own bike, I knock the kickstand down so I can open my top-box. I dig around through the detritus inside until I find a pair of wire cutters, then gleefully go to work ruining his Harley. If it can be cut, whether mechanically or aesthetically, it gets a trim.

If this was the wild west, I'd just steal his horse. Alas, I was born in a different time, and I can't operate two motorcycles at once. The asshole runs

from me, I make it so his bike can't run. Tit for tat.

I toss my wire cutters back in my top-box, then dig out some clothes. Nothing would get people's attention quite like a naked girl riding around on a bike, so I started keeping a couple spares in the trunk a while back.

The t-shirt chafes against all the scratches I've gotten. My hips and legs ache as I step into the soft cotton shorts, and I realize I'm going to have to find a store in town to pick up a new pair of boots. In the meantime, I step into my spare pair of flats and brace myself for engine heat on my ankles.

I briefly consider sticking around. Kian has to come back for his bike eventually, right? But there's no guarantee he will. I'm in pain. I'm pissed. I want to clean up my wounds and sleep for an entire day.

I've made it this long searching for him. I can go a while longer.

So I kick my bike into gear, carefully turn it through the undergrowth, and head back for the road.

Returning to the bustle of Oscura feels... odd. What just happened out in the woods feels like it took place on a totally different planet. It's like the girl who rode into town a couple hours ago isn't the same girl coming back now. Not after the constant rush of conflicting emotions I feel around Kian. After the argument. The fight.

Losing him again.

As I pass Joe's Bar and Grill, I remember that I had change laying on the table. I'd run after Kian without grabbing it, too caught up in his attempt to flee to think of anything else. No biggie, though. Poor Brandee was having a bad night. She deserves the tip. Hopefully the rest of her night goes a hell of a lot more smoothly than mine.

I park my bike on the sidewalk outside the motel then swipe the keycard to let myself into the cool AC. The door slams shut behind me, and I slump against it, staring around the pathetic room.

Home sweet home.

My head's throbbing in time with my heartbeat. I straighten and limp to my bag for some ibuprofen, then carry the little brown pills to the bathroom sink. When I turn on the strip of lights above the counter, I wince at my reflection in the mirror and immediately consider turning them right back off.

I look... rough.

The past three years haven't been kind to me. It's never more obvious than when I'm forced to confront my own reflection. My thin face has turned hard and angular, and my once grass-green eyes are dull and haunted above

dark hollows put there by sleepless nights.

I toss the pills into my mouth and lean down to drink from the faucet. The water's nasty—filtered with chemicals, nothing like the fresh, delicious well water back home. When I stand back up, I confront my reflection again, my lips peeling back from my teeth.

I tug a handful of dried leaves and twigs from my long dark brown hair, leaving them in a fun pile on the countertop like I'm the Blair Witch. Turning my face to the left, I run my finger beneath a raw red scratch on my right cheekbone. Another cut, deeper than the first, is angled above my eye and through my eyebrow.

Like the scar on Kian's face.

Even now, I can conjure up a vision of his face. The scar bisecting his brow, his sardonic grin, the hard glitter in his unique eyes. I hate how I can remember him in *such* perfect detail all these years later. Memories of our night together have been assaulting me since he showed up at Joe's earlier, never far from the edges of my mind.

Fury sets my blood boiling. I rip my t-shirt off over my head and step out of the shorts, then slam the faucet on in the shower. I climb beneath the surprisingly strong stream before it's fully hot, and I turn my face into the cool water, cringing as it burns my cuts.

Feeling his skin against me in the woods brought every satin memory of his body on mine back to life. I don't want to remember how right the weight of him feels on me. I don't want to breathe in lingering traces of whiskey and woodsmoke. I want to forget *all* of that. How can I *kill him* if I can't stop remembering the way he completed me?

Steam heats up the tiny bathroom. I unwrap the shitty motel soap and scrub at every inch of my skin, trying to rid myself of his scent. No matter how hard I scrub, even if I use my nails just short of drawing blood, I can't get myself totally free of him.

I can still feel him everywhere. His hands on my body back in Montana. His skin on mine in New Mexico. It all blurs together. There's no line between pleasure and pain anymore.

Finally, I rinse off all the soap and turn off the water. While the faucet slowly drips into the pooling water, I dry off with anger still bubbling beneath my skin.

It keeps me warmer than any shower ever could.

After throwing on an oversized t-shirt and boy shorts to sleep in, I slip

between covers that smell like industrial detergent. Bland. Bleachy. Void of life. I reach over my head and turn out the light, casting the room into total darkness.

Somewhere nearby, a horn honks. The swish of cars on the road continues like my entire world hasn't been rocked off its foundation.

I found him.

I found Kian.

The man I've been hunting all this time.

His face haunts my mind and his body haunts my memories as I fall asleep.

EVERY NERVE-ENDING in my body is buzzing, every inch of me both exhausted and insatiable.

Kian has already made me come three times, but the feel of his body draped over mine, his cock sheathing itself in my core over and over again, is pushing me toward another soul-stealing climax.

His cock drives into me with punishing thrusts, and he rests his forehead against mine as we both gasp for breath. I feel the warmth of his exhales on my lips, and I strain forward to kiss him once as our bodies rock together on the bed. The sound of the bed frame hitting the wall is a sharp punctuation to the smoldering heat building inside me.

My heart is racing, and so is Kian's.

I can feel it.

I can feel the heavy thud of each beat where his chest presses against mine, but more than that... I can feel it in my soul. The two of us are joined so closely together in this moment that the line between our two separate selves seems to blur.

There's no him, no me.

Just us.

My body goes tight as another orgasm looms over me, and I can feel sweat dripping down my temple and dampening the back of my neck.

"Almost there, baby," Kian murmurs. "So fucking close."

"Me too," I gasp. "Please. Kian, fuck, please..."

His forehead presses harder against mine, and our gazes are locked. In

this moment, nothing else exists but his dark brown eyes ringed with that startling gold.

But then something draws my attention away from him. Not a flash of movement I see or a sound I hear. Just a... a feeling.

My gaze flicks toward the corner of the hotel room, and I realize Kian and I aren't alone.

There's a man standing in one corner, watching us with blazing blue eyes. His skin is tan, making the light blond of his hair appear even paler. His face is devoid of expression, not a single emotion readable in his features, but the way he stares at us so intensely makes goosebumps break out on my skin.

Shock ripples through me, and on its heels comes the orgasm that's been threatening for so long. I cry out, clinging to Kian as he drives into me. He bites down on the curve of my neck, growling against my skin.

"Mine."

The voice sounds like Kian's, but as I watch, the stranger's lips move, forming the exact same word.

As if he's claiming me too.

My eyes pop open, and I suck in a gasping breath as I wrench myself out of the dream. My heart is thundering, and lingering pulses of arousal make my clit throb. The room is dark, and there's a disorienting moment where I struggle to remember which hotel room I'm in, in which city, in which state.

Instinctively, my gaze darts toward the corner of the room where the stranger watched us in my dream.

A man stands there, half obscured by shadows.

A tall blond man with bright blue eyes.

CHAPTER 7

I JERK UP IN BED, shock flooding me and turning my skin to ice.

The man and I stare at one another in silence for several heartbeats, neither of us moving. He's unblinking, a ghostly, beautiful statue in the sliver of light falling through the crack in the curtains. Half his face is forged from the shadows in the corner, and the other is damn near alight from the streetlamp outside.

For a moment, I sit frozen, my hands clawed into the blankets against my chest. On the heels of my dream, I'm not entirely certain he's real. Maybe he's just a vision—a night terror, a holdover from the dream, the way old photograph negatives could overlap in the developing process.

My head feels foggy enough to lend truth to the idea. Despite my jolt of terror, maybe I just haven't fully awakened. There's no way someone could have gotten into my room without me knowing it.

But... the ache in my head from the fight with Kian is more pronounced now. The ibuprofen I took earlier has worn off, so the throbbing has crept back in. I have vivid dreams, but they don't usually include pain.

Then the mate bond hits me, and I *know* it's not a dream.

The bond rushes through me like the wind on my bike. My wolf howls to life, a presence inside me that whines for this pale-haired stranger, aches to be close to him. The bond is electric in my body, just as strong and certain as it was the night I bonded to Kian. It's an almost corporeal connection, a line stretching between us, connecting us as one.

He's one of them, I think, floored by the realization. *This man is one of my three mates.*

It's hard to swallow. Even harder to believe. I was raised with the dead

certainty that every wolf had one fated mate, if you were lucky to meet them and be bonded. But I watched Ridge learn to share Sable with her other three mates—all of them alphas of the packs that came together with ours. Not to mention, Gwen warned me that I had three mates *after* I'd already bonded with Kian.

And here he is. One of them, at least.

So I have no reason to doubt the feeling.

My chest tightens, and my stomach churns. His face is entirely unfamiliar—a stranger—and yet everything about him screams *mine*. There's a familiarity that runs deeper than the surface. The way I sensed Kian like a storm on the horizon when he walked into that bar three years ago. My body knew before I did.

The bond is an all-out attack on my senses trying to drag me to this nameless stranger, but I remain on the bed, looking at him while he's looking back.

He doesn't move, though I know he feels it. There's no way he can't. It's a desperate pounding in my blood that has to be happening to him, as well.

The air conditioner kicks on with a low hum, startling me from the reverie. The real world rushes back in, dampening the screaming bond enough that I can gather my wits about me. I shove away the rising desire, the aching need, and remind myself that this man is dangerous.

I came here to *kill him*. Even if I didn't know him at the time.

Get off your ass, Amora! my mind screams. I know I need to leap into action. This is my chance—a second chance tonight to carry out my mission.

Still, I remain frozen in place.

God, he's gorgeous. Where Kian's darkly sensuous, this man is pale and illuminated. Even standing as still as stone, he vibrates with energy.

Get up!

I finally convince my hands to unclench, and the blanket falls away from my chest. My knife is on the nightstand, and I'm calculating whether or not I can reach it before he reaches me, when my mate moves.

His weight shifts just enough to draw my attention, and there's a blur of something that flashes in the angle of the streetlight. Then something long and heavy slices through the air toward my head.

Except... it misses me.

I jerk away, turning to stare at the knife embedded in the headboard.

Only inches from my head.

I raise an eyebrow and glare at him, fury lancing through me. “You missed.”

He inclines his head, and his shoulder-length platinum hair brushes over the dark fabric of his shirt like spiderwebs, but he doesn’t respond.

Suddenly, an odd, quiet hissing fills the room. It’s close to my ear—really close. I glance back at the embedded knife and notice for the first time that there’s a strange shadow on the headboard. The room is dim, and the sliver of light passing through the curtains is enough to cast a few shadows on the floor and across the mattress, but this one...

This isn’t normal.

It’s darker than most shadows, and it doesn’t seem to have a source.

As I stare at the black shape, it squirms. At first, I think I’ve imagined it—a trick of the light, a trick of my own movement, a trick of gravity. Because there’s no way in hell a shadow can move on its own.

Until it moves again.

It squirms against the knife’s blade, parts of it rising from the headboard like a corporeal black cloud.

My breath hitches in my throat.

Is that motherfucker *alive*?

I’m no stranger to magic. Hell, I’m no stranger to some real crazy kinds of magic, not after the battle with the witches back in Montana—the one that brought Gwen into my life and set me on this path. But this is like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

Peter Pan’s disembodied shadow, only darker and more menacing.

Then it attacks.

The shadow slides away from the blade pinning it to the headboard as if the knife isn’t even solid. It leaps for me, coming away from the tacky upholstered bedframe like a thick, black cloud.

I launch backward, falling off the bed in my haste. On the way down, I grab my knife off the nightstand and land on my back with my legs above me, still tangled in the covers. Not the most graceful thing I’ve ever done, especially considering I’m in what amounts to panties and a t-shirt with my ass in the air in front of a stranger. But I at least manage to get my blade ready.

The shadow follows me down, and I lash out. My blade flashes silver in the moonlight but does nothing to the blob. It barrels toward me, undeterred, and I roll away, wrapping myself even tighter in the blankets as I try to dodge

its attack.

The blond man looms over me; I didn't even hear his approach. He punches out, his fist catching the shadow as if it's actually a solid form. The dark cloud lurches away from me and hits the bedside stand, passing through the lamp and slamming into the wall, where it disappears.

"Get up," the man says in a low, dangerous voice.

His voice is deep and raspy, like it's not used to being used. For a moment, I stare up at him in the ambient light, astonished to find he has curlicue black tattoos just like Kian. Only... his tattoos *move*. Right before my eyes, they shift up his arms like a wave crashing on the shore before they freeze again.

Before I can get too interested, the shadow appears on the ceiling behind his angelic face.

"Behind—!"

But I don't even get to finish my warning.

The man whirls around on surprisingly light, graceful feet and lashes out with his knife. His timing is impeccable—the moment the shadow launches at his head, he's turning and slicing. The shadow jolts and falls aside toward the TV stand, where it disappears into the darkness.

I manage to kick free of the blankets then scramble to my feet and adjust my grip on my knife. The blond stalks toward the television, his fingers curled tightly around his own dagger. His weapon puts my dinky switchblade to shame. It's more like a fucking miniature machete than a pocketknife.

I'm not used to having the smallest knife in the room.

We wait in absolute silence broken only by the distant passing of cars. It's wild to think that life outside is just trucking along while I'm battling a *literal shadow* in my motel room with my *second mate* after rumbling with my *first mate* in the woods.

I rode my motorcycle right into the fucking twilight zone tonight.

I'm staring at the television stand where the thing vanished, but the blond's scanning the room, which makes me think he knows the beast better than I do. So I tear my gaze away from the pressboard stand just in time to see the shadow reappear from under the bed.

The little bitch heads straight for my ankles.

I kick out at it, but my foot passes right through it. I growl in frustration and dance away from the undulating mass. It's like I'm fighting smoke, trying to punch something that doesn't even have form.

When the blond steps in and snags the shadow with a mean roundhouse, the thing flies across the room, tumbling into the shadows in the corner.

“What the fuck, man?” I snarl, pointing my switchblade at him. “Why can you affect it when I can’t?”

His blue gaze cuts to me, and his expression is enigmatic enough to make me want to put my fist through his face. But we’re interrupted when the shadow returns.

The blond and the shadow start an incredibly fast, powerful dance around the motel room. It’s as if the shadow’s pissed, now, like it’s an honest-to-God living thing and we’ve gotten on its last nerve. It slides seamlessly through the shadows, darting into one corner and out of another, slithering beneath the bed and the table, fluttering beneath the curtains. Before it leaps from the shadows and becomes bulbous. A living creature. A living *threat*.

I try in vain several more times to land a blow on the damn thing, but nothing I do works. I lunge away from the shadow’s repeated attempts to reach me while the blond fights with his knife and fists. He slams into the table, knocks over the chairs, and takes out everything unattached to the nightstand during the fight.

When the shadow slams into the giant flatscreen television, and Blondie lifts his knife like he’s about to skewer a five-hundred-dollar machine, I grab his knife wrist.

Ignoring the way desire and need flood my body from our skin to skin contact, I snap, “Not the television! Do you think I’m made of money?”

Blondie purses his lips and looks at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. And maybe I have, but *he* won’t have to pay for damages.

I drop his wrist, my fingertips still tingling and warm.

Before I can lift my knife and look around for the shadow, the blob suddenly appears between us. A long tendril whips out at me, latching onto my wrist. It burns like fucking hell, like I’ve dunked my arm in boiling water. I let out a cry and stumble backward into the table. My hip catches on the edge, and I slam down onto my back on the tabletop, still in the thing’s burning clutches.

Blondie growls and grabs the shadow in his hand. His palm sizzles, and he lets out a yell—mostly to release the pain, I think, because he wastes no time throwing the shadow against the wall and slamming his knife into it. He slashes his knife down, twists it, then slashes up again—

—and the shadow explodes.

Little wisps shoot outward and dissipate into smoke. Within seconds, nothing's left.

I'm lying on the tabletop, my legs splayed and my t-shirt riding up on my stomach as I breathe heavily through the pain. My fingers are still curled around my knife, but it's more out of a need to squeeze something so I can ignore that the skin on my wrist is scalded with third-degree burns.

The blond man glances at me. He's not even winded. His expression is hard to read, though his piercing blue eyes glitter darkly as his gaze sweeps down my way-too-exposed body.

Then he lunges past me, throwing the curtains aside as he leaps through the window.

Startled, I leap to my feet and stumble over my own legs to follow. I throw back the curtains to find the window open, a cool, desert breeze blowing inside. That's how the fucker got in my room. I didn't even think to check that it was locked before I went to sleep.

His hair shines in the moonlight as he sprints through the motel lot.

No time for hesitation. I throw a leg over the edge of the windowsill and drop to the sidewalk, then shift into wolf form to take off after him.

I'm either running on fury or determination, and the emotions are so similar I can't tell the difference. But I'm not letting this guy get away. I don't know what the fuck is going on—why that shadow attacked me or why Blondie boy ended up in my bedroom—but I'm getting answers.

No matter how far I have to run.

Blondie vanishes under the overhang of a dark gas station—apparently closed for the night—and when he re-emerges in the moonlight, he's no longer human, but a giant blond wolf. He barrels into the street and heads for the shopping center, toward the outskirts of town where the wilderness will give him places to hide.

I spare a glance both ways before crossing the street, since I'm not really interested in getting flattened by a late night car, then go full throttle. My burned wrist aches, and I feel every pounding of my foot on the ground through the raw, sensitive nerve endings. I push through the pain anyway, my sight trained on the wolf ahead of me.

Blondie's fast. *Too* fast. He swings wide around the shopping center and vanishes into the trees.

I put on a burst of speed, ignoring the pain in my paw. When I hit the grass, it dulls the pounding enough to clear my head, and I glance around the

forest for my mate.

Only darkness and the murmur of the wind through the trees. At least when Kian crashed through the forest, I could hear his big, bumbling body in the brush and follow him based on sound alone.

This guy has vanished like a phantom.

Putting my nose to the ground, I sniff around in the area where I saw him leave the pavement. I pick up a hint of him after several seconds, and I'm floored by the smell—contrary to his pale, icy good looks, Blondie smells spicy and warm, like the steam rising off a mug of chai tea. The scent sends a thrill through me, and my wolf whines for him. She wants him for reasons contrary to what I'm here for, and she is *not* winning that battle.

I take off into the trees after him with my nose to the ground. I don't need to see to follow scent markings, so I just rush through the undergrowth, testing the ground every few feet to make sure I'm still locked onto Blondie's scent. But I hardly make it half a mile before his trail goes cold.

Frustration makes my fur bristle, and I let out a long, angry howl.

Again.

How did both Kian and this guy cover their scents so thoroughly?

They were both right in the palm of my hand today, and I lost them. I turn a couple more useless circles before finally giving up.

I return to the motel at a slower pace than I left it, limping on my burned wrist. Now that the rush of adrenaline has faded, all of my aches and pains from fighting Kian earlier today have returned. I feel chewed up, spit out, and left to die.

Which reminds me—if Blondie hadn't shown up in my room... maybe I would have.

Or maybe *because* Blondie showed up in my room, he put my life in danger. Living shadows have never tried to kill me before, after all. Seems a little suspect to me.

Back outside the motel, I realize climbing through the window after Blondie had been a stupid idea, given the fact the door was *right there*. I shift to human form, glad it's the dead of night and no one seems to have heard the commotion. So no one's around to see the crazy naked lady climbing through a motel room window. I grimace as I haul my beat-up ass back through the window, then turn around and lock it behind me.

I turn on the light that dangles over the table and grimace at the state of my room. I hadn't realized it was happening in the fury of the fight, but we

made a mess of the place. I right both chairs at the table, then pick up the dislodged alarm clock and return it to the nightstand, as well as my water glass and wallet. There are knife marks in the headboard, on the wall, and on the table.

Not a chance in hell I can explain that to the manager. At least I didn't pay with a credit card. Maybe I can slip out before the staff notices and tries to make me pay for damages.

I turn on every light in the room—both globes over the bed, the strip of buzzing fluorescents over the sink, the combination light-and-fan in the shower, the sound of which makes my teeth hurt. Then I check for shadow beings who want to kill me, but there don't appear to be anymore lying in wait.

At the sink, I run cold water over my burned wrist, hissing at the pain. It looks better than it feels, probably because shifting sped the healing process. But the skin is still fairly mangled in a strange approximation of a handprint.

I wasn't able to hurt the shadow, so how was it able to hurt me?

I clean up the wound as best I can, then bandage it up before I crawl back into bed. A night of rest and letting my natural healing stitch me up is just what I need, because tomorrow, I'm going to find my mates. All three of them.

They're nearby. I know it.

Just in case, I leave all the lights on.

CHAPTER 8

I OPEN my eyes to the blaze of half a dozen still-burning light bulbs, plus a hint of golden sunlight pouring through the crack in the curtains. I blink at the overwhelming illumination coupled with my grogginess.

Sleep eluded me most of the night after the ordeal. I jerked awake at every small noise, from barking dogs to slamming doors to my neighbors' television coming on at five a.m. Every time I opened my eyes, I expected to find Blondie standing over my bed, or to see a new shadow monster hovering over me, about to pounce.

On any other day, I'd grumble and complain at the bright lights, slam the pillow over my head, and go back to sleep for a little while longer, until my irritable attitude chills the fuck out. But I'm not really interested in the dark right now, considering that's where shadows sleep. Nor do I have time to waste lying around in bed while Kian and Blondie's scent markers grow even colder.

Last night feels like a strange dream. Rolling over onto my back, I glance at the corner of the room where my mate stood to watch me, looking like he belonged in the shadows. Then I look up to see the knife gouges in the headboard—a stark reminder that it wasn't a dream at all.

I hold up my injured wrist and peel off the bandage, sucking in a breath when some of the fresh, healed skin comes off with the gauze. The skin beneath is still pink bordering on red, but the worst of the burns have healed, minus a wicked blister near my wrist bone. I clench my fist twice, testing my pain tolerance, and grin when the skin barely tugs.

Nobody can argue the perks of being a shifter.

Shoving aside the covers, I stand and stretch, then head for the bathroom

to brush my hair and get ready for the day.

My goal today is to find my mates. I'm not naïve enough to think Kian's presence and Blondie's sudden appearance in my room are unrelated. I have no clue how Blondie knew where I was sleeping, but it's no coincidence Kian showed up in Oscura, and my second mate showed up with him. The only logical answer is they know each other. The even better hypothesis is they're traveling together.

Find one, find both, maybe even find my third mate.

Kill them all.

I brew a shitty mug of cheap, off-brand Keurig coffee while I dress in a tight black tank top and my only remaining pair of jeans. Then I inhale two granola bars and wash them down with the watery brew. The idea of hitting the run down McDonald's for an Egg McMuffin is enticing, but I don't have the time to waste or the patience to waste it. There's no telling how far Kian and his buddies got while I slept.

Unfortunately, my boots didn't survive my run-in with Kian, so I have to opt for the flats. Not the best tracking footwear, but there isn't miraculously a shoe store nearby as far as I know. I'll have to worry about replacements later.

Making sure my room is locked up tight, I hop on my bike and zoom across the busy, early morning intersection, then down the side highway that passes Joe's Bar and Grill. The shopping center is fairly empty this morning, only a few patrons at the Big Lots and a line of cars wrapped around both fast food joints. Just another day in small town America.

Hopefully my day will be a little *less* mundane. Some rigorous exercise, some bloodshed, some saving the world...

I bypass the lot and head for my first destination—the place in the woods where Kian's bike lay after our fight. My hope is that maybe he returned for it overnight, and I'll be able to pick up a new scent, maybe track him to where he's holed up.

In the light of morning beneath a pale blue sky before the New Mexico heat rolls in, I feel a bit more solid. More ready for what's going to come next. It's baffling to think that after three years on the road, eating cheap bar food and picking up odd jobs to keep my cash flow incoming, I'm *finally* close.

I roar down the highway on my bike, the wind caressing my bare arms and the sun burning away some of the anxiety I'm still carrying from the

night. What the hell was that shadow thing? And why was it in my room? Why was Blondie in my room?

Exactly how close did I come to death last night?

I retrace my steps from my pursuit with Kian, then find the skid marks in the dirt where we went off-roading. My smaller bike navigates the terrain well, though I go slower this time so the trees won't slice me to ribbons. The cut on my cheek still hasn't healed all the way up, and I'd rather not add more and make myself look like Edward Scissorhands' little sister.

Kian's bike is still in the same place.

I idle a few feet away from the fallen Harley, chewing on my lower lip. I don't smell him, just the barest traces of his scent leftover from yesterday evening. Nothing fresh to indicate he's returned. Plus, his bike hasn't moved at all—not even an inch to indicate he at least *tried* to get it.

Damn. I kinda wanted him to come back and see what I did to his precious motorcycle. Like a “fuck you” for running.

Both times.

I turn around and stalk out of the woods back toward town, but whip off the road onto the open plains before I reach the shopping center.

My bike takes me past the low shrubs and burning sunshine of the desert plain to another section of thick evergreen forest that backs up to the center. Unfortunately, the undergrowth here is way too thick for my bike, so I knock down the kickstand and hide it behind a thick bramble bush. Then I set out on foot to find the place where I lost the blond.

I'm on foot a good fifteen minutes before I find traces of his scent. The forest looks pretty different with daylight filtering through the canopy overhead, but I'm certain this is where I lost him. I have to strain even now to pick up the barest hint of his scent.

I knew not to expect my mates to be normal wolf shifters. Gwen warned me about that fact—*feral shifters*, she called them. I don't completely understand what that means beyond the fact that they aren't affiliated with a pack and are running wild on their quest to destroy the world.

But the fact that their scents can just... vanish?

That's unheard of. It's as if they can become invisible, make themselves totally undetectable to even a wolf's keen nose.

Blondie's scent vanishes completely near a small clearing in the trees. I circle the whole clearing, trying to pick back up on his signature, but it's useless. On my second pass, however, I find paw prints hidden beneath a

dense layer of wet, dying leaves.

Bingo.

I follow the trail of indentations, kicking aside the fresh layer of leaves with my feet as I walk. It's peaceful here, with the birdsong and the breeze knocking branches and the sun's warmth beaming through like waterfalls of gold. There's green here, lots of it, which is a welcome respite from all the brown I'm used to. Couple the idyllic scenery with the fact that I found a clue and a trail, and I'm damn near ready to celebrate my coming victory.

Those assholes won't know what hit 'em.

I knock aside another bundle of wet leaves, and the sweet, decaying scent tickles my nose.

Then a searing pain lances through my body.

I gasp from the sudden, unexpected shock and then double over, my fingers clenching like claws. My muscles spasm uncontrollably, and my legs buckle beneath me. I fall to my knees, unable to breathe, my whole body shaking, filled with an agonizing pain worse than anything I've ever felt before. Ripples of white-hot pain fill me end to end.

I can't move my hands.

My arms.

My legs.

My muscles contract, and my vision starts to fade out. I keel over sideways and can't even catch my fall.

With my face pressed to the dirt and the dense, earthy smell of the forest floor in my nostrils, I know nothing else.

I OPEN my eyes to a white ceiling bisected by wood beams the color of honey.

I'm lying on a soft mattress, and sunshine struggles to filter through the gauzy curtains covering the tiny window beside the bed. If I didn't know any better, I would think I was back home in my parents' little cabin, where I woke up beneath the same type of ceiling for twenty-four years. The paint between the beams is a bit brighter than the off-white cream back home, but the resemblance is startling.

Shock sends a zing of adrenaline through me as I remember collapsing in

the woods. I sit up so quickly my head spins, but something has a hold of me. Has hold of both my hands, actually. Craning my neck around, I find that my wrists have been tied to the bed frame, leaving my arms in a very uncomfortable position.

Son of a bitch.

I flop back onto the pillows to ease the pressure on my joints and sigh, blowing a lock of my dark hair off my face.

Just my luck. I get hit by a painful bout of food poisoning or some shit, pass out in the woods, and then get picked up by Oscura's resident serial killer.

Speaking of pain... I slow my breathing and focus on my body. The pain before I passed out was debilitating, but now, I feel nothing at all. The burn from the shadow beast on my wrist chafes a little beneath the rope restraining me, but the strange muscle contractions and tightening paralysis have stopped.

Okay, I think. That's a good thing. That means I can try to break free and get the hell out of here before the serial killer gets back.

Of course, an unarmed serial killer would be a cakewalk for a wolf shifter. That's not really my worry. But if a Ted Bundy wannabe flounces in here with an axe, I might be in trouble. Especially if I'm still restrained.

On my back, it's easier to incline my head and look up at the ropes without yanking my joints out of place to do it. My hands dangle from purple-patterned mountain climbing rope held in place by intricate knots. I've done some mountain climbing in my time—hard not to when you grow up in the mountains—but I don't recognize this knot.

Fuck.

I start working on the ropes, twisting my wrists and tucking my thumb in an effort to slide my hands free. Tugging on the ropes just seems to pull the knot tighter, and moving up to take the pressure off doesn't release anything.

Wannabe Ted Bundy really knows his knots.

Shifting is a possibility, of course, but my wolf legs aren't really any smaller than my normal wrists. Shifters aren't wolf-sized. Finding myself in wolf form splayed out like this doesn't sound appealing, and then when it fails and I have to shift back, it's even less appealing to imagine myself naked and splayed across a bed with a serial killer roaming.

Something prickles across my skin, then a strong scent wafts over me.

Warm. Spicy.

“You won’t break free.”

I jerk at the voice. My heart picks up a nervous rhythm, and I whip my head around to face the doorway.

Blondie leans against the door frame, looking for all the world like he’s bored out of his mind. He’s in khaki cargo pants and a black Henley that looks stunning next to his golden skin and insanely blue eyes. I should be terrified of him, knowing what I know about how dangerous he is, but instead, I’m just irritated he found me first.

It’s easier to focus on the anger than on the way my wolf howls hungrily inside me.

“*You’re* Ted Bundy?” I grit out.

Blondie stares at me, and even though his expression doesn’t change, I’m fairly certain he thinks I’ve lost my mind.

It definitely feels like I have.

I jerk harder against my restraints, like that’s going to miraculously free me. “You wanna untie me? Or no?”

He ignores my question. “What happened?”

“I can keep yanking until the headboard collapses if you want,” I say evenly, leaning my entire weight against the ropes. Blood trickles down my wrist. Great, I opened the blister.

Blondie’s nostrils flare, and his gaze flicks to my burned wrist. Scenting my blood. The way his pupils dilate leave no room for interpretation—my blood excites him.

“What happened?” he repeats.

Irritation chases away the small hint of lust I feel and revs up my desire to bash him in the head. I bare my teeth at him. “I don’t even know your name. I’m not gonna tell you shit.”

“Frost,” he says. “What happened?”

“Frost? What kind of name is that?” The words are supposed to come out scornfully. The insult might have fallen better if the sound of his name didn’t send a ripple of heat through me. His deep, raspy voice alone calls up every ounce of desire in my body, but hearing his name only heightens the sensation.

Fucker. I hate it. I hate this entire situation.

Frost repeats his question *again*. “What happened?”

“You’re a real conversationalist,” I mutter, falling back against the pillows. I glance up at my arm—blood has trickled down my forearm and

into the crook of my elbow. Letting out an annoyed sigh, I stare up at the wooden beams. “I was looking for you in the woods where you ran off. I started having this seizure-like pain, and I passed out. You found me. End of story.”

He’s silent for so long that I would think he’d left, except I can still smell him. In the depths of winter, when the temperature’s frigid and the wind is cutting, I love walking into coffee houses. That initial burst of heat and spicy, coffee-scented goodness that rushes out...

That’s what his scent makes me feel. Among other things.

I want to jump out the fucking window. Or kick him in the face. The longer he stands in the doorway, the more the room fills with him.

I lift my head to look at him again, and the bored expression is gone. His brow has smoothed, and a muscle in his temple works as he stares at me.

Thoughtful. Worried, even?

He finally speaks. “You’ve been poisoned.”

Not what I expected.

My eyes widen, and I try to sit up, jerking against my restraints as I snarl, “You poisoned me?”

“No. The shadow poisoned you.” He holds up one hand, and I can just make out the remnants of raw, oozing burns on his palm. “It poisoned me, too.”

Nausea settles in my stomach, and my head whirls. I dig my bare feet into the sheets to push myself back against the headboard. With my arms stretched out to my sides, I feel a little like I’m being crucified, but having the headboard behind me helps steady me.

“Why was it in my room?” I ask. “Why were *you* in my room?”

“The shadow was seeking me.”

“That answers the first question,” I say with a bit of a growl in my voice. “So you’re just going to ignore my second question. Great. And why the hell was the shadow ‘seeking’ you?”

One corner of Frost’s thick, kissable lips curls up, and his blue eyes begin to gleam. “You chased Kian down last night. If *you’re* hunting us, is it so surprising to learn that others are too?”

I let my mouth fall open in mock surprise. “Wow. You *do* speak in full sentences. Look at that.”

The half-smile fades immediately. Apparently, Frost is not amused.

He won’t be amused when I get out of these restraints either.

“Who sent the shadow?” I demand.

Frost’s bright blue eyes darken to an alarming navy blue, and the muscles around his eyes tighten, making him look less like a golden god and more like a psychopath.

Ted Bundy. Called it.

“It was sent by someone who does not like us very much.”

“Really? How could anyone *possibly* not like you?” I drawl, venom dripping from every syllable.

Before I can say anything else or Frost can retort, someone appears in the doorway behind him.

Frost steps aside, farther into the room, and the newcomer pauses in the archway, his gaze searing through me.

My wolf howls.

I knew it.

My third mate is here.

CHAPTER 9

MY THIRD MATE steps into the room and crosses his arms over his thick chest, his gaze leveled on me.

He's shorter than Kian and Frost, but his body is chiseled and muscular in all the right places in a way that makes his t-shirt look illicit. He has smooth, dark skin, short-cropped black hair, and thick eyelashes around the most vivid violet eyes. Tattoos identical to those on Kian and Frost paint up and down his arms and peek out from the collar of his shirt.

A new scent joins Frost's spicy warmth—fresh air and sunshine. The smell of racing through the open plains, cool mountain wind in my fur and the Montana sun beaming down. Freedom and contentment. The new man's scent wafts around me, mingling with Frost's spicy warmth until I think I'm going to suffocate. My body reacts to this man with the same alarming need I'd had for Kian the night we met, and again last night for Frost.

I don't like this unbidden reaction. My body is a fucking traitor, making me crave these men despite the fact that I've seen what they will do to the world if they're allowed to continue. Kian *rejected* me, and I still want him. Frost kidnapped me in the woods and tied me to a bed, and as irritated as I am, I also want to spread my legs and beg him to take me, ropes and all.

This isn't *normal*. I don't care what shifter lore tells me. I don't care that every elder in my life raised me to accept that one day, I'd find my mate and devote my life to that man.

I'll *never* devote my life to anybody but myself.

I shove away every ounce of emotion their presence has raised in me. I shove away every tickle of need, every out of character desire to break free of my bonds and rub against them like a bitch in heat. I contain it all behind a

glare and bare my teeth in welcome at my third mate.

For a long moment, we stare at each other. Me glaring, him calculating. His eyes are unreal. So bright they almost glow. He looks dangerous, and god help me, it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Then a vivid white grin slashes across his handsome, rugged face. It wipes away the danger, replacing his serious expression with a teasing, carefree charm.

He lets out a long, low whistle as he falls into an easy stride across the room. "Look at you. You're hot. You know that?"

"Malix," Frost says warningly.

The man named Malix glances back at his friend with an unconcerned shrug. "What? She's Grade A, prime cut. Bet she'd fall apart in our fucking teeth."

I clench my jaw and bite out, "She's also right here. Stop talking about me like I'm a piece of goddamn meat."

Malix chuckles, and his gaze rakes up and down my restrained body. "Hm. Kitty's got bite." He turns to Frost. "You sure those knots are tight enough? I'm too pretty for cat claws."

Fury makes my blood boil. I see what he's doing—insulting me by calling me a cat, but playing it off like it's a game. I snarl and tug against my restraints, catching his strange purple gaze. "I'm more wolf than you could ever dream to be, you asshole."

Suddenly, the charming grin falls away from his face, and he levels a sharp look on me. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that was hurt in his eyes. His next statement loses the casual charm and is more caustic, dismissive. "So this is our mate, then. Charmer."

"I have no interest in being your mate or anyone else's," I retort coolly.

"Great," Malix says, his teasing grin returning. "It would never work out between us anyway, kitty cat."

Frost sighs. "Quit taunting her."

"But it's so much fun." Malix smirks at me.

My head is spinning from the wild shifts in his moods. One moment charming and seductive, the next, frigid and serious. Then back to teasing with that devilish grin. It's enough to drive a girl mad. If my hands were free, I'd gladly wrap them around his throat and squeeze the life out of him with a smile on my face.

Instead, I'm prone on a bed, completely at their mercy. For the moment.

I have every intention of changing that though.

Malix turns away from me to address Frost in a low voice. “She was poisoned too?”

Frost nods. His pale hair shifts with the movement, and I can’t help but imagine that hair like spiderwebs over my stomach. My thighs.

Fuck, I hate this.

Malix lets out a long breath and rubs his hand over his cropped hair. “Shit. She’s never been able to use shadows like that before.”

“No.”

“That’s something else, man. And her timing was impeccable.”

“A little too impeccable,” Frost agrees. His black tattoos do that odd shimmering, wavy thing I saw last night, as if reacting to his inner emotions. Then they settle again on his golden skin.

They’ve both apparently forgotten I’m even still in the room. And I don’t think I’m the person they’re talking about, except for Malix’s reference to me being poisoned. I lean against my restraints, cringing at the raw pain in my burned wrist. “Hello? Who’s *she*?”

Neither one of them acknowledges me.

Malix sighs and claps a hand to Frost’s shoulder. “We told you not to go.”

“You did.”

“You didn’t listen.”

Exasperated, I snap, “Will someone please fill me in on what’s going on? All this cryptic talk isn’t telling me why I’m here or why I’m poisoned or what the fuck I’m supposed to do about it. Unless you intend for me to just die.”

Malix and Frost turn to look at me at that, their faces expressionless, but it’s neither of them who speaks next.

“Nobody’s dying.”

Heat flashes over me at the familiar voice. Malix and Frost are new to me—my mates, all the same, but not quite on the same level as Kian. I know him intimately. My fingertips know the satin of his skin and my mouth remembers the hard planes of his body. His smooth voice like hot caramel, his whispers in my ear, his body inside mine...

And here they are. All three of them. Just like Gwen said.

Kian stops between the other two, and I’m reminded just how big he is. He’s taller than the others, his muscles brawny. Even his presence is

intimidating. Frost is an inch or two shorter and more wiry in his strength, while Malix is a couple inches shorter than that but built like a Greek god.

They're all insanely beautiful. My heart races at having all three of them here, but I firmly tamp down on my desire. I know they can hear my heartbeat. Sense my emotions. I'll pretend like hell that I'm angry and afraid and only those things.

Anything else is unacceptable.

Kian levels his gold-ringed brown gaze on me. "You should have stayed away. I warned you to stop following me."

I jab a finger at Frost. "Your boy here showed up in my motel room last night. That wasn't on me."

Kian shoots a pointed glance at Frost, but then looks back at me. "I knew when I met you last night that you'd be trouble. I just didn't know how much."

I blink at him. *Met me... last night?*

He hasn't told them about Montana.

A sudden certainty rushes through me. The way he phrased his statement is subtle but clear, obviously meant to make it sound like we met for the *first* time last night. I know that's not true, and so does Kian, which means his phrasing can only be for Frost and Malix's benefit.

The two of them have no idea that Kian and I met before. That we fucked. That we forged a bond connection.

Interesting. I'm too intrigued by *why* he would keep such a thing secret to call him out on it. Instead, I fall back on my usual tactic for dealing with stressful situations—shit talk.

"You don't know trouble yet, you son of a bitch," I say, letting a vicious smile curve my lips. "But untie me, and I promise I'll show you."

Malix chuckles but covers his mouth with a hand and pretends to cough as Kian glares at him. Frost ducks his head, his face hiding behind his hair. No smile, though. I'm starting to think he doesn't know how.

Kian takes a single step closer to the bed, eyes narrowing. "You ruined my bike."

"Oh, so you know about that, huh?" I lean back against the headboard, trying to channel my best don't-give-a-damn expression. "I was worried you wouldn't see my handiwork."

"I watched you do it," Kian says, his voice more like a growl.

"With your magical vanishing scent skills?" I rotate my bare feet in front

of me with a shrug. “You took my shoes and tied me to a bed. Forgive me if I’m not sorry.”

“Your shoes are on the floor next to the bed,” Kian snaps, clearly irritated by my snark. “You can have them when we’ve concluded our business.”

My interest piques. “Business?”

Frost cuts in before Kian can speak again, his voice low. “The poison. The shadow was after me, but it attacked you too. We’ve been poisoned.”

“As you’ve already told me,” I say impatiently. “But I feel fine.”

“That’s how it works,” Frost tells me. “You’ll feel fine until you don’t. The pain will come and go as the poison destroys you from the inside. Eventually, we will both die without the antidote.”

I draw in a deep breath and study their serious faces for several long moments. Death isn’t all that frightening to me. Clearly, I don’t want to die—no healthy person does. But when the time comes, I’ll be content with shifting, going into the wilderness, and giving myself back to the earth as she gave to me. It’s the ultimate gift, a return to the wild that can never be taken away. When the time comes.

Unfortunately, that time *cannot* be now. I have a duty still to fulfill. If both Kian and Malix were poisoned as well, I’d be happy to stand back and let the poison do its work. All of us die, the world is saved, huzzah. As it stands, however, if Frost and I die, my other two mates will be free to do whatever they please.

My being alive is the only thing that stands between them and total destruction.

I nod. “Okay. Do you have the antidote?”

Kian shakes his head. “We can obtain it, but it won’t be easy.”

Malix grins. “That’s why we brought you here, kitty. We can work together to get the antidote.”

I ignore his irritating use of that nickname and roll my eyes. “You have got to be kidding me. You want me to work with you? You know why I’ve been following you, right?”

Frost steps in front of Malix, shooting him a warning glance before he can taunt me further. “It’s the only way we will both survive.”

Kian speaks up again. “A temporary truce. Long enough for us to find the antidote and save Frost.”

“And me,” I point out, an edge to my voice.

Kian’s lips quirk, and the little half-smile on his face does dangerous

things to the area between my legs. “And you. As long as you’re on your best behavior.”

I study them, weighing my options. Try to kill them before the poison kills me? Too much room for failure. I have no way of knowing how long the poison will work. Hell, I could die tomorrow, still tied to this fucking bed. I can’t die while they still live.

If I join forces with them, I could theoretically learn more about them. Figure out their weaknesses and strengths, formulate a fool-proof plan to get rid of them once and for all. And if we get the antidote in the process... win/win. I’d love to go back home. Be with Ridge and Sable and the kids. Be settled. Have peace.

I’ll never have any of it as long as these assholes are still alive.

This could be the answer.

“Fine,” I say.

Kian nods, his golden brown eyes unreadable. “So it’s decided then. A truce.”

CHAPTER 10

A TRUCE.

The asshole looks almost... victorious as he says the words. His lips tilt up, and a gleam lights in them. As if my agreement is some kind of unspoken contract that he'll use to control me.

I resist the urge to change my mind immediately and tell him to go fuck himself instead.

It's a strong urge, but it would run counter to what needs to be done. I have half a dozen reasons that prove this is the best way to complete my mission, as long as I can play my part well.

So I don't give in to the anger boiling through my veins.

Clenching my jaw, I nod, then add, "A *temporary* truce."

Without a word, Frost crosses the room and leans over me as he begins to untie my knots. Up close, his warm, spicy scent wraps around me until I can't smell anything else. It's like a drug that sends every one of my senses into overdrive. I lean into him, unbidden, and sniff the air, desire pooling through my body.

He pauses, his long fingers stilling on the purple ropes, and I know he's scented me, too.

I stare up at him, fascinated. The sun from the window glares behind him, turning his pale hair to a halo, but there's nothing angelic about his cool, remote expression. He's a venomous snake—beautiful, but only because he's deadly.

Which is why it's so hard to be this close to him.

Frost doesn't look at me, but I can sense he's as acutely aware of me as I am of him. He returns to his untying as if nothing happened.

My wolf beats against my soul in an effort to reach him. She's furious that she's calling for him and he isn't responding, and I *really* hate the bitch right now. Her lust rises inside me, making my own body react. I don't typically care about keeping a distinct line between me and my wolf, because we're one and the same. But right now, I need her to back the fuck off.

I force the feelings away by reminding myself he's deadly.

More than deadly.

He's a monster wrapped in a beautiful package.

I'm here to kill him. And there's nothing that will stand in the way of me carrying out my mission.

My timeline just has to be adjusted.

Finally, the ropes fall away from my wrists. Frost backs away from me, his pale gaze meeting mine for only half a second before he returns to Kian's side.

I sit up and scoot to the edge of the bed, glancing around for my shoes. I don't like being the only person seated, and there's something about being barefoot that makes me feel a little too vulnerable. In *this* situation, anyway. Shoving my feet into my shoes, I stand and step out onto the hardwood floor to stare them down.

We face off over the empty expanse of the room. I eye them warily, still not entirely certain this isn't some kind of trap, and they all regard me with expressions that are almost impossible to read. Kian glares, his face hard, though that seems to be his permanent look. Frost's face is eerily blank, and I'm reminded of how I thought he looked like a statue last night in my motel room. He has the same dead, inhuman emptiness as stone. Malix eyes me like he's measuring me up, and I ease down on the urge to bare my teeth at him.

When the silence stretches on entirely too long, I ask, "How long do we have?"

Kian answers. "A few weeks, if we're lucky. Less, if we're not."

A few weeks? A tingle of fear snakes up my spine. That's not long at all. I mean, better than a matter of days, I guess. But what if we fail?

Then I'll be dead. Kian and Malix will be free to do whatever the hell they want.

And the world will be in danger.

"Right," I say, as if my blood isn't running cold in my veins. "And how do we go about getting the antidote?"

"A witch," Malix replies, flashing me that crooked grin. It reminds me of

the Cheshire Cat—a creature smiling who knows much more than I do. I don't know if I find it charming or if I want to cut it off his face with my knife.

“Is approaching a witch coven smart?” I ask. The war my pack waged with the witches in Montana has stuck with me longer than I'd like to admit. Though I know that they were our enemy because of one sociopathic coven mistress, the bitter memories still remain.

“A covenless witch,” Kian adds. “Very powerful, but the four of us together will be safe.”

“Is he here? In New Mexico?”

“He is,” Kian says, “but not near Oscura, so we need to get a move on.”

With that, he turns and leaves the room. Frost and Malix file out after him.

I have no choice but to follow.

The hallway outside the bedroom is a little more run down. Paint peels from the walls, and the wooden floorboards are scratched and covered in years of sticky dirt and grime. We pass a ridiculously small kitchen that's empty of appliances, and a living room with two ancient couches spilling stuffing onto the floor. The floor's covered in takeout boxes and cups, and there are three sleeping nests of blankets.

I lengthen my stride to catch up with Malix. “You live here?”

Malix shrugs. “It's where we're living today.”

Well that clears that up. I roll my eyes, but don't ask him to clarify. Clearly, they're as nomadic as I am.

We reach the front door, and Kian opens it, spilling sunlight into the dim interior. The cabin has a shallow front porch with three narrow steps that lead down to a dusty lawn. Trees surround us on all sides and I can't hear any hint of traffic, indicating we're well off the beaten path.

As we cross the lawn, I speak to Malix again. “What are you?”

Before he can answer, Kian snorts under his breath. “Always asking that question, aren't you?”

“I figure at some point, someone will actually give me a straight answer,” I retort.

He whirls on me suddenly, looming over me like a mountain. “You don't even know what we are, and yet you've been hunting us.”

“I don't actually give a fuck what you are,” I shoot back, my heart pounding at his proximity. Whiskey and woodsmoke surrounds me, drowns

me, and all I can think about is his body on mine and the final moments of happiness I once knew before life fucked me up. “You could be my own damn mother, and I’d still hunt you because I know how dangerous you are.”

Frost and Malix exchange glances, but Kian’s glare remains fixed on me. “If you know how dangerous I am, why didn’t you kill me last night?”

“Oh, we’re just going to pretend I didn’t try?” I snap. “Or did you forget the fight in the woods? I seem to recall hitting you with a *literal* tree branch.”

Malix chokes on a laugh, and when Kian shoots him a glare, he slips behind Frost like that statue of a man will protect him.

Frost doesn’t react to Malix’s amusement or Kian’s anger, but he puts a hand on Kian’s arm. Their gazes meet, and something silent passes between them.

Kian’s agitation fades just a little. He growls, then stomps off across the grass.

Frost inclines his head for me to follow.

“We are wolves,” he says, falling into step beside me—close, but not close enough for my wolf to lose her mind.

“But not normal wolves,” I clarify.

Malix laughs from Frost’s other side. “What the hell is a ‘normal’ wolf?”

“*Canis lupus*,” Frost replies evenly. “Commonly known as the gray wolf, or the timber wolf. A member of the Canidae family that occupies much of the northern hemisphere.”

“Oh you’ve done it now,” Malix says, leaning around Frost to grin at me. “Turned on his encyclopedia brain.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re the one who asked the question, idiot.”

Malix’s violet eyes sparkle. “There’s kitty’s claws.”

“I will end you,” I shoot back in a falsely pleasant voice, and I’m legit bothered by how much I’m starting to like the asshole. I cannot—and *will not*—become friends with these men. Temporary truce, find the antidote, then kill them. My plan is stone.

Kian whirls around, interrupting our banter. “This show of bonding is very touching, but we are on a time limit.”

I turn my back on him to give Frost and Malix my attention. The way I directly ignore him sends Kian into a fury I can feel raging at my back.

Good. Let him seethe.

“So no one’s going to answer the question I so patiently keep asking?” I say. “What. Are. You? And don’t tell me ‘wolves,’ or so help me—”

Frost speaks up, interrupting me before I can ramp up into a full tirade. “Have you heard of the shadow realm?”

“No.”

He nods, as if he expected that response. “Our alpha has tasked us with bringing the shadow realm to earth.”

The shadow realm.

Something about the name makes fear spike in my heart. The only types of shadows I know, beyond literal shadows and the living creature Frost killed last night, are magical. The witches back in Montana... their magic was black and smoky, like shadows leaking from their fingertips. The idea of a shadow realm, where magic like that might exist unfettered, or where more living shadows exist that would try to kill me...

I shudder.

I’m ready to fire off more questions, to ask what the shadow realm has to do with the three of them, but I don’t get a chance.

“Enough chatting,” Kian snarls, then grabs my elbow and shoves me ahead of him.

Fury bursts to life like a flame inside me. I flip my arm around to break his hold, then slam my forearm against his to knock his hand away. Then I follow up with a punch to his face.

My knuckles crack, and pain lances up my arm like I’ve slammed my fist into a brick wall. But it’s worth it when he grunts and leans forward, blood spurting from his nose.

“Do not *ever* touch me again,” I bite out, giving my aching knuckles a shake.

Malix makes a noise in his throat. “I told you kitty’s got claws, brother. You didn’t listen.”

I hold up my fist in his direction. “Call me kitty again and you’re next.”

Kian straightens, glaring daggers at me over a thin trickle of blood that seeps from his nose. A small, insane part of me wishes I could step forward, tiptoe against his hard chest, and lick that blood off him. The idea makes me hot from head to toe, and I struggle to keep my thoughts and pheromones to myself.

A moment of tension hangs in the air, so thick it’s hard to breathe. Then Kian breaks it, turning to stalk away into the trees.

Toward a grouping of motorcycles.

Three of them.

“You got a new bike?” I say with a mock pout, thankful for something to distract me from my tumultuous thoughts. “But that takes all the fun out of my present. I fucked up your Harley *just* for you.”

Malix laughs, and Frost punches him in the arm.

Kian kicks up the stand on a newer-looking Honda and hitches his leg over the black bench seat. His gold-ringed gaze latches on to me as he slides forward, opening up a space behind him. “Get on.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You have to be kidding. I’m not riding with you halfway across the fucking state.”

“No, you’re not,” he grinds out. “We’re going to go get your bike, as long as you don’t force me to kill you first.”

God help me. Between the sight of the blood on his upper lip, the venom in his tone, and the threat of bodily harm, I’m more turned on than I have any damn right to be. If I get on that bike with him, he’s going to know it. If I don’t get on that bike with him, he’ll have won.

Son of a bitch.

Kian stares at me in silence as I march to his bike. I throw my leg over the seat and sit, careful to keep several inches of space between us.

But Kian grabs both my knees and hauls me forward.

I slam against his back, my legs widening even more around his hips. I can’t help the little gasp that comes from me, though I don’t know if it’s from the contact or from my lungs slamming against his hard muscles.

“That was unnecessary,” I snap.

“Sitting like that will throw off my balance,” he returns, then revs the engine, cutting off any further conversation.

I swear to God, I can’t wait to kill this man. I’ll do it with a smile on my face and a song in my heart.

AFTER RETRIEVING my bike from the bramble bush where I left it, we stop by the motel for my things and then leave civilization behind for the barren desert.

The good thing about riding bikes is that we aren’t forced to communicate. The bad thing about riding bikes is there are no distractions from my own mind. On my Ducati with the wind rushing in my ears and the

engine thrumming between my legs, I'm left alone with my thoughts.

And I have *a lot* of them.

After years of aimless drifting, chasing half-empty leads and just simply existing day to day, I've now found myself in the midst of more than I ever bargained for. The plan was always to find my mates, then kill them. End of story. Now, I've been poisoned and am two weeks from death. I've thrown my lot in with three men I desire more than I've ever wanted anything—also, three men I plan to annihilate. And I'm stuck with them for the foreseeable future as we track down a witch for an antidote. All the while fighting this unrelenting need for them.

I feel like I rode my bike into the twilight zone... and right off the goddamn planet.

With hours of free time to think, I study each of the men while we ride. Kian has taken the lead, while Malix cruises beside me, and Frost brings up the rear. It should be surprising that they're all motorcycle enthusiasts like me, but in the grand scheme of things, if they *are* my mates, then I guess it makes sense.

I can see tension in Kian's shoulders ahead of me, and it never fades, not even after an hour, two hours, three hours. I wonder what he's thinking—if he's wishing he never walked into Joe's Bar and Grill last night. That one decision changed everything, not just for me, but for them, as well. If we hadn't had our run in, Frost probably wouldn't have shown up in my room for whatever reason he chose to do so, and neither of us would have been poisoned.

I can't quite believe I've formed a truce with the men I've sworn to kill. Everything is upside down and backward.

I *feel* them. Even as we're on separate bikes with several yards between us, I feel them. This deep, undeniable pull, a metaphysical thread that connects me to all three of them. They're mine—there's not a doubt in my mind of that. But no matter what happens, I have to pretend they aren't.

The fate of the world depends on it.

As the sun's dipping into the horizon, Kian leaves the highway and zooms across open desert. The heat of the day is fading, and crickets have set up a chorus in the growing twilight. It's peaceful, if a little bumpy, as we leave behind the road for the wilderness.

A little more than two miles off the highway, Kian slows and comes to a halt, then kills his engine.

I pull up behind him and do the same. “We’re stopping?”

He nods. “I’d prefer to approach the witch well-rested.”

A surprisingly logical response. He warned me back at the cabin that the witch was “very powerful,” so arriving on his doorstep exhausted would benefit nobody.

I fight the urge to groan as I peel my tired ass off the seat, then do a few stretches to work out the kinks. Malix and Frost park their bikes next to Kian’s and dismount.

“Food?” Malix says.

Kian grunts. “Yeah. We can hunt out here, then rest up for the night.”

I toss my backpack onto the ground next to my bike. “A hunt sounds great.”

Malix and Kian exchange glances, and Kian says, “You can stay here.”

“I could,” I say, “but I’m going with you anyway.”

I busted my ass for three years to get into this position. And yeah, it’s not exactly what I wanted, but it’s the closest I’ve come to completing my goal. I’m not letting any of them out of my sight.

Plus, the idea of stretching my legs after so long on my bike sounds marvelous.

I strip off my tank top and unbutton my jeans to shimmy them off my hips. I never mince moments when I’m undressing to shift, because the moment I’ve made the choice to do it, I’m raring to go.

But as I step out of my blue jeans, I realize all three men are standing still, watching me.

Nudity is a fact of life in shifter culture. I could walk around pack lands in the buff without blinking an eye, surrounded by dozens of other naked friends.

This is different.

I might have spent a night with Kian years ago, but he’s still a stranger. They all are. Their gazes on me feel equally uncomfortable and erotic. They’re all three gorgeous enough that I’m sure they’ve had their fair share of naked women in their beds, so I know I’m not an anomaly. But their gazes feel hungry and... admiring.

I shift quickly, covering my nudity with my fur and pacing away from them. Although there’s a little voice inside me telling me to turn around for a peek, I keep my eyes firmly on the nighttime horizon while they undress behind me.

Kian walks up and glances my way. In the woods outside Oscura, I'd been too dead set on murdering him to really appreciate his wolf. It's a magnificent creature. Massive, more than a head taller than me with muscles like an ox. His thick fur is the same color as his hair, a kind of dark espresso with hints of tan around his muzzle and ears.

Those beautiful brown, gold-ringed eyes are exactly the same.

Don't get in my way, he rumbles in mind-speak.

Don't get in my way, I retort, flicking my tail irritably.

Frost appears on the other side of him, padding up to join us on silent paws. His wolf is pure white from head to tail, and fluffy, like he should be prancing about the snow in the arctic rather than running around the desert. He's smaller than Kian, closer to my size, and his blue eyes stand out like beacons against his fur.

Frost's voice echoes in my head. *Perhaps we could work together?*

Malix bounds up beside me. *Always the voice of reason, Iceman.*

Malix is a stunning mix of salt-and-pepper, so that he looks like a galaxy of stars when the wind ruffles his fur. He catches my gaze with those sparkling violet eyes and his jaw hinges open, tongue lolling out in a doggy grin. I just know he's giving me that Cheshire Cat smile.

Kian takes off without further comment, and the rest of us follow.

We race into the desert, and I'm already calculating how the hunt will go. It won't be like back home—there are no trees to hide us, and very little brush that isn't half-dead or too scrubby to be a hiding place. Animals out here will either be in plain sight or hiding underground, so we'll have to rely on our noses to find them and on our speed being faster.

I put my nose to the ground and start tracking.

For several moments, we pace circles on the ground, each of us searching for any hint of prey that's recently moved through the area. Frost finds the first scent trail, and we converge on him, racing after him as he follows his nose.

My heart hammers from the rush of adrenaline, and for the first time in a long time, I feel free. Kian barks orders in mind-speak as we spread out around a prairie dog burrow. Then we ease in, closing a circle around the visible hole. Frost starts digging, and the prairie dogs start running, and the chase is on.

I lunge after one of the five dogs, while Kian, Malix, and Frost do the same. My paws pounding in the dust, my muscles working as I close in, and

the excitement of the hunt, all of it reminds me of home. I'm nostalgic for the old days. Hunting with my pack. Feeling a part of something that's akin to family and community.

Too bad for prairie dogs, they're slow, fat little things.

I snatch one off the ground by its neck, giving a quick, vicious squeeze of my jaw to break it. I'm not squeamish about feeding myself, but I do my best to make sure they don't suffer fear or pain for too terribly long. The one thing that separates a wolf shifter from the beasts is our sense of empathy.

For most of us, anyway.

I'm somehow certain empathy isn't something the feral shifters worry too much about.

The four of us converge back on our makeshift campsite with our kills, and start to eat. I'm still harboring those emotions over my old pack, and as I bite into skin and tendon, I glance around at the other wolves as they feast.

For the briefest moment, I was happy. But now, that feeling fades as I remember these wolves aren't my family. They aren't my pack. They aren't even friends.

They're my enemies.

I'd do well to remember that.

CHAPTER 11

RIDGE SLAPS his cards to the table with a triumphant grin. “Royal flush.”

We’re on his back patio sitting in mismatched plastic chairs, a pile of crumpled twenties in the center of the table and a cooler between us. It’s Montana summer—lush, green, hotter than a Sunday in hell. I’ve got my bare feet propped up on the cooler, which is a few degrees cooler than the lava in the concrete. The kitchen window is open behind me, and I can hear Sable cooing at the baby and talking to Trystan as they start dinner together.

I stare at Ridge’s winning hand fanned out atop the glass tabletop, then at my own, still in my fingers. Raising an eyebrow, I wrinkle my nose at him. “You’re cheating.”

His honey-colored eyes dance with laughter as he reaches out and pulls down the top of my cards for a peek. One pair. Two tens and a bunch of other shit cards. Maybe the worst hand I’ve ever held against one of his rare winning hands.

Ridge sucks air between his teeth and chuckles, releasing my cards as he leans back in his chair.

“Bad luck, Mo,” he teases, picking up his bottle. “I’m taking you to the cleaners for all the times you lined your pockets with my money.”

“My luck must be on vacation,” I grumble, tossing the cards onto the table. A sense of déjà vu washes over me, but I ignore it and pick up my beer, only to find it’s empty. Add that to the bout of bad luck—I was so irritated over my shit hand that I don’t even remember drinking it.

“Luck,” Ridge repeats.

I set my bottle down and reach for the cooler lid to grab another as I joke, “Yeah. Luck. You have it, I don’t.”

“Your luck’s at the end of the world,” Ridge says, his voice going... strange.

Startled by the sudden change in his tone, I abandon my reach for the cooler and glance up at him

His familiar, casual slouch is gone. He’s ramrod straight, his knuckles pale on the bottle, and his eyes are black. Not even a hint of white sclera, none of his amber irises.

A void.

The sky is darkening too. Heavy black smoke rolls overhead, blocking out the bright sun and the feathered white clouds. A cold breeze kicks up around us, whipping my long hair into my eyes. The cooler tips over and beer bottles scatter across the raised pavement, followed by ice cubes that begin to melt the moment they touch the ground.

Something shatters, and I return my gaze to Ridge.

Only he’s gone.

His beer bottle is in pieces on the ground beneath his chair, but he’s nowhere to be seen.

My heart pounds wildly. I shove my seat back and stand, looking around the yard. “Ridge?”

Suddenly, the scenery changes.

The cooler remains on its side, spilling brown bottles and puddles of melted ice, but the ground beneath it is hard and dry. The grass is gone, replaced by dead shrubs and tumbleweeds like the New Mexico desert.

I walk away from the table, from Ridge’s shattered beer bottle. The grass crackles and crumbles beneath my boots. The fence Ridge built with his own hands has vanished, though several boards remain, sticking up from the ground like broken, jagged teeth.

Whirling around, I find the cabins in total disrepair. Ridge’s roof has sunk into the living room, while my house down the road looks like an atomic blast wiped out the entire back wall.

“Sable,” I breathe.

I race to the back door of Ridge’s cabin and shove it open, barreling into the kitchen. The roof is intact here, but the place has clearly been abandoned for a long time. A highchair lies in pieces on the floor, and ivy has grown through the open window, taking over the cabinets, cracking them open like eggs. Dishes lie in pieces on the countertops and the floor, everything covered in inches of dust.

I stare at the highchair. Something deep in my mind, a lucid part, reminds me that I never met the baby. Sable was pregnant when I left home. But my fear drowns out that small common sense voice, and I sprint back outside.

I leave Ridge's yard, moving faster now. There's no sign of my pack. The village is destroyed, overgrown by time and nature. Bones lay on the dead, cracked dirt, bleached white and picked clean by god knows what.

And still the black smoke hangs overhead, blocking out the sun.

I race into the plains where a forest used to be, screaming Ridge's name. What about Sable? The baby? Trystan, Archer, Dare? Grady, the elders? The wind roars, empty of anything but its own voice.

I whirl around, gripped by relentless terror and heartache.

But I'm not in pack lands anymore.

Desert and ruin surrounds me. On the horizon, the dark, half-falling spires of skyscrapers touch the black sky, and flashes of light emit from downed power lines nearby. People run screaming, kicking up dust from the dying earth, clutching their belongings. Everybody crying, everybody terrified.

Including me.

I fight against the fleeing crowd, drawn back toward the broken city. Several people run into me in their haste, but I barrel forward, undeterred. Then the crowd parts and dead bodies stretch as far as I can see.

Roaming between the bodies are hundreds of black, smoky creatures. They're monstrous, larger than any animal I've ever seen, with featureless, formless bodies. I stare, trying to make sense of them, but it's like watching shadows drift across a dark horizon and trying to form shapes from them in my head.

They're twisted.

Wrong.

A few stragglers race toward me, and the shadows give chase, bounding across the ground with preternatural speed. I watch in horror as one creature takes down a mother holding her toddler. Her scream cuts off abruptly, and her baby cries.

Then I'm flying backward. The ground moves away from me, and the big picture becomes clearer. I keep going, further and further, until I can see the whole country, the whole continent, then the earth itself.

Everything has been taken.

Conquered.

Decimated.

I close my eyes and try to scream, but nothing comes out. When I open them again, I'm back in Ridge's backyard.

The witch, Gwen, stands on the lush green grass, her face pale and grave and framed by waves of bright auburn hair.

"Go," she says.

I jerk awake, shooting up from the cold desert dirt. I clutch at the ground beneath me, struggling to breathe through the panic that stays with me in the moments after waking. My heart pounds painfully in my chest, and I swallow against the beating, trying to swallow my emotions.

It's a recurring nightmare. I have it periodically, typically when I'm stressed or overly stuck in my feelings. But it's also the driving force behind my three-year long search for my mates. Seeing what Gwen showed me—the dead earth, the terrified, dying people, the indistinct shadow monsters destroying everything—seeing that all over again only cements my determination to stop these men before they can unleash that on the world.

All three men are sound asleep, fanned out around me on their own patches of ground. They opted to sleep in human form, which is yet one more example of how they're nothing like pack wolves. I would usually sleep as a wolf under the stars, but I chose human form too, matching their choice like I was calling some sort of bluff. The cold stillness of night still reigns over the desert, and none of them have moved since I awoke.

I stare at them in silence that turns to horror the longer I watch them sleep.

They're beautiful. All of them.

But they're poison worse than the one inside me.

How could I have teamed up with them? I chose to ally myself with the enemy. Willingly. My entire life's goal is to protect the world from what I know they'll do to it, and here I am sleeping beside them.

I get silently to my feet, leaving my shoes where they lie, then creep over the dusty ground.

Malix sleeps on his back, his hands clasped over his stomach and his legs crossed at the ankles. He chose to sleep closer to me than the other two, though I don't know if that's because he wanted to keep an eye on me or be close to me because he finds me amusing.

I ease down onto my knees next to him, staring at his handsome face. His short hair shows off his regal features. His high cheekbones arc beneath the

shadow of his eyelashes, and his strong jaw and thick brows accentuate every angle. I've only been in his company a few hours, but I can already picture his smile in my head, the way that slash of teeth between his thick lips transforms his face from kingly to playful.

Gwen's vision flashes in my mind. I watch the mother fall beneath the shadow creature. The baby cries. I see it, over and over again in my nightmares, and I know deep in my soul that killing these men is the only way I can guarantee that future never happens.

Lucky for me, they decided not to take my weapons from me.

Drawing my knife from the holster at my hip, I clench my jaw and stare down at him a few more seconds. If I kill them all, right here, right now, then I've done what I set out to do. I could crawl into the mountains nearby and let the poison take me, content in my knowledge that I've saved the world.

I raise my blade.

Malix's eyes snap open. "Don't."

I freeze, raised up on my knees with the knife still hanging over his chest.

He doesn't move or smile, but he meets my gaze with those stunning violet eyes and waits me out. He looks for all the world like a guy kicked back on a couch watching a game.

Meanwhile, I'm about to murder him.

"If you do it," he says softly. "You'll break the truce."

"I didn't sign a contract," I mutter, tightening my grip on the hilt.

"You don't believe your word to be a binding contract?" he asks, looking genuinely confused.

His nonchalance has me all off balance. "I don't know."

"A man's word is their bond. It's magic on a deeper level. Upholding honor in the face of a dozen reasons why you shouldn't."

"I'm not a man."

Malix grins with that panty-melting charm. "No, you certainly aren't. But you're honorable. So are we."

I glare at him. "There's no honor among evil men."

He shrugs. "That's fine you think that. Try to kill me, and my brothers will stop you. Manage to kill me before they realize it, and they *will* kill you. So you're going to have to find a better way to do it than attacking me in my sleep."

Gritting my teeth, I shove against the ground with just my bare toes and stand, then whirl around and stalk back to my "bed." Even though I don't like

it, I know it's true. It's the same catch-22 of Frost and me both being poisoned. If we die, Kian and Malix are still alive to do their worst. If I take out Malix without making sure the other two can't kill me before I kill them, they'd kill me and be on their merry way.

I slide my knife back into its holster and sit on the ground next to my bag, then glance back over at Malix.

He's on his side now, his head propped up in his hand as he stares at me in the darkness. His eyes glitter in the moonlight. "Smart choice, kitty."

I growl low under my breath and lay down, rolling away from his twinkling gaze. I can feel his eyes on me still, and when the wind blows, his sunshine scent tickles my nose. Taunting me.

How can I want someone and hate them at the same time?

Frustration and anger settle into my bones, along with every single confused emotion I could possibly feel. I curl into an uncomfortable ball, ignoring the weight of his gaze on me, and beg silently for sleep to come.

But no matter what I do, it never does.

CHAPTER 12

I FINALLY DOZE OFF around the time dawn begins to paint the sky red, though I feel like I'm barely under before I wake again. What little sleep I managed to get was fitful and full of shadows.

When I awake, Kian, Malix, and Frost are already up and loading their bikes. The moment my eyes open, they stop talking and all three glance my way like they're one goddamn person.

Not suspicious *at all*.

Malix grins. "Sleep well, kitty?"

I bare my teeth at him and briefly consider throwing my knife at his face for funsies. It would only cut him a little. Add a little extra pizzazz to that stupid smile.

"Yeah," I snarl. "How 'bout you? Did the bed bugs bite?"

Malix's grin widens, and I wasn't even aware that was possible.

"Time to go." Kian speaks up as he closes his under-seat storage compartment. He turns a dark, unreadable gaze on me. "We've got another few hours on the road."

I get to my feet and roll my shoulders, working the tension out of my muscles. While I load my gear back into my bike, none of the guys speak. Not even to each other. The deep silence feels more like a condemnation of me than anything else, but at least no one mentions my attempted murder.

And I *know* Malix told them.

We ride for a few more hours, breaking around lunch time to grab food at a local barbecue joint off the highway. There's a western boutique next to the restaurant, and even though the selection isn't great, I manage to find a pair of boots that look more heavy metal than cowgirl. Good thing too, because

my ankles are starting to blister.

Back on the road, there's nothing as far as the eye can see. This is deep desert, absolutely beautiful but deadly. In places like this, people can get lost and die pretty easily. We stick to the state highway for the rest of the morning—prime real estate for enjoying the view without getting lost in the wilds.

I start to see signs for the Mexico border in the early afternoon. I'm concerned they're about to drag me across the border and kill me, until Kian signals to leave the interstate in the middle of damn nowhere only a few miles before the country ends.

The off-ramp spills us onto a two lane road with yellow lines so faded they're almost nonexistent. A gas station sits right near the highway, and behind that, a general store that looks straight out of the wild west. We pass a few dusty strip malls, half the spaces empty except for a bar, a diner, and a few odds and ends like a lawyer's office and a tax preparation place. We fly through one green light and don't see another one for the rest of our trip.

We turn off on a gravel road surrounded by empty desert. Several houses dot each side of the road, though they thin out the further we drive. Then the gravel ends and turns to dry, caked dirt, and up ahead, a rundown shack leans listlessly on a backdrop of barren land.

We park in a line outside the shack. Out here, you can't get away with sneaking up on people when you're traveling on four loud bikes. It's too deadly quiet. Even an eagle's cry seems loud in the desert.

So the witch is already on his porch staring at us as we cut our engines.

He's... not what I expected. He's abnormally tall with limbs so thin he looks overstretched, and long, dyed black hair that frames his face in scraggly lines. He has ridiculously pale white skin, the kind that looks as if it would turn lobster red in the desert sun, and huge green eyes. He wears a Metallica t-shirt, half a dozen beaded necklaces and even more bracelets, and carpenter jeans with giant legs.

I didn't even know the latter still existed in modern fashion.

Malix grins as he knocks down his kickstand and swings a leg wide to dismount. "This'll be interesting."

Kian grunts, then speaks in a low voice. "Mind your manners."

I fall into line with the feral shifters as we cross the yard. Dried grass crackles and breaks beneath my new boots, and the sun beats down mercilessly on my shoulders. I can't imagine living out here at what seems like the unforgiving edge of the world, but clearly people do.

Including this weirdo.

Kian halts a few feet away from the shack's lopsided front porch.

The witch crosses his skinny arms over his chest. His eyes are too large for his face, giving his features a strange, cartoonish slant. "You folks lost?"

Kian ignores his question. "You Erik?"

The witch drops his arms, and his fingers twitch at his sides. "Maybe. Who are you?"

"I'm in need of your special brand of assistance," Kian replies. "Can we talk?"

Erik's green gaze moves over all of us, one at a time. He knows we're supernatural—I can tell, I just don't know how. He's on edge, standing on his tiptoes, ready to fight or flight. Something about him seems off. If my gaze slides away from him, he takes on a smoky, half-formed haze in my periphery, as if he's cloaking himself in magic. But when I look at him head on, he looks like he's about to hop in his car and head to Comic-Con. I'm not sure which view of him is the truth.

I don't like him. Something about him feels strange enough that I think he's dangerous.

Malix claps his hands together and says, "Hey, man. We're not looking for handouts. We can pay."

Erik's eyes gleam. His green gaze slides over Kian's torso in a look that—on someone else—might be a sexual leer. But I'm pretty sure Erik's interest has nothing to do with Kian's muscles. He's looking at the tattoos.

"We can find someone else," Kian says with a shrug.

The witch leaps into action, opening his door and holding it wide as he motions us inside with an overly dramatic flourish. "No, no. That won't be necessary. By all means, come in."

His house is small and cramped. I pass into the front foyer, bowing my head beneath a chandelier too large for the space. Herbs dangle from wire hangers lining the ceilings, and they brush like finger bones along my hairline as we follow Erik through the hallway and into the living room.

The television is on, playing an old nineties cartoon I only recognize from pop culture. There's an open beer can on the table, condensing in the hot room. The air is heavy with incense, something strong and earthy that makes my head swim.

Erik picks up his beer. "I'd offer you one, but I'm broke and you're strangers."

Malix and Frost exchange amused looks, but Kian forges ahead, undeterred and gruff as ever. “We need an antidote to shadow venom.”

Erik laughs, clutching his beer can to his t-shirt. “Shadow venom? First time I’ve ever met someone who needed that. Why do you need it?”

“Does it matter?” Malix asks, his tone more serious than his usual amusement.

Erik shrugs nonchalantly and sits down on the couch, slouching against the overstuffed cushions. “If you want my help, it does.”

Kian’s expression turns thunderous, but he answers, “Two of our number have been poisoned. We require an antidote. Does that satisfy your question?”

Leaning forward, the witch sets his beer on the distressed coffee table with a smile. “It does indeed. I can make you a potion that will work as an antidote against shadow venom. And you mentioned payment?” He directs this question to Malix.

Malix nods. “We have money.”

“I don’t want money,” Erik murmurs. His gaze slides over Malix’s bare arms, alight with hunger and interest. “You have something else I want.”

Malix holds up both hands. “Whoa there, Merlin. I’m not interested.”

Erik rolls his eyes. “I’m not propositioning you.”

Kian cuts in before Malix can say anything else. “What do you want?”

Erik stands, his too-thin body unfolding like a praying mantis, then he crosses to face Kian and gestures at his arm. “I want a piece of that. Of the magic you contain.”

The... what?

I blink, staring between Erik and Kian as I wait on somebody to offer me up some clarification. A piece of the magic they contain? What does that even mean?

Kian, Malix, and Frost share a look and seem to come to some kind of unspoken agreement. Then Kian grabs the hem of his shirt and tugs it off over his head.

My desire for my mates has become a low-level hum inside me, something I’m slowly learning to tamp down in their presence. But the moment Kian bares his expanse of tattooed muscles, heat flares through my body and every carnal memory I have of him returns to the forefront of my mind.

He’s as gorgeous as I remember, and his tattoos have grown in number.

The long, tribal-looking curl down his abdomen has felt my tongue, and looking at it dipping into the waistband of his jeans sends a rush of need through me. Coupled with the potent incense and the overwhelming warmth of the shack, I feel woozy enough to fall. Instead, I shuffle sideways and lean against the sweating wall.

Erik chuckles almost maniacally and crosses to a podium-style altar in the corner. He opens a trapdoor on the front and digs around inside for a moment before emerging with a long, sharp ceremonial knife.

I have my own knife in my hand before he even turns around.

Malix reaches out and rests his fingers lightly on my knuckles. He gives me a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head.

“Seriously?” I hiss, gesturing at the mad witch.

A grin slashes across Malix’s face. “Calm down, kitty.”

I point my blade at him with my best glare, then lower it and remain where I am as Erik goes back to Kian. But I don’t put my knife away. Just in case.

Erik’s nose scrunches as he sizes up Kian. “You aren’t one of the poisoned, are you?”

“I am not,” Kian replies stiffly. Then he angles the right side of his body toward the witch and thumps the muscles of his shoulder with two fingers. “Shoulder.”

Erik eyes the tattooed expanse of Kian’s shoulder for several long seconds, like an artist about to carve marble. Then he lifts the viciously sharp blade and digs into Kian’s skin.

My own shoulder burns in sympathy, but Kian takes it like a man. A muscle twitches near his temple, and his jaw tightens in pain, but he gives no other outward sign of discomfort. Bright red blood drips down his arm, stark against his black tattoos.

Bile rises in my throat, and the hot, lightheaded feeling intensifies. I’m not a wuss about blood or pain, but the look of pure rapture on Erik’s face disgusts me.

The mad witch digs out a chunk of Kian’s flesh with slow, methodical slices. He looks almost gleeful as he pulls the lump of tissue away from the bleeding wound and holds it up in a slant of sunlight falling through the living room window. Blood falls from the hunk of skin onto the floor at Erik’s feet.

I swallow hard, horrified at how Kian let the mad witch carve him up

without protest.

As Erik holds his prize up to the light pouring through the window, I realize the skin he chose has a tattoo on it. I feel a pang of dismay over the fact that Kian's gorgeous tattoos are going to be screwed up, and I glance at his arm to survey the damage.

His tattoos are moving.

I shouldn't be surprised. I've seen Frost's identical tattoos move, but afterward, I could just pretend it was a trick of the light. Now, I watch in fascination as Kian's tattoos rearrange into a new pattern around the bloody wound. Where the tribal curls slashed to the right, now they slash to the left. A swirl pulls away from his collar bone and slides down, framing the still-oozing cut.

My skin crawls, and I tighten my grip on the hilt of my knife to ground myself. When the tattoos are done moving, they look like they've always been in that position, wrapped around an injury that will surely scar.

What the fuck is happening?

Erik looks between the wound and his bloody, tattooed tissue. "Ah. Give me a moment and I'll fix you up." He takes the skin to his altar, leaving the knife and the lump of tissue on a small plate, then he returns to Kian. "With your permission, I'll close the wound."

Kian nods, his expression empty of pain or disgust or anything I think he should be feeling right now. If he can handle having a literal chunk carved out of his arm without breaking a sweat, it's no wonder he so easily walked away from his mate.

Bastard.

Erik holds his palms up to Kian's shoulder, cupping the injury and hiding it from sight. He mutters something under his breath and black smoke begins to swirl around his fingertips.

A few years ago, seeing witch magic in the flesh would have scared the shit out of me. That was before Sable came into my life. Part shifter, part witch, she taught me to appreciate her smoky magic, and ultimately, she was the catalyst for bringing the two races together.

But I don't like seeing her magic on Erik's hands. Sable is everything good and kind in my world, while this guy... this guy gives me the creeps.

After a few moments, Erik's hands fall away and his magic fades.

Kian's shoulder is no longer bleeding, but the wound has barely closed. It still looks angry and raw, like the damage done goes much deeper than the

surface. More than the witch could heal.

“All right,” Erik says pleasantly. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Kian yanks his t-shirt back over his head. The blood on his skin soaks into the fabric as he turns to face the witch. “And the antidote?”

“I’ll get started on the potion,” Erik assures him. The lanky man strolls to a large wooden cabinet beside his altar and opens both doors, revealing a plethora of glass jars filled with all manner of things. Dried herbs, crystals, sand, limbs from a variety of animals, even what looks like a jar of human eyeballs.

I grimace. Somehow I don’t think Erik obtained those eyeballs legally.

We remain standing where we are, scattered about the room, while Erik starts shifting jars around and muttering to himself. He pulls down a large jar of what looks like lizard feet, and another full of a white substance that could be salt. That I *hope* is salt. Then he scoots around a few more jars, peering into the back of the deep cabinet, still mumbling under his breath.

Suddenly, he stiffens, then glances at us over his bony shoulder, his eyes narrowed as if he just realized we’re all still standing here staring at him. “You can leave now.”

Kian crosses his arms over his chest and glares at the witch. “We intend to stay.”

Erik sighs and turns to face us, clutching a jar of some moss-like substance. He taps his fingers on the metal lid in a nervous gesture. “This won’t be a fast process. The potion will take two days to brew, and I’m not in the mood to host guests. Come back at sundown, two days from now.”

“Fine,” Kian bites out. He motions for the rest of us to head toward the door.

I don’t need to be told twice. Erik’s hot, smoky shack has left me feeling claustrophobic and thoroughly wigged, so I’m damn sure ready to leave. I shove away from the wall and head for the door with Frost and Malix right on my heels.

I’m already out in the punishing heat and sunlight when I realize Kian hasn’t followed us. Malix left the front door to Erik’s shack hanging open, but Kian doesn’t immediately appear. I pause by my bike and cast a questioning look at Frost.

His cool, remote expression doesn’t change. “Kian has trust issues.”

“Ah.” I nod, not surprised. “Putting a little fear of god in the mad witch. Got it.”

Trust issues, control issues... Kian has *all* the issues. If he wants to toss around the creepy guy a bit to make sure he does what we've paid him to do, I'm not judging.

When Kian exits the shack a few moments later, his gaze drifts over me, then to his brothers. He nods. "The witch will not fail us."

I roll my eyes at his dire declaration and mount my bike.

This potion could be ready in an hour, and it still wouldn't be quick enough.

WE PICK up shitty gas station burritos and bottled water, then check into the only motel in town: a run-down hovel so close to the interstate that every passing car shakes the walls.

Kian insists on one room for all of us, which quite frankly, I'm not okay with. On the other hand though, I get what he's doing. Keeping an eye on me, making sure I don't run or do something stupid. I have the same innate desire to keep an eye on the three of them, too, so I don't argue. No use splitting up, not when we're this close to the antidote.

But damn. Two days in this dingy, beige hellhole with them.

Kill me now.

I set my bottle of water on the table and sink into a wobbly chair to unwrap my burrito, my gaze sliding over the room. My motel back in *Oscura* looks like a damn four-star hotel next to this roach trap. The blankets are covered in suspicious white stains, and the walls have two decades' worth of yellow cigarette smoke damage. There are burn marks on the tabletop, and the carpet feels tacky beneath my boots. Despite the overall neglect, a hint of bleach on the air tells me it's clean, at least. Or if not clean, at least the surfaces are disinfected.

Malix kicks back on one of the two double beds and turns the television on before balancing his food on his legs to eat. Kian sits on the edge of the other bed, looking like he's ready to launch into action at any moment, while Frost takes the chair across from me. He keeps his attention firmly on his burritos, but I have no doubt he's just as aware of me as I am of him. His warm, spicy scent is a complement to the spices in my food.

Malix has stopped channel surfing on some sitcom with a laugh track, and

every time the audience roars at a joke, I get a twitch in my eye.

Nothing to do now but settle in and wait.

I take a bite of my burrito, cringing when the exterior is hotter than lava and the interior is still half-frozen. I force myself to chew and not gag, though I almost consider tossing this in the trash and going to chase down a rabbit instead.

I'm antsy now, and sitting in this room for two days sounds like the worst form of torture. Cooped up with the three men who threaten not only my life but also my independence. I'm ready for this to be over—to get the antidote, end the truce, and fulfill what I came here to do.

After Kian finishes his three burritos in two bites, then chugs his water, he slams the empty bottle to the bedside table and declares, “Dibs on first shower.”

Malix balls up his burrito wrapper and throws it at him. “Fuck you, man.”

Standing, Kian raises one sardonic eyebrow. “Did you sacrifice your flesh for the witch?”

I snort, and Malix tosses me a grin. “I guess not, boss. Enjoy your sauna. Leave me some damn hot water.”

Kian grunts, then heads toward the closet-slash-sink area where the door to the toilet and shower is. He tugs his shirt off over his head, and the green-tinted fluorescent light slants over his wounded shoulder.

Maybe it's the sickly light, but the injury looks even worse than it did back at Erik's shack.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I say, launching to my feet.

I cross the room in several quick strides before he can disappear into the bathroom cubicle. Grabbing his elbow, I angle him further toward the light so I can better see the gash on his shoulder. The wound seeps thick, maroon blood, and the edges look raw. Painful. I lean in and sniff, catching a hint of infection beneath the copper tang of blood.

“Jesus,” I mutter. “We need to disinfect this. There's no telling what garbage was on that asshole's knife. I've got a first aid ki—”

“No,” Kian growls, then yanks his elbow from my grasp. “I don't need your help.”

Irritation and anger flare inside me, but beneath it is the deep well of hurt I've spent the last three years filling with quicksand. I grab his arm again, digging my nails into his skin. “Gangrene can kill you.”

“Leave it be,” Kian snaps back. He twists his arm from my grip and turns

to stalk into the bathroom.

“This happened because he wanted your tattoo,” I say sharply. Kian halts, freezing with his back to me on the threshold to the shower room. “‘The magic you contain.’ So what are these things? Because they’re obviously not tattoos. You all have them. All the same dark swirls in different shapes.”

I cut my gaze to Malix and Frost. Neither of them have moved, though Frost’s tattoos are shifting and adjusting on his arms, waving beneath his sleeves and up his neck.

“And that’s not normal,” I add, pointing at Frost. “Tattoos don’t move. So what is that? What causes that?”

Frost’s icy blue gaze lifts to meet mine, but he doesn’t respond.

In fact, they’re all three so silent that it grates on my nerves.

Kian finally turns back around, his expression hard as granite, but he still doesn’t speak.

“I can only guess that these tattoos, or whatever they are, are part of what makes you more than shifters,” I say, turning back to him. Before I can second guess my actions or my thoughts, I press my fingertips to the curling swirls that cross his abs to dip below the waistband of his pants. “These look different than they did three years ago. The pattern has changed. You have more of them than I remember too.”

Kian’s body stiffens beneath my fingers, and from my periphery, I see Malix and Frost rise to their feet. I glance over at them to find them staring daggers at Kian.

That’s when I remember he never told them about that night back in Montana.

The night between us when everything changed.

The night that I just inadvertently revealed.

CHAPTER 13

“THREE YEARS AGO?” Malix says, his tone low and angry.

He hovers on the other side of the bed, framed by the fading sunlight streaming through the gauzy curtains. Frost stands behind him a few feet away, still near his chair at the table and also highlighted by the light. They both look eerily beautiful... and deadly. Frost as pale and unearthly as an iceberg in the fading twilight, and Malix as darkly magnificent as a mountain at sunset.

The sight of them, and the tingle of their fury on the air, quickens my breath and makes my heart race. There’s a kind of savageness hanging between us that reminds me of the wilds, of the hunt, the chase, the kill.

My fingers itch to reach for the dagger in my holster, but I wait. As of right now, I don’t think their anger is pointed at me.

I glance at Kian and swallow. I know I’m about to be read the riot act for revealing something I knew was a secret. But he’s not even looking at me; he’s looking at his brothers. A muscle ticks in his jaw, and a thin trail of blood oozes down his shoulder from the gash. He looks angry, but more than that he looks ashamed.

Ashamed of *me*.

A painful ache spreads through my chest. Kian’s fucking ashamed of having been with me. With his *mate*.

I didn’t know I could hate him more than I did. *But, oh look. I do.*

Malix takes a single step forward. He looks pleasantly deadly as he asks, “Care to explain?”

Frost’s usual empty expression has been replaced by something akin to anger. It morphs his delicate features into something monstrous as his

smooth, calculating tones filter through the room. “What is she talking about, brother? What happened three years ago?”

More blood trails down Kian’s bicep. His voice almost sounds robotic as he admits, “Amora and I shared a night together.”

Malix’s eyes narrow. They look like violet fire in the sunset-drenched gloom. “And you failed to tell us... why?”

“It never came up,” Kian says gruffly. “It happened before Quinton had us join forces. Back when we were still solo, searching for weaknesses in the barrier between realms.”

I snap my head around to stare at him. “Weaknesses between the realms?”

It scares me how easily I can forget they’re the enemy—until one of them says something like this and reminds me that my only goal in life is to see them bleeding out on the pavement. It terrifies me what they would do if they found those weaknesses.

Kian ignores me, still speaking to his brothers. “It didn’t mean anything. It was just one night. It didn’t seem important to tell you when the three of us joined up later.”

The ache in my chest turns to a knife cutting deep into my heart. *It didn’t mean anything.* To him, maybe. But at the time, it meant *everything* to me. Every minute of every day since we shared that night, I’ve had to come to terms with the emptiness, the raw emotions, the sheer fury he left me with.

I growl, ready to tear him into tiny pieces on the bathroom floor.

But apparently, *my* anger isn’t the only anger in the room.

Malix clenches his hands into fists at his sides and snarls, “So you betrayed us.”

Kian bares his teeth. “I did no such thing. Frost? Back me up here.”

But Frost shakes his head, stepping up to stand beside Malix. “You’ve had dozens of moments to tell us about that night since she showed up in Oscura. You chose not to. I’m not sure what else to call that but betrayal.”

Kian scoffs. “Don’t be dramatic. It happened a long time ago. It’s ancient history.”

That comment just pisses me off even more. I whirl on him. “Is it?”

“Yeah, it is,” he replies dismissively, not even sparing me a glance.

So I punch him in his wound.

Blood spurts beneath my knuckles. Even though the punch itself likely wouldn’t be enough to hurt a man with muscles like Kian, the wound is raw

and angry. He grunts and doubles over, one hand clapping over the bloody mark on his skin.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Malix launches over the mattress and plows into Kian's abdomen with one massive shoulder. The two men fly backward into the bathroom, where the shower curtain collapses beneath them. The tension rod crashes to the ground in the split second after they slump over the edge of the tub, fists flying.

I stare after them in shock, surprised by the sudden violence. While I'm frozen to the spot watching the two men grapple in the tub, wrapped in the shower curtain, Frost races past me. For a moment, I think he's going to stop the fight.

But he just joins it.

Frost grabs Kian by the hair and hauls him out of the tangle of limbs and shower curtain. Even though he's leaner than Kian, he's clearly just as strong, and he knees Kian in the abdomen, knocking him out the bathroom door right toward me.

I stumble backward out of range because I'm not too keen on joining this circus. Frost lunges after Kian, and they hit the nasty-ass carpet and roll. Frost's head bounces off the ground, and I cringe as Kian's open wound grinds right into the dirty carpet.

"Gonna get fucking herpes of the arm," I mutter, bouncing back on my toes as they wrestle around and roll toward my boots. "E.coli of the blood or some shit."

Malix appears from the bathroom, trailing the shower curtain from one knee. He falls onto Kian's back, and Frost lets out a pained grunt as Kian's weight slams down on his chest. Grunts, thuds, kicks, punches, cursing. It's like watching a fucking schoolyard brawl... if the kids in a schoolyard were built like brick houses.

"*Gangrene won't kill me,*" I mutter mockingly as I dance away from their flailing limbs. "But your brothers might. And I'm gonna let them."

I return to my burrito and shove the last of it in my mouth as something shatters in the sink area. My things are still in my backpack, so thankfully, I know it's nothing I own. The tortilla's gone as cold as the half-frozen beef, but I just chase it down with my water.

Behind me, the bed shudders as all three men roll into the frame.

I grew up in a pack. You get used to posturing, especially in the teenage

years when all your friends are coming into puberty and gaining more strength as wolves. Pack men fight like little bitches, both in human form and in wolf form. So this doesn't bother me. I figure, either they're going to wear each other out and come to an eventual truce, or they're going to kill each other.

I'm honestly hoping for the latter. Would save me so much trouble.

They're on their feet now, trading blows and snide comments. I slide up on the tabletop and cross my legs to finish my drink, ready to wait out the testosterone.

I've got my head tilted back as I finish off my water, when the first man shifts.

I've seen their wolves. I hunted with them just last night and ate my meal sitting in a circle with them.

This...

This isn't that.

Kian's body elongates and distorts, growing much more mass than even seems possible. He looms taller than a horse, vaguely wolf-like but... different.

Black smoke dances over his fur, and his eyes glow like golden lanterns. It's as if he's an artist's abstract rendition of a wolf formed of magic and shadows, with only the barest hints of his wolf showing through. The smoke that curls around him, seeming to be formed of his skin and fur, resembles the tattoos he possesses in his human forms.

A split second after Kian shifts, Frost and Malix do too.

My heart lurches as I see them all three standing there like wolf demons sent straight from hell. The already too-small motel room feels even tinier with three massive, snarling monsters about to attack each other.

This is the other side of them, I realize. This is what makes them separate from normal wolf shifters.

And *now* I'm worried.

I'm not dying today because some asshole didn't tell his asshole buddies that he screwed me.

I drop my water bottle on the table, hardly paying it any mind when it clatters off the edge and rolls across the floor. Then I slither off the worn, scratched tabletop and lunge between the three beasts.

Throwing up my arms to both sides, I shout, "Stop! Calm the hell down!"

All three shadow wolves freeze. Well, their bodies do—the smoky

shadows clinging to their fur do not. It continues to swirl and ebb like oceans of witch magic flowing over their tall, nightmarish forms. Limbs too long, too crooked, bodies bony, teeth like knives... god, they're hell monsters.

"We're two days from the antidote," I snap, my gaze darting between the three of them. Their eyes glow behind the smoke, and in this form, their irises are all the same color—an icy, vibrant blue. "Pull yourselves together, you idiots."

The room goes completely silent for a moment, and it occurs to me that I might've just made things worse. I've put myself in the middle of a fight between three brutal supernatural beings whose power I don't even quite understand.

But then some of the tension bleeds from the air, and I let out a slow breath.

Kian shifts back to human form first, a scowl painted across his face. "We aren't idiots."

I very carefully ignore his nakedness and motion around the room. "Are you not?"

He notes the beds—both of them shifted from their normal positions—the television on its side, the lamp broken, and random crap scattered across the floor.

"All because we fucked?" I say, my heart beating fast in my chest.

Frost and Malix shift back into their human forms as I speak. Gray smoke filters away, like the trail of a smoker finishing their cigarette in a darkened room.

Then all three of them surround me.

Naked.

My heart races for reasons much, *much* more devastating than my initial fear over their strange shadow forms. I have to carefully keep my eyes up, focus on their hard expressions, their smooth chests rising and falling from their breaths.

If I look any further south, I have a feeling I won't be able to handle it. Heat and desire already fill every corner of my body.

"Yeah," I say, keeping my voice pointedly bland. "We fucked in a shitty hotel room in Montana. And we did it because I went to the bar *looking* to get laid. Kian came in for a drink, and he was exactly the candidate I was looking for."

I look at the man in question then, holding his gaze as I continue. "We

had sex, and the mate bond presented itself. But the next day, we went our separate ways. I wasn't looking for a mate, and neither was he. Just because fate says something has to happen doesn't mean you have to go along with it. Because sometimes fate is fucking wrong."

Kian's gold-ringed eyes glitter in the darkening room. I'm still holding his gaze, challenging him, looking him right in the eye so he knows without a doubt I'm not broken by what happened between us. Maybe I *was* back then, for a while, but that's—in his words—ancient history.

I finish by echoing his earlier statement, forcing the words from my mouth. "It meant nothing."

A long moment of silence settles over the room. The sun is almost gone outside the window, casting us in shadow. I want to turn on a lamp, shine some light in here to chase away the doom and gloom, but I don't want to move either. As far as I know, I'm the only thing keeping them from shifting back to those horrific forms and tearing this place apart.

Malix stalks away toward his backpack in the corner and bends to dig around for some clothes. I steal a glance at his body, my breath hitching in my throat. His ass is tighter and rounder than the best Grecian god statue in the world. His cheeks taper into thick thighs and strong calves beneath, and his muscular torso above.

I feel an intense, deep-seated urge to sink my teeth into that expanse of dark brown skin.

The moment the thought fills my mind, I whirl away from the three of them and focus on taking a few deep breaths. The room was drenched in their scents just a while ago, but something about their shadow wolf forms made all scent vanish, leaving the air fresh. Filled with tension, but fresh.

I stand still, facing the window as I listen to the three of them moving about the room as they dress. The two men's response to finding out about my night with Kian seems like an overreaction. I don't understand it. Hell, I don't understand anything about the lingering tension in the room or what's really going on between the three of them. And quite frankly, I don't want to. It's none of my business.

My business is to make sure that before all of this is said and done, the three of them are six feet under.

It's almost fully dark out by now, and I stare out the window with my arms crossed under my breasts. A twin pair of headlights passes by in the parking lot outside, illuminating the room. As the two beams drift across me,

they light up the ceiling and the wall.

Except for a splotch of darkness in the corner that the light can't seem to penetrate at all.

A shadow.

And not a natural one.

I barely manage to scream out, "Frost!" before the living shadow lunges right for me.

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CHAPTER 14

I LEAP ASIDE AND, thankfully, land on the mattress instead of the ground. The shadow narrowly misses me, and the air around my head displaces from its passage, whipping my hair around my face. I bounce precariously on the edge of the bed and nearly fall off onto the floor, though I manage to catch myself on the blankets.

All three men shout in surprise, but I'm too busy trying to get my limbs back in the proper order to see what's happening.

Finally, I manage to lever up onto my hands and knees and glance wildly around for the shadow, ready to leap into action if it comes for me. Then I freeze.

Fuck.

There's not just one shadow this time. There are several.

Kian's on his knees next to the fallen television, reaching into his pack. He brandishes a long dagger, slicing out at the shadow that narrowly missed me. Across the room, Frost calls out his name, and Kian throws the knife to him. The blade twists and flashes silver in the dim light, but Frost catches it easily by the hilt and turns on two more shadows darting along the wall. On the other side of the bed near the bathroom, Malix is using another shadow like a punching bag.

Kian extracts a second knife from his bag—*dear god, how many knives does one man need?*—and jabs at the shadow in front of him. He curses when it darts under the television stand, then snaps, “Amora! Get the light!”

It takes me a split second to realize he's said my name. I bound off the edge of the mattress and reach for the nineties era lamp hanging on the wall between the beds.

I don't make it. Something slams into me, and I pitch sideways with an *oof*. I land on my hip on the second bed, then bounce off onto the floor. My side hits hard, and my cheek slams into the carpet.

Great, now I'm going to get E.coli, I think, and if the situation weren't so damn dire, I'd laugh. I'm already poisoned, so why not add a deadly bacterial virus? I could die *twice*.

Shoving against the floor with both hands, I ignore the gritty, crumbly texture of the carpet and glance around. Kian's still battling his shadow, while Frost and Malix both have one of their own. Three shadows in the dark, three knives slashing.

So what hit me?

I probe the tender area on my forehead as I climb to my feet. The blow felt like a water balloon that didn't break—squishy, but firm and capable of knocking down a grown woman.

This time, I manage to get my fingers on the cheap plastic switch before I get hit again.

I'm ready for it though. I throw up an arm, batting the thing away from me before it can fully slam into me. It's a shadow—a fourth shadow—and it skitters across the bed then disappears on the other side of the mattress. I take advantage of its distraction and slam the light on with a little more force than necessary.

The lamp illuminates the room, such as it is, casting dull amber light into all the corners. It's the first time I've seen the shadows in the light, and the effect is even more eerie because my brain knows they should vanish—but they don't.

The fourth shadow appears from nowhere and launches at me again. I whip my knife out of the holster at my hip and lash out at the dark shape. Even though I don't miss, the blade slices right through the shadow without doing a bit of damage.

"Son of a bitch!" I duck another darting attack, then do a tuck and roll away from the beds toward where the feral shifters are fighting their shadows.

I roll to my knees by Frost's feet and leap up in time to see his knife take off a hunk of the shadow. The piece falls away and immediately turns to smoke that fades into the air. The shadow darts out of reach, but doesn't seem too bothered that it just lost a chunk of itself.

Malix yells, "Amora!"

His voice is so hard that I almost don't recognize it. I instinctually duck, and Malix's knife jabs out over my head, slicing through a shadow that had been only centimeters from taking me down. The shadow hisses and slides away, trailing smoke.

Just like back in Oscura. The three of them can land blows on the shadows, but I can't.

I straighten, the idea dredging up a deep sense of horror inside me.

What would happen if more of these shadows were unleashed on the world? They could decimate whole cities, and nobody—not soldiers, not police, not even a redneck with a gun—could stop them.

Kian's attention is on the shadow in front of him, so he doesn't see the shadow looming behind him. I can't do fuck all about stopping the thing, so I yell, "Kian! Behind you!"

He whirls, surprisingly graceful for such a burly, muscular man, and his knife slices through the approaching shadow, while his other hand punches out at the first. Both shadows dart away, and the knifed one trails fading smoke from its injury.

I feel useless. I move around the room, calling shots like I'm a fucking referee. The fourth shadow does its best to take me down, and it's certainly quick, but I'm quicker. It balances its attacks between me and the feral shifters. I yell a name, a direction, anything to warn them it's coming, and they lash out.

It works, for a time, until two of the shadows decide to get smarter than they should be.

One whips toward Frost's head, and I say his name, but the moment he turns to battle the oncoming threat, the first shadow whips around his face like a cloak. Frost drops his knife, and his hands go to the shadow squeezing his face.

Horrified, I rush up to him and try to get a grip on the monster. Even though the one back in Oscura was able to grab me, and poison me, I can't get a grip on this one. My hands go right through the shadow and glance off Frost's face while he gasps for air.

"Kian!" I scream. "Help!"

In the split second after my scream, the light goes out.

Kian's at my side in an instant, his gaze raking over me like he expects me to be hurt. I rake at Frost's face again, my heart in my throat because I can *feel* that he can't breathe. It's like I'm with him, feeling his lack of air,

and even though he's not outwardly terrified, I am.

Kian latches on to the shadow and yanks. It pulls a few inches away from Frost's face, and Frost sucks in a deep breath. Then Kian slices the knife through the tendril, severing it in half. Before the shadow can dart away and lick its wounds, Frost latches on to it, slams it to the television stand, and skewers it.

It vanishes in a puff of smoke.

"Well," I grunt breathlessly. "One down."

From near the door, Malix calls, "Uh, guys?"

The remaining shadows have him cornered.

Shit.

Moving almost like a single unit, all three of us lunge across the room to his aid. The shadows swirl around us like storm clouds, and I duck and twist away from them while the men fight. Without the light illuminating the room, it's harder to see them, and even harder to keep from being brained by one of them as they dodge and attack.

In the midst of the chaos, I take a blow to the head that knocks me off my feet.

Lights flicker in my vision, and I sail backward, hitting the table. The wobbly piece of shit slips out from beneath me, and I fall, banging my head on the edge before slumping blearily to the floor.

A shadow looms over me, blocking out the ambient streetlights coming in through the window overhead. I struggle to see it, blinking rapidly as I try to make the world come into focus again. I can't even seem to pull enough air in my lungs to yell for help.

Suddenly, over the grunting and cursing from the guys, I hear a new voice.

A soft, intensely creepy whisper.

A whisper that feels like it's more inside my head than in the real world.

"Leave her," the voice hisses.

The shadow hovering over me undulates in what can only be irritation. An answering whisper, higher pitched than the first, replies, "But she is so *bright.*"

The first whisper grows harder. "The witch wants her alive. He must receive his payment. Leave her."

The witch wants her alive. His payment.

Goddammit. That motherfucking Comic-Con piece of shit.

He sold us out.

Frost appears from nowhere like a shooting star. His pale hair flutters around his hard face as he launches at the shadow above me. I watch, equal parts horrified and mesmerized, as he slams into the shadow and both of them crash through the window.

I throw my arms up and squeeze my eyes shut against the deluge of broken glass. Shards rain down on me, and Kian shouts something I don't hear through my surprise. A moment later, the door flings open and a gust of hot, sandy wind flows past me.

I sit up, swaying a little as my equilibrium balances, and watch as the door slams shut behind Kian and Malix.

Well, *they* were smart enough to use the door instead of climbing out the window after him.

I grab my knife from under the table where it landed when I fell, then lurch to my feet to follow them.

The moon is high in a crystal clear night sky dotted by hundreds of stars. A gray wash of light splashes over the feral shifters as they fight with the shadows in the parking lot.

Frost is on the sidewalk just outside our room as smoke filters away from him. His knife blade is still jammed against the concrete where he defeated the shadow who almost killed me, and the blade is broken from how hard he stabbed the thing. He tosses his broken weapon aside and climbs to his feet, then casts me a single glance that I can't read before he sprints into the parking lot to join his brothers.

Kian ducks a blow from a shadow, but not quick enough, and he slams into an SUV. The alarm begins to blare, and the headlights start to flash right into someone's motel room. But he's back in motion almost immediately, undeterred by the noise. Frost joins him—weaponless this time—but punches out at the shadow with his fists.

They're fighting harder now, and fury seems to cloak all three of them. Malix slams a shadow into a small, rusted out coupe, caving in the hood. Kian kicks a shadow into one of the shoddy landscaped trees, snapping the trunk in two. Frost runs interference for both of them, and I just stand on the sidewalk holding my useless fucking knife.

Doors begin to open up and down the motel block. Further down, where the ambient glow of the lobby spills onto the asphalt, I see the proprietor emerge in his casual khakis and Oxford, a cell phone pressed to his ear.

Great. Probably calling the cops.

Malix takes out the third shadow with his dagger, breaking a car window in the process. A moment later, Frost and Kian corner the last shadow against the building and slice it to bits too.

The resulting silence seems far too loud.

Kian straightens, still clutching his dagger as he glances around at the gawking civilians.

“Get your things,” he tells the rest of us sharply. “We’re leaving.”

“Leaving to go where?” I ask as he passes me on his way back into the motel room.

He halts and levels his gold-ringed eyes on me. There’s hot anger burning in his gaze. I think for a second that it’s fury toward me, until he speaks again. “To pay Erik a visit.”

Frost appears at my side and places his cool hand on my shoulder. “You heard what the shadows said. The witch sent them after us. With you as the prize.”

I shudder at the reminder. Not just of the shadows’ creepy hissing voices, but at the fact that Erik the mad witch has machinations on me. I don’t know what the fuck he wants to do with me, but it definitely can’t be anything good.

“You heard them speak too?” I clarify.

Frost nods. His expression is ice cold.

I remember the way he leapt out of the darkness and carried the shadow away from me. He saved my life. Although, maybe we’re square, given he might have suffocated beneath his own shadow if I hadn’t yelled for help.

Malix limps up to us, his violet eyes flashing in the night. “I hear sirens.”

Kian nods. “We need to go. Now. Time to make the witch pay.”

CHAPTER 15

THE DIRT ROAD that leads to Erik's rundown shack is even darker in the night. A few of the sad little houses lining the strip have a light or two gleaming inside, but for the most part, the desert is silent and black as midnight.

Kian leaves the road for a patch of sparse grass next to a seemingly unoccupied house—considering its door is hanging off the hinges—and the rest of us park beside him. Instead of riding our bikes down the road and announcing our presence like we did earlier in the day, we walk the rest of the way.

Intense heat from the day is fading as we walk down the dirt road, and the strange chill of night is settling in. The weather here is so extreme—one moment, sunburn, the next hypothermia. But I can imagine the allure of living somewhere so secluded. So isolated.

Peace. The lack of city lights ruining the stars or pollution in the air.

It reminds me a bit of home. Only drier. More brown.

A light burns in one of Erik's front windows like a beacon, growing larger as we head toward it. We stay off the road, slinking through the desert shadows. Even though Frost's hair flashes in the moonlight, the three of them are preternaturally silent.

As a shifter, I'm silent too, but they're on a whole new level.

I can't help but wonder what the hell else is different about them.

When we reach Erik's yard, Kian points to Frost and Malix, then points to the side of the house, before rotating his finger. A signal for them to go around the back of the house, I'm guessing, because they immediately peel away from us into the darkness.

Kian catches my gaze. The moonlight turns the gold in his eyes to a

molten silver. He lifts his chin, indicating I should follow him.

It's weird. I've hated him for years. I've wished I could rip his head off his gorgeous body since the moment he left me in that hotel bed.

But here I am. Following his orders like he's my fucking alpha or something.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

I tiptoe across the rickety wooden boards of Erik's front porch on Kian's heels. A television plays inside—something squeaky and high-pitched, like a cartoon. Not that I'm surprised, given how fucking weird the guy is for a witch.

Kian pauses for a moment, his eyes going blank. I stare up at him, confused; the look on his face is almost like he's listening to something I can't hear. I get the strangest feeling he's communicating in some way with Frost and Malix, but that can't be. Mind-speak is only for when we're in wolf form.

But I mean... they aren't exactly normal. The very short time I've spent with them has reinforced that unpleasant truth on multiple occasions.

After a moment, Kian's gaze refocuses on Erik's dingy wooden door, then he kicks it off its hinges.

We barrel into the house to the din of another door splitting somewhere else in the house. Frost and Malix, I presume, entering from around the back. They don't appear, though—not right away. As small as the shack is, we should see them immediately. I glance down the dark hallway, but nothing moves.

We clear the living room, where incense burns on Erik's altar and the television plays an old nineties cartoon chock full of dumb toilet humor. The witch is nowhere to be found, though there's a can of beer on the table, still half full, still condensing. We head into the hallway and finally run into Frost and Malix.

Next to a staircase.

I blink at the gloomy stairs leading up to a second floor that doesn't exist. Or *shouldn't* exist, anyway.

Malix grimaces. "Yeah, so, turns out this place is a lot fucking bigger than it looks. We got lost when we left the kitchen."

"Magic," Frost offers with a shrug.

Kian glares around the darkened hallway. His anger is terrifying, radiating from him with a dominance that leaves no room for interpretation.

He won't be happy until Erik's blood is on his hands for sending the shadows after him and his brothers.

To be honest, I'm not opposed. That crazy fucking witch wanted *me* as payment. To carve my skin off? To eat me? To fuck me against my will? I don't know.

But he's never going to get the chance to do any of that shit now.

"He's here," Kian says sharply. "Find him."

The four of us split up to search—Frost and Malix going upstairs, while Kian and I handle the downstairs. I start opening doors and looking behind curtains in a dining room, then find myself in a strange kind of "grand parlor" like this place is an English manor house and not a metal shack in the desert. Erik fooled us real nice with the one shitty little living room we saw. He lives like a damn king.

I pass out of the parlor and back into the hallway near the stairs. I'm considering where I'll go next, when I glimpse something dark slinking through the shadows toward the back of the house. A flash of shadow against the barest hint of moonlight. My first thought is, *oh shit, a living shadow*.

But my next thought is, *that asshole is trying to escape*.

I sprint down the hall as quietly as possible, then lunge through the darkness, praying I'm not about to slam into furniture. The shadow lets out a sharp, girlish scream, and Erik the witch collapses beneath me.

I follow him down to the floor, where his head bounces off the linoleum, then wrap my hands around his neck in an attempt to subdue him.

He screams again, and magic pours from him. In an instant, the smoke is wrapped around my face and neck in an odd mimicry of what happened with Frost back at the motel, and I can't see anything. The smoke tightens, cutting off my airway, my sight, everything.

Erik's bony form bucks beneath me. His elbow, or something equally as sharp, slams into the side of my head. My head whirls and I slump to the side, struggling to get past the blinding pain and the suffocating magic. The witch shoves at me, and I shove back, trying to pin him down more securely, but he manages to break free from under me.

A snarl cuts through the room.

I duck as something large whooshes past me, leaving the scent of woodsmoke and whiskey in his wake. Kian. I claw at the black magic around my face to no avail, but then Erik screams over the sound of running feet, and the binding vanishes so abruptly I fall onto my ass.

I scramble to my feet and hurry out the open back door.

Erik's gangly form sprints through the back yard with Kian's nightmarish demon wolf right behind him. Magic smokes and wavers, then lashes out when Erik turns around and points at Kian. But the wolf is undeterred—he leaps aside, then speeds up while the witch is distracted casting his spells.

Kian leaps through the air and lands square on the witch's back. They tumble to the ground, where the large wolf latches onto the witch's neck and rolls him to his back.

Then sits on him.

I skid to a stop next to them, breathing hard. Frost and Malix jog toward us from the shack, clearly drawn by the screaming.

Kian has his monstrous jaws clamped around Erik's skinny neck so far it looks as if he's about to swallow him.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Erik screams in a tight, high voice. "I didn't mean it! I shouldn't have done it! I take it back!"

Malix looms over the prone man and crosses his arms over his massive chest. "What're you sorry for, shithead? Turning us over to Felicity?"

"Yes! She offered... I'm sorry!"

I kick him in the thigh. "She offered what?"

I have no idea who Felicity is, but my lack of knowledge doesn't hinder his ability to tell us the truth.

"You!"

"I'm not hers to give you," I bite out.

Erik's face screws up. I can smell blood on him from Kian's teeth slicing into his skin.

Malix speaks up. "Can you even create the antidote to the shadow venom? Or were you lying? Just stringing us along like a fucking cheat?"

The witch's eyes are so wide I can see whites all the way around his irises. His gaze pins on Malix, and he gasps out, "Yes! Yes, I really can! It's on the altar! It's almost ready!"

Malix latches on to his words. "Almost?"

Erik clutches at Kian's fur. A single tear slips down his cheek as he gazes up at Malix. "It's missing an ingredient."

"An ingredient you have?" Malix prompts.

"No," Erik admits. "But the source is close. Just two tablespoons of sap from the Tree of Life. Once that's added, it'll do what you need it to do."

"So just that one ingredient?" Malix says. "Just that, and it'll work?"

Everything else is already done?”

“Yes! I just need to get the sap!” Hope flares bright in the little worm’s eyes.

He thinks he’s safe.

Too bad he’s so naïve.

Frost’s cold voice cuts through the night air. “Good. Then we don’t need the witch anymore.”

Kian growls, then clamps down on Erik’s neck and rips out his throat.

I manage to stay where I am and not make a sound, but the brutal violence of it turns my stomach. Erik’s green eyes stare up at the starry sky, his eyelids twitching, as his entire life’s blood spills from his ruined neck. There’s nothing left of his Adam’s apple, his skin tattered, most of it gone... all that’s left is exposed viscera and gushing blood, bubbling as he struggles to breathe through ruined airways.

He goes still in less than five seconds, the light fading from his eyes.

Kian shifts back. Black smoke and shadows swirl around him, and his nightmarish shadowy wolf limbs sink into his form like they never existed at all. Then he’s on his feet, naked, covered in the witch’s blood from his thick lips down to his navel. The sight is almost as terrifying as his shadow wolf.

“What do we do with him?” Malix asks.

“Bury him. Right here,” Kian adds with shrug. “I’m going to go clean up.”

Frost glances around the yard, then angles off toward a lean-to shed against the back of the house. Presumably for digging implements.

Malix crosses his arms over his chest and steps over to stand beside me, both of us looking down at the dead witch. “You okay, kitty?”

“I hate you,” I reply, irritable at his incessant use of the rude nickname. “I’m fine. The asshole didn’t have good intentions for me, so I’m not mourning his death, if that’s what you mean.”

“So you’re okay with killing,” Malix says.

I glance over to find his violet eyes staring at me in the darkness. “When the situation calls for it.”

That irritatingly adorable grin cuts across his face. “Maybe you’re not a useless kitten after all.”

“I *really* hate you,” I growl.

Frost returns from the lean-to with three shovels. He throws one at Malix, then offers another to me.

I glare at him for a long moment before snatching the shovel from his fingertips.

Guess I'm digging a damn grave.

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CHAPTER 16

WHEN THE THREE of us stride into the kitchen, sweaty and covered in dirt, we find Kian standing in front of Erik's old-fashioned mint green refrigerator, a clump of lunchmeat in one hand. He's wet from a shower and wearing only a pair of low-slung jeans. With his tapered waist and muscles on display, plus those tattoos I know so intimately, I find myself staring.

He glances over at me, and our gazes lock before I can look away.

Busted.

So I cover up my completely unbidden and unwanted lust with snark.

I raise my eyebrow. "Feeling peckish?"

"Don't you get hungry after you kill?" he shoots back, turning to peer into the fridge again.

"No, I'm usually horny." The words come out before I even realize it's happening.

What the actual fuck, Amora?

All three men whip around and look at me, each with a slightly different expression. Kian's jaw is clenched, like I've said the worst thing he's ever heard. Frost's face is as expressionless as usual. And Malix just looks amused.

The violet-eyed man smiles and remarks, "Huh. Good to know. I'll keep that in mind for the future."

I carefully keep my embarrassment to myself and hope nobody can see the flush heating my cheeks. Catching sight of a bottle in the fridge beyond Kian, I reach past him and snatch up the water before darting away from his whiskey-drenched scent.

"So. Anyone want to tell me who Felicity is?" I say, unscrewing the top

on the bottle and leaning a hip against the counter. “Better yet, how about why she’s sending shadows after you and offering me up as payment for information on finding you?”

All three of them exchange loaded glances. Frost turns his back to try to fit the broken door back into its frame, while Malix snatches the lunchmeat from Kian’s hand.

Kian glares at him, then leans back into the fridge for more.

None of them answer me.

I slam my water bottle on the counter. “Look, assholes. I’m here against my better judgment. I don’t like you. *Any* of you. But I’m not going to continue to put my life in danger for you if you’re not going to come clean to me.”

Kian grunts, emerging from inside the fridge with a pizza box. He lifts the lid and grimaces, then turns to put it right back where he found it. His voice drifts out. “Your life is already on the line.”

Malix makes a noise in his throat, shoving the rest of the ham into his mouth to free his hands so he can help Frost with the door. “Sap from the Tree of Life,” he mumbles around the lunchmeat. “Anybody got a damn clue where that is?”

Kian slams the fridge door shut. “No.”

“That poses a logistical problem,” Malix says with a grimace. “We’re gonna need the sticky goo.”

“That’s what she said,” I say under my breath, grabbing my water up to drink.

Malix guffaws, and even Frost cracks a rare smile. It utterly transforms his face from emotionless stone granite to something beautiful and alive. It nearly takes my damn breath away. I feel the dangerous desire to reach out and touch his face, to trace the curve of his lips with my fingertips.

I cover that up with sarcasm too.

“Oh, so you listen to me only when you want to. Got it,” I say, giving them a thumbs up and an eye roll.

Kian’s lips press into a firm line. “Can we focus, please? We don’t need to deal with anybody else willing to sell us out to the highest bidder. But we need to find this tree. Any bright ideas are welcome.”

Frost turns back around and dusts his hands off. The door is settled back on its frame, albeit somewhat precariously. Anybody else who wanted to kick it in could do so easily. “Books. There’s a library upstairs.”

Malix drapes an arm over Frost's shoulder and looks at me. "Have we told you he's the smart one?"

"You haven't told me fuck all," I point out, unamused by the way they've all danced around my questions.

Kian ignores us both. "Astute observation. All right, let's search the place. Journals, magic books, anything that might tell us where to find this tree. See if the guy's got a laptop and Google. Also, keep an eye out for anything of value that might help in our goal."

I scoff. "What is our goal, pray tell?"

He levels his hard gaze on me. "Getting out of this alive. *All of us.*"

I give him a feral grin. "Sure. *All of us.*"

Like I'd ever let that happen.

ERIK'S "LIBRARY" is simply a converted bedroom lined with bookshelves that has an interior table and chairs. I hoped for something cooler, considering the parlor looks like something out of a duke's manor, but clearly, the witch's magic only ran so far.

Frost enters first, then picks the nearest shelf to start shuffling through books. I head for the table, where half a dozen notebooks are scattered around as if Erik was recently in here researching something himself. Chances are good that *something* is the potion he was making for us.

I settle in a seat and pull the closest spiral-bound notebook toward me, then start flipping through the pages.

We left Kian and Malix downstairs to search the living room, where Erik kept his altar and magical supplies. When silence settles over us, giving my overwrought nerves a chance to breathe, I decide I've made the best choice in choosing to accompany the silent shifter.

I can't help but glance at Frost as he works. He has his finger pressed to a row of spines on the shelf, moving slowly along as he reads the titles. No clue what criteria he's got in mind for picking out books that might help us. *Native Trees of New Mexico* or some shit, I guess.

But it's his tattoos that stand out.

He's wearing a plain white t-shirt, and his black tattoos are moving again. Doing that eerily beautiful shifting thing I've seen a couple times already.

Frost's tattoos seem... restless. They move more than Kian's or Malix's, and I wonder why. He reaches up to pull a book off one of the higher shelves, and there's a ripple effect down his arm.

I put down the journal full of Erik's chicken scratch and ask, "Are your tattoos made of shadows?"

His shoulders tense. He glances over his shoulder at me, the book open in his palm.

I think he's not going to answer. He usually doesn't, being the strong silent type. So I speak again.

"The shadows that attacked us," I say softly. "Like the one the night you came into my motel room. Are you one of them? Is that kind of... I don't know, magic? Is that what you have inside you?"

I brought up the night in my motel room for a reason. I still have no idea why he came to see me, but I do know both Kian and Malix argued with him not to. Maybe he just wanted to see the woman fated to be his mate, maybe he was curious. Hell, maybe he wanted to kill me. I don't know.

But I think it was the right call to bring that night back to his mind.

Frost's hard expression falls away. His eyes soften, such a brilliant sapphire that they glow like spotlights in the light from the dim overhead bulb.

He turns back to the shelf and shoves the book into the empty space. "I'm... not certain. We are the first of our kind. But it is a probability."

I turn in my seat to give him my full attention. "How so?"

He lets his hand rest on the shelf overhead, his gaze on the books instead of me. "My brothers and I were created from shadow. We are the only corporal beings on earth made with that magic. So while we aren't shadows, we're... related. In that we carry that magic inside us."

"*Made*" with that magic. That's not the choice of word I expected when I ventured down this path. I open my mouth, ready to ask him what he means by "made," but I stop before I utter a sound.

These men—all of them, even Malix who never shuts up—are hard to get straight answers out of. If I want Frost to keep talking, to give me *something* to work with, I have to navigate this discussion carefully. Keep him talking. Keep him engaged.

"Why do your tattoos move so much?"

Frost's hand falls away from the shelf, and he turns it over, palm up, to stare down at the black markings roaming the smooth skin of his forearm.

“It’s always been that way for me. Since I was a child. The magic gets... restless.”

“So it’s separate from you? The way shifter magic is separate and has its own thoughts and desires?”

He finally turns and looks at me. I think, for the first time, I’m seeing him at ease. His brothers aren’t around to keep him from talking to me. His eyes are bright, interested. His stony walls seem to have come down, or at least lowered a bit.

It’s just the two of us and my twenty questions.

“Yes,” he says after mulling over my words. “The magic is a separate being, but part of us nonetheless. Like the wolf. When we’re far from the shadow realm, the magic aches.”

The shadow realm. This isn’t the first time they’ve mentioned such a place. I don’t know quite what it is, but even hearing the words makes snippets of the vision I got from Gwen flash in my mind’s eye. “Why does it ache?”

He shrugs, his blue gaze roaming the library, looking everywhere but at me. “Because we belong in the shadows, I suppose. The shadow magic hurts, like fire beneath our skin. Constant, unending agony. But if we get close to the shadow realm... it stops. We can breathe.” His gaze lifts to meet mine. “That’s why we want to bring the shadow realm to earth. To stop the pain.”

I can see the brutal honesty on his face. Frost’s walls are gone, and his emotions are fully exposed. He’s not lying to me. He’s baring the single biggest secret he has.

And it’s a horrific one.

I try to imagine if my wolf was restless and achy inside me. And not in the normal way, where I get itchy and need to blow off some steam with a run or a fuck, or the way she howls for Kian, Malix, and Frost, a low level hum inside me every moment I’m with them. Those things don’t hurt. Not physically.

Their bodies are at war. The shifter side and the shadow side.

Goddamn.

On the heels of my horror comes the pity.

What a shitty way to live.

I stand, smoothing my sweaty palms over my jeans. “I’m... I need to use the bathroom.”

“Down the hall and left,” Frost offers, then chooses another shelf and gets

back to work.

I ignore his directions and go downstairs, needing space from him. From all of them.

Someone wedged the front door back into place, though there's a giant split in the middle from where Kian damn near tore it in half. I stop in the darkness beyond the foyer and wrap my arms around my middle, breathing through the turmoil inside me. A few feet away, Kian and Malix talk in the living room, discussing things they find as they work. Malix says something, and Kian laughs, and the sound is so real. So rich, like the burst of caramel inside a molten chocolate candy.

I don't want to feel sorry for these men.

I don't want to feel *anything* for them.

I fought tooth and nail to overcome what Kian did to me all those years ago. It took every bit of willpower I had to compartmentalize my emotions, the mate bond, the affection I felt for him in just that one night. When I shoved it all away, I was left with emptiness. More emptiness than I'd ever felt before. And I clung to that void inside me because it fueled my rage and kept all those warm fuzzies away.

Until I got dragged into this mess. Their world.

Malix's humor. Frost's honesty. Kian's loyalty to his brothers.

I can't see them as people. I can't see their goodness because it erases the void. As long as I only see them as monsters, I can survive this and do the job I came here to do.

Suddenly, from inside the bright living room, Malix crows.

I rush around the corner, thinking he's found exactly what we need. Maybe Erik lied to us, and he had a whole jar of Tree of Life sap waiting in his cupboards.

But no.

Malix stands near the cabinets filled with Erik's supplies, a big grin on his face and a bottle held aloft.

Not the ingredient we need.

Whiskey.

I roll my eyes.

These assholes will be the death of me.

CHAPTER 17

AN HOUR LATER, we're no closer to answers regarding the Tree of Life, but we're about halfway through the bottle of whiskey. We're sprawled out on Erik's couches, exhausted and frustrated at not having found any hints about where to find the damned Tree of Life.

The whiskey helps though, I gotta say. So do the bags of chips and pretzels Malix rustled up from somewhere in the kitchen.

"Weirdo had decent taste in liquor," he observes, rotating the bottle so Kian can see the label.

I lean over to catch a glimpse, since the bottle isn't one I'm familiar with. "Tullamore Dew?"

Malix nods and tosses back a chug straight from the glass rim. He smacks his lips, then lets out a satisfied noise. "Damn. That's the good kind of burn."

Frost—who's taken the cushion beside me on the couch—holds his hand out for the bottle. "Tullamore Dew is a top-shelf Irish whiskey. First introduced in eighteen twenty-nine. Forty percent alcohol."

Kian intercepts the bottle before it reaches Frost, then throws back a shot.

"Thank you, Rainman," Malix says, swiping the bottle back from Kian. He hands it off to the original intended recipient as he adds, "A hundred fifty a pop for this guy."

"I doubt the little asshole paid for that," Kian says. He's brooding. More so than usual.

Frost toasts him with the bottle. "Maybe instead, he received the bottle as payment."

"Oh, like *I* was payment," I say wryly, reaching into the chip bag on the coffee table. Frost hands the bottle back to Malix with an agreeable tilt of his

head. The action brushes his soft, silken white-blond hair over his shoulders, and my fingers twitch to run through the locks.

Stop. No.

Malix grins, brandishing the bottle in my direction. “Come on, kitty cat. Take another shot. Grow some balls.”

I swipe the bottle from his fingers with a snarl. “I’ve got bigger balls than you, puppy dog.”

Kian and Frost laugh, and Malix sucks in a breath in over-exaggerated mock surprise, falling backward against the couch cushions as he claps a hand to his chest.

I take a tentative sip, and the liquor burns so good. It’s smooth. A little spicy, a little lemony, a little buttery, with that sweet smoky undertone that makes me think of Kian. I haven’t touched whiskey since I met him—it’s funny that I’m popping my Never Again cherry sitting on a couch across from him.

Funny, or absolutely devastating.

Malix leans back against the cushions and tosses his arm around the headrest behind Kian. “Guess we aren’t going back to the hotel.”

I laugh. “Not unless we want to pay for damages.”

Kian takes the bottle from Frost and motions toward the door. “We drew a lot of attention out there. Our best bet is to lie low tonight, then head out at first light.”

I hold out my hand for the bottle. “We don’t even know where we’re going.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Kian says, a low growl in his voice. He pointedly hands the bottle to Malix, even as my hand keeps hanging in the air over the coffee table.

Gritting my teeth before I leap across the table and throttle him, I shove my hand in the pretzel bag and grab a few.

“There’s another witch just across the border,” Frost says. “We could be there by early afternoon tomorrow.”

“No,” Kian barks. “No more witches. And definitely no border crossing. We don’t need the government knowing our location because we went through border patrol.”

I take the bottle from Frost for my third drink, raising my eyebrow at Kian. “In trouble with the FBI or something?” I accuse, then toss back a long, long slug of liquor.

As I gasp and pass off the bottle yet again, Kian glares at me. “No. Invisible to the government, and I’d prefer to remain so.”

A steady, delightful burn has settled into my chest. I pop another pretzel in my mouth, the hard, salty bite crunching between my teeth as Malix suggests we ask around town about the Tree of Life. Kian shoots that down too, but I’m not really listening.

This feeling—this heat fanning out from my diaphragm and into my limbs, making my face hot and my toes tingle—it reminds me of the night I met Kian. I’m a casual drinker, with the metabolism of a wolf shifter, so alcohol doesn’t affect me as much as the average human. Not usually. But that night, I had a few, and I got drunk on gin and Kian. It was such a pleasant burn. The kind of feeling that makes a girl feel invincible. A little bit tipsy, a little bit daring.

A little bit about to ruin your life.

Frost tries to hand the bottle back to me, but I wave him away. The last time I got drunk, I gave myself heart and soul to the one man I never should have. Maybe it’s the poison racing through my veins as we speak, but the alcohol is hitting me way too hard.

I can’t relax. I can’t let go.

Bad things happen when I let go.

Frost’s murmuring something about possible magical trees in the desert when I cut him off and say, “Have you ever fought shadows before? Like the ones we fought at the hotel?”

All three men share a glance, communicating without words in that strange way they often seem to use.

Kian snatches the bottle away from Malix. Before he presses the rim to his lips, he says, “No. The shadows are new.”

Malix shrugs. “Felicity must’ve learned to control them to use against us. She can’t keep that shit up though. She isn’t strong enough.”

I sigh. “Again, could anyone tell me who Felicity is?”

Kian gives me a narrow-eyed look, and I think he isn’t going to respond. Until he does. “Felicity is our alpha’s mate.”

Shock tingles up my spine. My alpha’s mate is Sable, and I just can’t... she’d never hurt her own people. I grab the bottle from Frost and take another sip. Smaller, this time, just to calm my nerves.

“What the hell?” I say out loud, keeping my thoughts to myself. “Why would your alpha’s mate send shadows to attack you?”

Malix leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. The easy smile he often wears fades away, and there's a hard note in his voice when he speaks. "Felicity doesn't think we should exist."

It's pretty clear from the stormy expressions on all their faces that there's a history there with Felicity, and a lot of bad blood.

It's not like I care. Because I don't. Felicity's right—they *shouldn't* exist. They're the three horsemen of the apocalypse, and I'm here drinking this ridiculously expensive whiskey with them because my goal is to rid the world of them.

But still... despite myself, I can't stop being curious about them. My life was sheltered before I left Montana, and even in the ensuing years after, it's been nothing more than boring and monotonous. They've got powers I've never seen before, and secrets I want to pry open with a crowbar.

It's recon, I tell myself. Soon enough, the antidote will be complete, Frost and I will drink it, and then I'll use whatever intel I manage to get now against them.

Easy peasy.

"Why doesn't Felicity think you should exist?" I ask.

Kian shakes his head. "None of your business."

"Fine. Whatever," I snap, falling back against the cushion. Trust this fucking asshole to put a damper on my subtle attempts at interrogation.

Malix grabs a handful of chips, then looks at me. "What about you, kitty? You're from Montana. What brought you all the way to New Mexico?"

"You," I tell him with a wolfish, vicious grin.

Malix raises an eyebrow. "Me? Or us?"

"I've been tracking all of you for the better part of two and a half years, give or take."

Frost straightens, his pale brows rising toward his hairline, while Malix and Kian exchange unreadable glances. Not surprise, not really—but definitely a reaction of some kind.

Fuck. I've been chasing after them for so long, I sometimes forget that it's kind of weird for me to have devoted my whole life to this.

When Malix offers me the bottle again... I accept it.

My emotions are too raw, and I'm feeling too damn unsettled. I need to take the edge off. Maybe drinking whiskey isn't the best way to do that, but I can't really see a better option at the moment.

We talk some more as we keep drinking. Nothing too personal. Kian

clings to his secrets like a spider to his web, and I don't press. No use pissing him off and ruining any future chance of finding out what he's hiding. But we discuss places we've seen, figuring out how close I came to finding them multiple times over the years—which makes me feel good. I thought I was the world's worst tracker. Turns out, they were just always one step ahead of me.

When the Tullamore Dew is gone, Kian shatters the bottle on the ground, and Malix finds another bottle stashed in the cabinets. A lesser whiskey that tastes more like rubbing alcohol and cigarette ash. We talk about music and a mutual love of *Written by Wolves*, which Malix insists *isn't* ironic. Then we shift topic to movies, and I'm not really surprised to learn Frost loves documentaries and Malix likes action flicks. Kian's too busy brooding to bother giving his two cents.

By the end of the second bottle, I'm drunk. Not just tipsy. Not just woozy.

Drunk.

Maybe more so than I've ever been before.

"I think..." I say, rolling over the thick syllables on my numb tongue, "it's time for bad. Bed. Not bad. Ha! Bad. What does that even mean? Mean. Fuck."

I look over at Frost for help, and the sudden movement of my head sends me in a slow freefall. He catches me before I end up in his lap, and across the coffee table, Malix bursts into half-drunk laughter.

"You can't hold your alcohol, kitten," he says. I'm thankful his words slur a little too. It makes me feel less like a lush.

Kian's gold-ringed gaze looks like a supernova. The sun exploding, revealing the black hole beneath. He stares at me, cold, silent, observant. "Yes, I think we should all get some rest. We have work to do tomorrow."

Malix chuckles. "Right. Tracking down a magic tree."

I snort and toss a potato chip at him. "You make it sound so mundane."

He catches the missile mid-air and throws it back at me. A short chip battle ensues before Kian snatches the bag off the table and out of our reach. He looms over us as we stare up at him like scolded children.

"Upstairs," he bites out. "Now."

Frost helps me to my feet, and I let him, even though my inner voice is screaming at me. *What the hell, Amora?*

The four of us make our way to the stairs. Now that I'm on my feet and

my blood is pumping, I'm a little lightheaded but maybe not as drunk as I thought. More tired, I think. It's been a long day of fighting, running, and driving. This bitch needs some sleep.

Halfway up the dark narrow stairway, Malix says, "Are we going to share a mattress tonight?"

I shoot him a look. "Uh. No? No. Absolutely not."

But it's too late for me to protest. The moment he spoke, I got a visual—me, naked, surrounded by the three of them beneath the sheets. Their breath on my skin, their limbs resting over me. Sleeping beside them, which is the most dangerous and deadly form of vulnerability a person can have.

Desire snakes through me, leaving a path of warmth straight through my core. My body temperature spikes, and my breath hitches in my throat.

All three men stop walking and turn to me.

I'm surrounded. Kian behind me. Malix and Frost ahead of me, one step ahead, two steps ahead, I couldn't tell in the dark. But too close. Way too close. Their scents deepen—sunshine and whiskey, woodsmoke and spice, and it's too much. Way too much.

I've managed to ignore this most of the day. This sexual tension that's always there at a low level, always within reach.

Now it's a boiling, raging storm threatening to crash over us.

I don't know what they want from me. How they feel about this storm of need. They obviously don't want me as a mate, but they're just as attracted to me as I am to them. I can feel it.

I can't deny the heat between us.

It's suffocating.

I back up against the stairway railing, which is as far as I can go to get away from them. Not far, unfortunately, and the combination of their scents is still stifling me.

"This place is huge," I mutter, looking out over the dark foyer so that I don't have to look at them. "There are plenty of places we can sleep without having to share."

Malix grins when I turn back to face them, just a slash of white in the gloom. "We always share."

Oh Jesus.

The double entendre has been noted.

"Well I don't," I say with a shrug, struggling to keep my voice even. "I like my space."

Malix opens his mouth to speak again, but Frost hits him in the arm.

Part of me is dying to know what he was going to say.

Instead, they split off and head down the inky hallway, while I disappear into the first bedroom I find.

I close the door and lean against it, sucking in deep lungfuls of air, hoping that each one is the inhale that will let me stop breathing them in. All three of their distinctive scents still linger in the air, as if they're embedded in my clothes or clinging to my skin.

Dim illumination comes through a window across from the door. It's a modestly sized room with a four post bed, a matching set of armoire and dresser drawers, and a small fireplace tucked beneath a carved marble mantle. More fitting for a rich man's country house than a shack in the desert.

I wander over to the bed and brush my fingers over the maroon and gold coverlet. Dust rises in wisps, and I cough, waving a hand at the clouds. Why did Erik need a house this big? This room obviously hasn't been touched in years.

I cross to the dresser, where an old-fashioned mirror hangs from a carved frame. It's old, covered in dust and speckled by rust between the layers. I swipe a hand across it and stare at myself in shock.

I look... rough. And not because I just drank the equivalent of a gallon of liquor. Maybe it's not even really something physical, because my skin looks fine. My hair is just as thick and long as usual, and my green eyes are clear, albeit a little bloodshot.

It's more something I can't see with my eyes. I see it with my soul.

The poison. Eating me from the inside out.

Between the lingering arousal in my body from the stairwell conversation and seeing this—the effects of the poison on me, the poison that's going to kill me—I need some air.

Downstairs, I bypass the broken door, since there's no way in hell I want to deal with trying to finagle it back into place. The living room window is still open from our impromptu drinking party, so I slip over the window sill and drop to the dirt.

Most of the land around Erik's shack is wide open desert, dotted by sparse shrubs and rocky outcroppings. I don't want to go too far into the wilderness, but about a mile away, I can see a dense, green copse of trees near a natural rock formation that rises from the ground like a small mountain.

The cold air feels good on my skin. I turn my face to the sky and close my eyes as I angle toward the trees. The heat in me fades, and the sick feeling in my stomach over the poison gradually diminishes.

Trees thicken as I close in on the rock formation, and I trail my fingers over smooth, white bark. Not evergreens like in the woods back in Oscura. Something more scrubby, more desert-like. Too bad one of these can't be the Tree of Life.

I circle around the edge of the outcropping as I gaze up at it against the night sky. The craggy rocks look like jagged teeth biting the stars, darker than the sky itself. I'm still staring up at the rocks when I realize I'm not alone.

Malix is leaning against the trunk of a thick tree, his upper body resting against it and his head tipped back a little. His eyes are closed, his feet are planted wide, and his pants hang off his narrow hips as he fists his cock.

My heart jerks, slamming so hard against my ribs that it hurts. I make a startled, strangled noise in my throat, and he opens his eyes, his violet gaze focusing on me.

He doesn't look the least bit embarrassed or even surprised. And he doesn't let go of his cock as he grins at me, his teeth bright against his dark skin.

"Couldn't sleep?" he murmurs, dragging his hand up and down his shaft once more.

I don't answer.

I don't move.

"Yeah. Me neither." He chuckles, and the sound ends in a husky sort of groan that makes my nipples go hard. "I was too fuckin' wound up, you know what I mean?"

He strokes his cock again, and even though I'm trying so fucking hard not to look, my gaze flicks down to watch him swirl his fist over the crown of his dick before sliding down again. The smooth, veiny skin glistens in the moonlight, and I wonder if it's precum or spit or both.

A gush of wetness seeps from me as if my pussy is offering to help. As if it wants to be the thing that slicks his cock.

Fuck.

No, Amora. Fuck.

Malix laughs softly again, speeding his strokes up a little before slowing them down again, like he's teasing himself, trying to draw it out as long as possible. He squeezes the base of his thick cock, and I clench my jaw,

swallowing hard.

“You don’t just have to stand there,” he murmurs, resuming his steady, even strokes as he watches my face. “You can touch yourself too, if you want. Are you wet?”

I don’t answer that question either.

But my little betrayer of a vagina does. She gets even wetter, and my clit throbs angrily, demanding friction, pressure, *something*.

I let out a shaky breath. There’s no way in hell I’ll let Malix see everything he’s doing to me, no way I’ll give in and touch myself like he told me to. But despite that resolve, I can’t quite bring myself to leave either. My feet feel rooted to the ground, and my gaze flicks back and forth between his face and his hand on his cock.

It’s fucking mesmerizing—the slow glide of his fist, the way his dick juts outward from his body, the way his thumb grazes over the crown, spreading more precum over his smooth, dark skin.

My clit throbs again, hard enough to make my breath catch, and I wrench my gaze back up to Malix’s face.

“Fuck, I like watching you, kitty,” he murmurs roughly, his bicep tensing as his hands moves faster. He licks his lips, his eyes glittering in the dim light. “Do you want to know what I’m thinking about? Should I tell you what I’m imagining?”

Yes.

No.

Fuck.

I don’t answer, clenching my jaw so tight that my cheeks ache. My hands curl into fists, and I think it’s because if they don’t, they’ll reach for him. There’s still too much booze in my system, my shifter metabolism unable to process it fast enough, and even without Malix telling me what he’s thinking about, a dozen filthy, illicit images flash through my mind.

My lips stay sealed shut, but it’s like Malix can read my thoughts on my face anyway. He lets out a tortured groan, his hand moving faster as his hips arch forward. The wet noise of skin sliding over skin fills the air, punctuated by the musky smell of arousal and the sharp, staccato sounds of our breaths.

Malix grunts, his upper body coming away from the tree a little as his abs contract. His fist is a flurry on his cock, and he groans deeply as cum erupts from the tip, spilling over his hand and onto the ground. He keeps stroking himself through the orgasm, coating his fingers in his own release, and I stop

breathing. My body feels like it's burning up from the inside out, consumed by desire. By pure, senseless *need*.

With a shuddery breath, Malix straightens, finally releasing his grip on his cock. His fingers are slick and shiny, and the smell of him teases my nostrils.

His pupils are dilated, his chest rising and falling as he tries to catch his breath, but that teasing, taunting smile reappears on his lips as he holds his hand up.

Offering it to me.

My stomach clenches as the basest, wildest part of me reacts to the sight. The she-wolf inside me doesn't care that this man is my enemy—that he could destroy the whole world without regret. All she sees is one of her mates, a man who is *hers*.

She wants to walk over to him, wrap her lips around his fingers, and lap up every drop of cum. Then she wants to drop to her knees and do the same for his cock.

My skin feels like it's on fire, and for a reckless, stupid moment, I sway toward Malix, my weight shifting as I almost take a step closer to him.

Then I jerk to a stop.

Anger at myself morphs into anger at him and back again, and I let my fury give me strength as I turn on my heel and stride quickly back toward the house.

CHAPTER 18

MY HEART'S still hammering in my chest when I heave myself back through the living room window. The angle is awkward, and I manage to slip my upper body over the sash. But I'm still off-kilter, still breathless, still not really in my right mind after what I witnessed. So before I can get a leg over the edge to gracefully climb to the floor, I crash headfirst instead.

I catch myself with my elbows instead of my face, which is better than nothing. Score one for Amora. My legs slide the rest of the way in, and I tumble forward in an approximation of a somersault, landing splayed on the living room floor.

Right at Kian's feet.

He's sitting on a large chair in the dark, a liquor bottle resting on one knee. Somewhere between the time he left me and now, he lost his shirt. Even the darkness can't hide his chiseled torso or the almost metallic ring of gold in his eyes. His dark hair is sticking out everywhere, and the scruff on his face gives him a dark, deadly look that makes me weak.

He looks inhuman. Impossibly beautiful, like a devil that could tempt me to sin in the worst ways.

He arches a brow at me. "Anybody ever tell you you're graceful?"

"Why are you here?" I snarl, embarrassed for him to see me like this. I've tried so hard to make sure he knows I'm strong and capable and not fucking afraid of him, not *ruined* by what he did to me.

Only to fall at his feet like an ungainly pup.

He takes a drink from the bottle, then leans forward, his elbows on his knees and the bottle dangling between his legs. The position puts him entirely too close, hovering over me, in my space. His whiskey and woodsmoke scent

wafts around me. At this point, I don't know if the whiskey is him or the bottle in his hand, but it wounds me anyway.

I remember when I decided I loved the smell of it. Before he abandoned me and made me want to break every bottle of whiskey I ever saw after.

I *hate* these conflicting feelings I have for him. I hate the way just his presence is enough to ratchet my body temperature. The unsettled desire I've been feeling since I left Malix only intensifies.

Kian inhales, long and deep. His nostrils flare, and his pupils dilate. If he wasn't so close to me, I might not have even seen it.

But I know he smells the arousal on me.

"Fuck off," I snap, shoving at his face with one hand.

Kian growls and grabs my wrist, hauling me off the floor as he surges to his feet. The movement brings us closer together, with his face only inches from mine as he stares down at me. I scramble to get my feet beneath me as a mix of fury and desire course through my body.

"Don't push me, Amora. Next time you do, you'll lose the hand," Kian warns, his voice low and husky. There's an undercurrent of something I don't understand in his voice. Something raw.

"Let go of me." I attempt to sound angry, like I'll bite his face off if he doesn't release me, but instead, my voice comes out breathless.

What the fuck is *wrong* with me? These men are nothing but monsters. I'm here to destroy them and save the world. And I just spent the whole fucking night drinking and partying it up with them, then watched Malix jerk himself off in the desert woods, only to come in here and be so dominated by Kian that I'm ready to climb him like a goddamn tree.

I can't find my footing with them. Any of them.

Kian releases me abruptly. I fall backward but manage to catch my balance before I land on my ass, then immediately straighten my spine so that he's no longer looming over me.

Not as *much*, anyway.

"You're a fucking asshole," I snarl at him, planting my hands on my hips.

The anger on his face has been replaced by his usual brooding. He tosses back a swig of liquor. "And you smell like Malix."

"I haven't touched Malix," I snap, irritated. But I was near him. I was only a couple yards away from him when he came, and that scent would leave a trace on the air. A trace that could be on me.

I don't know how much Kian has guessed about what I saw or what I was

doing out there in the dark. But he knows his brother's scent well enough to know Malix was there too. When Ridge's mate ended up forming a mate bond with three other men, it took all four of them time to come to terms with it and to get past the initial jealousy of sharing.

Is that what this is?

A slow, almost cruel grin turns up the corners of my lips. "Are you jealous?"

Kian throws out an arm, hurling the half-full bottle of whiskey against the living room wall. The thick glass explodes violently on impact, and shards rocket back out into the living room, slicing my arms. And his. The sharp, smoky scent of whiskey fills the room, and the silence is absolute.

And I'm... turned on.

I'm bleeding from half a dozen small scratches on my left arm, and I'm an inferno of lust. Kian's chest rises and falls with his breaths, and his presence fills the room, overtaking my senses. His anger is a drug, and stoking that fury gets me fucking high.

"Yeah," I say, keeping my tone cool and even. "That's what I thought."

He doesn't respond. He just stares down at me with those eyes that burn like fire, like he's daring me to say something else. To *do* something else.

But I don't.

I leave the living room on shaky knees, doing my best to hide it. Not that I *can* hide the way Malix made me feel. Or the way Kian makes me feel. My body is a puddle of need as I stalk upstairs and slip back into the dusty bedroom I chose earlier.

Can Kian really be jealous?

The question rolls around and around in my head as I remove my boots and sink down to sit on the edge of the mattress. Dust wafts up around me, and I sigh, standing again to remove the blankets. I lie down atop the mattress cover, which is slightly less dusty. I check on the status of the cuts on my arm—shallow, superficial. Not even bleeding anymore.

It doesn't really matter whether any of the men are jealous of each other. Not really. They're not interested in being my mates, and despite the way my body aches for them, I don't want them as my mates, either.

But... the pull is intoxicating. More intoxicating than all the whiskey in the world.

Malix claimed he couldn't sleep, and now I'm fucking positive I won't be able to either. My body is buzzing, as if there's an electric current beneath my

skin or a thousand bees trapped inside my veins. The small cuts from the broken bottle are healing, but they still sting slightly, and adrenaline churns in my system, mixing with the remnants of the alcohol I drank earlier.

It all combines into a potent cocktail, and rising above it all is a deep, almost painful arousal. My clit pulses, and my pussy feels swollen and empty. I shift my position on the mattress, trying to get comfortable, but it doesn't relieve any of the ache inside me.

Goddammit. I *need* to sleep. I need to *focus*.

I clench my jaw rhythmically as I try to talk myself out of what I know I'm about to do, then I finally give in and let the hand that's resting on my stomach slide lower. The space between my legs is wet and hot, and when I press two fingertips lightly against my clit, the sensation is so powerful that my back bows off the bed.

Fuck.

I haven't let myself do this since Kian left me all those years ago. I mean, I've touched myself plenty of times—a girl's gotta pass the time in lonely hotel rooms somehow—but I haven't let myself think of him while I do it.

Now that he's back in my life, though, now that he's in my space every day along with my other two mates, I can't fucking take it anymore. If I don't let myself have this one little moment of release, if I don't take the edge off, there's a chance I'll break down and do something incredibly stupid. Something that will endanger my entire mission, risk my heart all over again, and complicate this already messy situation even more.

So really, touching myself while I think about my mates is the lesser of two evils. It's a hell of a lot better than touching any of them.

My fingers move over my clit as I let my imagination run wild, going to all the places I've refused to let it venture since Kian, Malix, and Frost crashed into my life. I imagine doing what the reckless and untamed part of me wanted to do back there by the tree—striding up to Malix and putting my mouth on his cock, lapping up his release and stroking him until he's fully hard again.

I imagine the taste and feel of him in my mouth, the sounds he would make, the way his fingers would tangle in my hair.

And then, because I'm too lost in my imagination to hold anything back, I add Kian to the picture. In my mind's eye, he strides up and discovers us, finding me on my knees in front of his friend. He growls, the sound more wolf than man, as he yanks me to my feet and spins me around.

Just like he did downstairs, he towers over me, anger filling his eyes. Except in my imagination, there's *need* there too.

His lips crash against mine, devouring me and worshipping me and punishing me all at once. I wrap my arms around Kian and arch against him, kissing him back until Malix yanks me out of his friend's grip and spins me to face him again.

A wicked smile curves Malix's lips, such a startling contrast to the hard, angry line of Kian's mouth. But when Malix kisses me, it's no less fierce than the way Kian did.

I keep working my clit as the fingers of my other hand slide lower, plunging into my pussy. My legs are shaking, my toes curling, my breath coming in choppy gasps as the scene plays out so vividly behind my closed eyelids that it almost feels real.

Kian and Malix share me, passing me roughly back and forth, and even while I'm kissing one of them, the other man makes certain I can't forget him. Hands are everywhere on me, squeezing my breasts, pinching my nipples, sliding under my clothes to tear them off.

When they have me entirely naked between them, Frost appears.

As he did in my dream, he stands a little to one side, watching with an expression I can't read. But just like in my dream, I swear I can feel a world of emotions just beneath the blank, unreadable mask he wears. His blue eyes, which lighten to a color almost like silver near his irises, focus on us intently as Malix lifts me into his arms and thrusts up into me.

I wrap my legs around Malix's waist, moaning at the sudden intrusion, and then Kian's fingers find my ass. Like that first night in the hotel room, he doesn't give warning or ask permission.

He just takes.

Takes what's his.

His fingers delve into my tight hole as Malix fucks me, and as the pleasure inside me starts to build into a torrent so wild I don't know if I can contain it, he slides them out and replaces them with his cock.

The stretch steals my breath, and my head drops back as I feel his cock fight for space inside me. Malix is still fucking me, grunting with every thrust, and when Kian bottoms out, I'm so desperately *full* that I feel like I'm on fire.

Frost is still watching us, still so separate and inscrutable, and in my mind, I beg him to come closer—to join us.

He takes several steps toward us, and although he doesn't touch me, I watch with greedy eyes as he shoves his pants down and grips his cock. He strokes himself, his gaze locked on me, and as his fist moves up and down his shaft, his entire face transforms. Pleasure blooms across his features, heat and adoration burning in his eyes...

...and that's what pushes me over the edge.

Lost in all three of them, I come hard. My imagination floods my mind with filthy images as my hips jerk and my clit throbs. I keep rubbing my clit, dragging the first orgasm out into a second, and then a third, as if I'm trying to wring my body out. To purge myself of every fantasy I've ever had about these men.

When the last tremors of pleasure finally wash through me, I unclamp my teeth from around my sore bottom lip. I managed to keep myself from crying out, but I'm not sure I was entirely silent either. In fact, I'm pretty damn positive I wasn't. If nothing else, my breathing would've given me away if any of the men are close enough to my room to hear it.

I hope like hell they aren't.

My muscles unclench, and I sink into the mattress, drawing my hands away from my throbbing pussy as my heartbeat slowly returns to normal.

The buzzing feeling inside me has faded a bit, and I can feel exhaustion tugging at me, urging me to let go and fall asleep. But despite the fact that I accomplished what I meant to, taking the edge off and allowing myself to relax a little, I know I'm playing a dangerous fucking game.

Because even though I tell myself this will never happen again, my body already craves more.

I DON'T KNOW how long I'm out for, but it doesn't feel like much time at all before something shatters my dreamless sleep.

Crash.

My eyes fly open as my heart jumps.

I'm on my back in the fancy bed, staring at the gold fabric draped over the posts. I blink away the grogginess and try to get control of my senses to figure out what awoke me.

Turning my head, I glance at the window. There's the slightest hint of

early dawn on the horizon, though the sky is still dark.

I pause in the silence, waiting.

Another crash echoes through the house. It shakes the bed, and I jerk upright immediately, grabbing the post near my head. This time, raised voices meet my ears. Not any of my companions.

Unfamiliar voices.

Outside.

I launch off the mattress and race to the window.

Small beams of light bob around the house. At least a dozen of them, spread out as far as I can see. Whatever's out there has come for us.

And I'm pretty fucking sure it isn't shadows this time.

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CHAPTER 19

MY BOOTS POUND down the wooden stairs in time with my heartbeat, laces trailing on the floor from where I didn't bother to tie them. Kian, Frost, and Malix are already in the foyer when I arrive, circled up in conference next to the broken front door.

A strong breeze and the sound of voices raised in anger and alarm drift through the crevice in the wood left from Kian's assault last night.

"It's humans," I say, my heart leaping into my throat. "Just humans."

All I can imagine is these men shifting to their shadow wolf forms and destroying every human life out there. Because that's what I *know* they're capable of.

Malix rolls his shoulders and looks over at me, unamused. "Just humans with guns. They're not here to play cops and robbers with us."

Kian nods his agreement. "Our best guess is they're the humans who witnessed us battling the shadows in the motel parking lot. Humans aren't accustomed to seeing the supernatural, and they're reacting accordingly."

I gape at him. "By coming to kill us?"

Kian just looks at me like I'm an idiot. "What would you do if you didn't understand something that looked like it could eat you?"

"Not fucking engage it," I snap.

"Then you're smarter than the cattle outside."

I glare at him. "They aren't cattle. How'd they know to come *here*?"

Frost answers me. "Erik was not a subtle witch. They've probably suspected him of it for a long time. So when they saw some other shit they couldn't explain tonight, he was probably the first person they thought of."

"Not to mention," Malix adds, "our bikes are just down the road from this

place. Where else are shadow-fighting superheroes gonna be except at the local Merlin's joint?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're not a superhero."

"Speak for yourself, kitty."

The walls shudder again, and I jolt, glancing toward the back of the house. "That came from the back door."

Kian puts a hand against the broken front door. "We secured it. If they want in, they'll have to bust through."

Malix gestures at the living room window. "They're in a pitchfork mob mental space, brother. They're gonna bust in. The question is only a matter of when."

"What do we do?" I ask, shaking out the nervous tingles in my hands. "I'm not going to kill humans."

Kian scoffs. "You will if they try to kill you."

I snatch at the front of his shirt and clench my fists in the fabric, going up on my tiptoes to stare him in the eye. "They're *scared*. We are *not* going to kill them."

"You're a pain in my ass, Amora." He grabs my wrists, and his fingers dig into my bones painfully, but I don't release him.

"Likewise," I snap, even as the sound of my name on his lips sends a flood of warmth through my chest. "Kill a human, and I'll kill you. Got it?"

Kian tightens his fingers even more, cutting off my circulation. "I dare you."

Frost takes a single step, sliding his leg between us like a mountaineer trying to get through a too-thin crevice. As his muscular torso passes between us, I let go of Kian's shirt and step away before he can touch me.

Frost nods, seemingly satisfied that he's broken up the imminent fight, then glances at Kian over his shoulder. "We'll shift to shadow form. That alone should scare away some of them. Then we work from there."

Kian doesn't reply except to strip off his shirt and reach for his pants, his gaze leveled on me and still full of venom. And a little something else, maybe.

Something like... respect?

Nah. Can't be.

Frost and Malix follow suit, shucking off their clothes for the shift. Then black smoky magic swirls around them, and they begin to morph. Those long, creepy limbs lengthening, their bulk growing substantially larger until I have

to back away to give them more room in the suddenly too-small space. Their snouts elongate and fill with razor-sharp teeth, while their eyes begin to glow like blue flames in their dark visages.

I kick off my boots and start undressing myself as Kian slams through the broken front door, shattering it to pieces. All three shadow wolves race into the yard to the sound of terrifying screams.

Shit.

I swear to fuck, if they kill those people, there will be hell to pay.

Leaving my clothes in a pile on the floor, I shift quickly, then bound out the door, trying to formulate some kind of logical plan in my head. Luckily, half a dozen flashlight carrying humans are fleeing the scene as I exit the house. So at least Frost's plan has a little merit.

A gunshot cracks nearby, and I fall to the ground in a roll as I sense the bullet on the air. It whizzes past over my head, then hits the dirt a few feet away in a geyser of rocks and sand. My heart leaps into my throat at how close I came to tasting a damn bullet.

The gunman is to my right, and when I leap to my feet and race for him, he stumbles back, frightened of me. He remembers he's holding a gun too late—I leap for him, my teeth latching onto the sour metal barrel. He pulls the trigger, and the blast makes me feel like I've been punched in the teeth. My teeth and brain rattle around in my head. Rattled or not though, I rip the gun from his hands and toss it away, then I leap up and headbutt him.

Hard.

His entire body stiffens, and he keels over backward. Out cold before he hits the ground.

Not dead though, which is my goal. These aren't trained fighters. They're men—*scared* men, and that's a pretty terrifying creature all on its own. But I don't want their deaths on my conscience.

Good thing my wolf head is big and thick like a fucking battering ram.

I leap over the unconscious man and run for the next silhouette on the lawn. His flashlight dances across my line of sight, nearly blinding me, but I duck away into the darkness just as his gun cracks. The bullet slams into the ground way wide, and I circle back around, my claws skittering on the dry dirt.

I slam into his side before he realizes I'm coming. This time, I don't have to take a blow to the head. He lands on his back beneath my bulk, and his skull bounces like a basketball on the hard ground. The poor man goes limp,

and I nudge his gun away from him, well out of his reach in case he decides to wake up anytime soon.

I take a minute to check on the feral shifters, since I don't trust them not to kill. They have a much darker moral compass than me, and I know their inclination is to fight to kill. The little verbal shoot-out Kian and I had isn't enough to calm my fears.

But nearby, Frost whips his paw across a man's face, knocking him out cold. Not a kill shot, thank god.

I guess paws can do that when you're the size of a goddamn Clydesdale, I think to myself.

Am I bitter? Maybe. I never felt like a small wolf until these assholes showed up with their weird-ass shadow forms.

Kian races past me on a trajectory for another gun-toting silhouette in the dark. His voice sounds in my mind over mind-speak. *Get the potion. We're running.*

I huff at him for bossing me around, but he's already well past me and about to take out one of the two remaining humans. I leave the three of them to handle the remaining attackers, feeling at least ninety percent certain they won't kill them.

Racing back into the house, I shift back to human form and throw my clothes back on. Erik's potion is in a black metal cauldron on top of his altar. I look down into the dark green goo and make a face at the foul odor wafting off the top of it. *And we have to drink this shit? Ew.*

I can't imagine trying to carry a cauldron full of liquid in the trunk of my bike, so I whip open the cabinet next to the altar and grab the first mason jar I see. I dump out the contents onto the floor—something seed-like and hopefully not deadly—then carefully tip the cauldron over the jar. The potion globs into the glass like a moss-colored gallon of chunky sour milk. Once it's secure, I cradle the jar in one hand and grab the guys' clothes and boots on my way out the door.

They converge on me as I leave the house, already back in their human forms.

"Did you kill anyone?" I ask, dropping their boots on the ground and handing Malix his clothes.

Kian rolls his eyes. "They're all breathing."

"Then I can let *you* breathe," I snarl, throwing his clothes at his face.

Malix pops his arms and head through his t-shirt. "I appreciate the fact

you hate each other, but we gotta go, kids. They ain't gonna sleep forever. We need to be long gone when they wake up.”

As they make quick work dressing and stepping into their boots, I find a gun nearby in the grass and check the chamber—only two bullets used, plenty left in the cartridge. I make sure the safety is on and shove it in my waistband.

You just never know when you might need one. Especially with me running around with *these* lunatics.

Potion in hand, we kick off on our bikes at the end of the dirt road, then get the hell out of there.

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CHAPTER 20

BY THE TIME we hit the interstate, dawn is rising over the mountains in the distance and casting the desert in shades of amber and purple. I'm not wearing a watch, though it's not like that's ever stopped me. I can tell it's that purple time of day where late night is bleeding into early morning, and the birdsong answering somewhere in the distance only cements my certainty.

Once we reach empty road, we open the throttle and fly. We make it three miles before I start to breathe easier—five miles before I look in my rearview mirror and assure myself no one followed us. Maybe they were all knocked out or they were just too terrified to chase us when they woke up, I don't know. But they let us go.

Which is what a person *should* do when they're facing a threat they don't understand. Like Kian said, something that could *eat them*. Historically, humans didn't make the best decisions.

I cling to the handlebars with adrenaline still pumping through my veins. As far as I know, we don't have a plan at all beyond the mason jar inside my trunk. I can't really worry about that right now. The important part is to put as much distance between us and the humans as possible.

It sucks that things went down the way they did. Humans aren't meant to see supernaturals. I can't even imagine how terrified they were to see us battling shadows in the motel parking lot. Clearly, it caused a ripple effect of fear that couldn't be stopped. A ripple effect that led a bunch of big ballsy men to track us down with guns.

Most people just aren't ready to know the truth. They were so frightened of us that they put their own lives in danger...

Except, they didn't, did they? As hard as Kian pushed back on my order

not to hurt the humans... none of the feral shifters did. I mean, they didn't exactly take it *easy* on them, but neither did I. We knocked them out, shook off enough of them to have some breathing room, then fled.

So what does it mean that the feral shifters listened to me? What does it mean that they didn't hurt the humans?

Could they have goodness in them? Could they have a conscience?

Could they be reasoned with?

My plan since they pulled me from the forest and tied me up in their bed was to team up with them just long enough to get the antidote. Then I was planning to try to take them down again by whatever means necessary. Earn their trust, then annihilate them using the information I gathered in our time together. Anything it takes to stop the apocalypse.

But what if they're capable of changing?

They aren't exactly forthcoming with details on their life, but from what I've gathered so far from the hints they've spilled, they're under orders from their alpha, who "made" them. Whatever mission they're operating under, it has to do with that alpha and the fact that they're filled with shadow magic.

I think of Frost, looking forlorn in Erik's library as he told me how much the shadows inside him hurt. How the pain that magic causes is enough to make them want to destroy the barrier between the worlds and pull the shadows closer. To ease the agony.

A hawk flies by overhead in the dim light, his wings spread so wide he looks larger than life. I glance up at him and convince myself he's a good omen.

It's a rare thing for me these days, but for just a moment, I allow myself to feel a flicker of hope.

What if there's another way?

Killers don't just stop killing because someone tells them to. Killers will shed blood for the slightest reason and not give a shit who gets hurt in the process. But all three of these men refrained from killing those humans. Even though the townspeople came to Erik's house specifically to take us down.

So... maybe I could help the feral shifters see another path. Help them break away from the mission they've been sent out on by their alpha.

What if I could convince them not to do it? I could show them how fucked up it would be to destroy the world just because their alpha commanded them to. Just to ease their own pain.

Because that's the kicker, isn't it? According to Frost, they want to break

down those barriers and bring the shadow realm to earth so they won't hurt anymore. Except, in doing so, they'll destroy humanity.

Three lives for seven billion?

That math just doesn't make sense.

But still... I don't think they're pure evil. Not like I did before.

I glance at Kian. He's leading us, looking like a hulking mass of muscles on his little Honda bike. It reminds me of his Harley that I so carefully cut to pieces, and how sexy he looked on the seat of that old girl.

I *want* him to be a good man.

I want them all to be.

But wanting something doesn't make it true.

I lean back, turning my face to the sky. I can imagine the heat of daylight just beyond the horizon. The earth is turning ever so slowly, taking us into a new day, and the warmth is just out of sight, just out of reach.

Maybe I can fix this after all.

Just as the thought begins to solidify in my mind, a wave of stark pain lances through me.

I gasp and tighten my fingers on the handlebars, fighting against the sudden agony. It washes over me all at once, a thousand tiny knives digging into my body. Keeping my focus on the road ahead, I let off the gas, but before I can hit the brakes, everything in me goes tense. I lose my grip on the handlebars and double over, completely losing touch with my body.

My vision flashes in and out. I struggle to get my hands back on the bars, but I can't even feel my fingers through the white hot pain burning me from the inside out. The world dips and twists around me. Colors blur, wind blows, everything somersaults around me. For a brilliant moment, I'm weightless.

Then I crash into the pavement at fifty miles an hour.

If the poison pain felt horrible, this pain is unbearable. I skid across the warm asphalt, then roll and roll, my arms useless, flailing. Something snaps in my arm, and another something cracks in my torso. Then everything goes perfectly, absolutely still.

I hover on the edge of unconsciousness. There's nothing but darkness around me, and the distinct feeling that I've detached from my body completely. Tires screech nearby, though I think the sound should be louder. It's like it's coming from the end of a long tunnel that I can't access. Then, the muffled sound of pounding footsteps and raised voices.

"She's got a pulse," someone says faintly. It almost sounds like Kian, but

there's no way he'd ever have that much concern in his voice over me.

"Broken rib," Frost says. "Her arm's injured as well. Possibly a concussion."

Malix snarls. "Yes, thank you, captain obvious. I'm a little more concerned about the total body road rash."

Now I know I'm not imagining the worry in his tone.

I claw my way back to consciousness, even though doing so tugs away the muted, muffled distortion of my senses. All the agony rolls right back over me, and sound returns much louder than it should be.

I blink up at the circle of three faces hovering above me.

"My bike?" I croak.

Kian sits back on his heels with a snarl. "Oh for fuck's sake. Seriously?"

"Is she okay?" I rasp, trying to sit up for a look. My possibly broken rib protests with a dagger-like sharpness against my insides, and I squeak in shock, falling back against the pavement.

Frost leans over me, and his cool, steady palm rests over my forehead. "Amora. Can you hear me?"

I nod wearily.

"Shift."

Maybe it's the possible concussion, or the lingering, lightheaded effect of the poison attacking my body, but I pout. "This is my last pair of jeans."

Kian growls something that I can't hear through my fuzzy-headedness. His fingers go to my waistband, and he undoes the button on my jeans.

I slap his hand away, then roll to my side, clutching my arm to my body and screaming as my wrist protests at the violence. Frost's cool palm vanishes from my skin.

"Do you want us to salvage your pants or not?" Kian roars.

"Not you," I hiss back.

Malix waves him away, then rolls me back onto my back. The movement makes my head swim, and I find myself staring up at a sky growing bluer by the minute. Malix unzips my pants and gently works them off my hips, taking my boots with them. Once he's tossed them aside, Frost's cool palm rests against my forehead again, and his sexy, remote face comes back into view.

"Shift, Amora," he says.

Closing my eyes, I reach for my wolf and let her wash over me.

The pain is agonizing. I feel every inch of my skin that's been mutilated by the concrete. The road rash turns to flames licking my skin as the shift

erupts over my limbs. I swallow back bile as my broken rib pops into place in my wolf torso, and my injured arm protests the magic elongating it. I don't even try to get up—I just let my paws stretch off to the side and pant against the asphalt.

Frost's cool fingers rub gently behind my ears. "Good. Let's give it a minute, then you're going to switch back."

Oh yay, I think to myself, and a little whine comes out of my throat.

"It's going to be okay," he murmurs, and his voice is just so calm, so fucking *steady*, that I believe him. "Now. Shift back."

It's a struggle to focus on the change through the painful assault on my body. But Frost leaves his fingers against my forehead, and I focus on that little pinpoint of cool in a world of fire. My shifter magic races through me, tugging my legs back in, turning paws back to hands and my bent torso into a human one.

When I'm done, I'm lying on my side on the concrete with bits of broken glass, cigarette butts, and rocks beneath my naked body.

Frost's palm slants over the side of my face. "Much better. Let's do it one more time."

By the time he coaxes me through another shift, and then back to human once more, I feel better. The shifter magic healed the worst of the road rash and knitted my broken rib back together. Whatever I'd done to my arm eased up, so now it just feels like a bad sprain.

New fingers touch a particularly raw spot on my outer thigh. Malix probes the semi-healed road rash as he says, "Good thing you aren't human, kitty cat. That crash would have owned you."

I laugh, but it turns into a cough and *everything* in my body starts to hurt. Like a low-level hum that you can only hear but not find the source of.

Frost's hand still rests against my heated face, while Malix continues to check me over. His strong, capable fingers probe my injured arm.

Suddenly, I'm struck by the memory of him in the woods outside Erik's house. His hands on me make me recall the way he was stroking himself, and for a split second, I'm back there in that little copse of trees, mesmerized by the beauty of him.

Even crashing my bike and ripping off acres of my skin can't completely override the pull of my attraction to him. My breath catches in my throat as I stare down at his fingers wrapped around my arm.

Tension builds, like it always seems to. Even Frost's hand goes utterly

still on my face. The air is charged between us, with all the things we've left unsaid, all the things we'll never admit.

Kian's boots scuff over the concrete behind Malix. "Come on. We need to find this tree yesterday, before the poison kills her."

Frost slips his hands below my arms and gently helps me sit up. "We have time."

"Do we?" Kian asks gruffly. "Because I think maybe we were wrong about the timeline."

I lean heavily on Malix's arm as he and Frost maneuver me to my feet. It's not easy, and I ache from the roots of my hair to my fucking toenails, but I'm mobile and I'm alive, so that's good enough for now.

Once I'm vertical, I ask, "What do you mean we were wrong about the timeline?"

Kian catches my eye, his expression giving nothing away. "We may have less time than we thought. The next attack could kill you."

CHAPTER 21

KIAN'S DECLARATION snaps me out of my daze—both the lingering arousal and the fuzziness in my head from the crash. The poison pain has faded again, but that attack did feel stronger and more intense than the first. It didn't last as long, but it felt like I was dying.

That alone makes me fear that Kian may be right.

"Potion isn't going to do us any good if it shattered during the crash," I point out, a sick feeling settling in my stomach.

Kian's brow arches. "Come again?"

"The potion. It was in my trunk. And that was..." I wave a hand, indicating the road and the crash. "That was a big boom."

"Fuck," he growls, then stalks away from us back toward my bike.

While Frost was coaching me through shifting, Kian must have walked down the road and retrieved my Ducati. It sits on the embankment behind their bikes, upright and with a working kickstand, but absolutely savaged by the wreck.

Kian rips open the internal trunk with a bit more force than necessary, then digs around in my things before emerging with an intact mason jar.

Every one of us lets out a sigh of relief. It's a weirdly unifying feeling.

I take a step toward my poor demolished bike and nearly stumble. Malix reaches for me but then holds back at the last second, like he's not sure he should. Helping me when I was torn to pieces and half unconscious must have been an easier sell than helping me now that I'm back on my feet.

I try not to let it bother me... but it does.

Malix's gaze lingers on my face as I find my balance. "You okay?"

I shrug. "One more day above the roses."

Shoving aside all of my conflicting thoughts and feelings, I focus on putting one foot in front of the other and manage to limp over to my bike. Frost follows close behind with my boots and jeans.

I retrieve my backpack from inside the trunk and pick out a clean t-shirt and some cotton shorts. The road rash on my thigh aches like a motherfucker, so while I'm glad Malix helped me save my jeans, I'm sure as shit not putting them back on. Not until I can deal with the fact that they're going to be somewhat holey from here on out.

Once I'm dressed, I carefully shovel the rest of my belongings into the backpack until the trunk is empty, then throw my jeans on top of it all and zip the bag.

I haul the bag onto my shoulder and grimace at my bike. If I could get it to a shop, it'd be fixable, but that's not exactly a possibility at the moment. Finding the Tree of Life and completing this potion is the priority. We have no time for bike repairs.

"Fuck," I seethe under my breath, running my fingers over the seat. I've been riding it since the day I left pack lands, and I've gotten oddly attached to it over the years. "I liked this bike, dammit."

Frost, who's stood silently next to me this whole time, holds out my boots. "You can ride with me."

I nod. "Yeah. Thanks."

I get in one last, long good look at my beloved bike while I shove my feet into my boots, then I limp over to Frost and climb up behind him.

I perch a few inches away from his back and rest my hands lightly on his waist, trying to keep as much air between our bodies as possible. I'm still feeling way too sympathetic toward Frost after our conversation last night, and especially after he just sat and held my head, coaxing me through the worst of the pain from the crash. Of all three of the men, he's the one I most think could be salvaged, and that is a dangerous thing.

We take off down the highway, even though I still have no idea where we're headed. After a while of holding myself too stiffly, I finally stop resisting and slouch against Frost's back. I'm exhausted, and my body aches all over. I can't even put forth the extra energy to pull away from him anymore.

A small part of me doesn't want to bother anyway.

Frost smells good. Warm and spicy, like chai tea on a cold porch while a fire pit roars at my feet. I bury my face in his shirt and cling to his trim

stomach. His muscles are hard and defined beneath his clothes. I fit a little too well against his back, and it scares me.

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of his tattoos moving over his biceps. I lift my head to watch the little lines squiggle, then raise my voice over the wind. “Why haven’t you had any bouts of pain from the poison?”

His voice flies back to me on the rush of the wind. “I have.”

Confused, I say, “But I haven’t seen you get hit like I have. I passed out the first time and wrecked my bike the second.”

Frost shrugs. “I’m always in pain. A little more doesn’t make a difference.”

His words hit me in the chest like a sledgehammer, just like they did when we spoke in the mad witch’s makeshift library. That sick, yawning pit of sympathy opens inside me, and I don’t respond, because I don’t want him to know how much his words affect me. He’s so simple and matter-of-fact about being in pain all the time. Like it doesn’t even faze him.

But the reality fazes me. My heart aches to know what he lives with on a daily basis.

Don’t get soft, Amora, I warn. But the reminder doesn’t have the bite it normally does.

They’ve all shown me a different side of them. In a different light, it almost feels like I can change them.

And that’s an even more dangerous thing.

WE PULL off the interstate in a town slightly larger than the last one. Kian leads us away from the small business strip and into a neighborhood of single-story Spanish-style homes set far apart from one another. It’s a nice area—professionally landscaped, clean kept, sporting slightly more expensive vehicles in the driveway. Kian motions for us to stay behind, then he disappears into the neighborhood for a good twenty minutes.

I doze against Frost’s back on the side of the road. My head feels like it’s three times the proper size, and the road rash on my thigh burns like my bones are on fire. The injury in my arm wasn’t really bothering me until I had to hang on to Frost on the back of his bike, but now that we’ve stopped, it’s almost numb with pain.

Kian finally returns and crooks a finger at us as he circles around the street. Frost turns on the engine and we follow, heading deeper into the neighborhood.

After a few turns, we end up on a cul-de-sac that juts up to a decorative line of trees that separates the houses from the desert. Kian rolls right up into a driveway like he owns the place, and Frost and Malix follow him without comment.

We park at the back of the house next to one of those ridiculous wooden patios that has open beams instead of a damn roof. The kind of dumb rich person purchase that always makes me wonder if they've got brains at all. When I'm on a patio, I'd like to have some actual shade and some actual protection from the elements. How the hell are you supposed to drink a beer in the rain if it's pouring right through the beams?

Frost cuts the engine, then climbs off first and offers me a helping hand.

I ignore it. No use letting the whole touchy-feely thing drag out.

Kian walks up to the back door. It's a verandah door—no deadbolt, just one of those curly handles that can be ripped right off by a shifter. Which is what he does, breaking the handle away from the doorframe, then shoving it open.

"Guy left for work," he says gruffly. "Suit and tie, probably heading for a nine-to-five somewhere. We'll eat, get some rest, then keep moving before he gets home."

I limp into the living room, glancing around at the whitewashed walls and bland decor. Place looks more like a rental property than a home, but what do I know? I collapse onto the tan leather couch and hook my boots off with my toes before I curl up on my side and close my eyes.

A few moments pass as I sink into the cool, comfortable cushions and the darkness behind my eyelids. I listen to the guys move around the house and hope they aren't about to rob this poor guy blind, then realize I don't fucking care. I just want to sleep and feel better.

A rustling sound next to me forces my eyes open a minute later. I blink at a set of turquoise blue eyes set in a fluffy little white face.

A cat.

She sits on the coffee table beside my head, staring at me with her ears perked. Her long white fur is splotched with black, cinnamon, and ginger in the typical calico pattern.

"Uh. Hi," I murmur. "Sorry to intrude."

At the sound of my voice, she instantly begins to purr.

I growl and close my eyes. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, really?”

The purr gets louder, and I feel the cushions shift as her little paws pad toward me. Then the little bitch curls up in the curve of my abdomen. Still purring.

I’m too tired to argue.

“Made a friend, I see,” Kian notes, his deep voice rumbling into my ear.

I open my eyes again, thinking I’d much prefer it to be a second fucking cat than him. He’s settling on the edge of the coffee table with a clear plastic box marked by the first aid symbol.

“Yup. We’re besties now,” I mutter. “Don’t tell Malix. I’ll never live it down.”

“Too late,” he grunts, cocking a thumb over his shoulder.

I shift my head to look up at the doorway. The man in question stands leaning against the doorframe, a giant Cheshire cat grin on his face.

“Oh, fuck off, puppy,” I snarl and close my eyes again.

The cat purrs louder.

God fucking dammit. Why is this my life?

Warmth closes in on my thigh, and the loose leg of my cotton short shifts upward. My head snaps up as I shoot my good arm out and latch on to Kian’s wrist. The cat doesn’t even flinch.

“What are you doing?” I snap.

“I’m going to clean the dirt out of your wounds. Unless you want gangrene.”

I ignore the fact that he’s pointedly throwing my own argument back into my face. I argued that I needed to clean his wound after Erik sliced him up like a loaf of bread.

“I’m tougher than I look,” I tell him with a snort. “You act like I *didn’t* grow up eating dirt and wrestling in poison ivy like a good little pack wolf.”

Kian makes a sound that could almost be a laugh.

Almost.

The sound tugs at something deep inside me, as if someone plucked a string in my heart. It reverberates through my chest, soothing and aching at the same time. Clearing my throat, I release his hand and wave him on.

“Fine. Do whatever you want. Just don’t take too long.”

With those words, I give in to my exhaustion again, closing my eyes and sinking back against the couch pillow. The cat continues to purr like she’s

harboring a freaking twin turbo under the hood.

Kian sets to work on my leg, his movements brusque and businesslike. He uses alcohol to clean it out, then gauze to lightly scrape leftover rocks and debris away. I'm tense under his touch, and the cleaning hurts like hell if I focus on it too much, but having him care for me feels good.

Even though I don't want it to.

That makes me think about how things might have been different all those years ago. If he wasn't who he was, if we'd accepted the mate bond and started a life together. Maybe he would have cared for me like this through the battle with the witches.

"When we met," I murmur, my eyes still closed, "were you already on the same mission for your alpha as you are now?"

There's a pregnant pause, then he answers. "Yes."

"But you were alone in Montana."

"I was," Kian agrees, and cold alcohol flows over my road rash again. I suck in a breath, and the cat's claws sink into my side like she's holding me in place. "Our alpha sent us on solo missions at first. Then Frost found a place where the barrier between Earth and the shadow realm is weak. He tried to breach it himself, and shit went south fast. He almost died, and the barrier held firm. That's when we were instructed to stay together. To keep each other safe and work together if we ever find a thin enough part of the veil to break through."

His hands disappear from my thigh, and a moment later, a wet cotton ball swipes over my jawline.

I open my eyes, and my heart skips a beat at his nearness.

He's leaning over my head, his knees pressed against the cushions because of how big he is. Something stings on my face as he cleans it. I probably look like a fucking wreck.

"You have an alpha," I mutter, mostly to distract myself from the overwhelming feel of his presence so close to me. "That means you have a pack, right?"

Kian's lips tighten, and he drops the bloodied, dirty cotton ball onto the table, then reaches for a tube of ointment. "No. Not really."

As he swipes the ointment on my skin, I consider what I know about these three men. They hunt like pack wolves, but they're not really. They're nothing like the men I grew up with back home, and it's not just because of their shadow forms or the magical tattoos. They're exactly what Gwen told

me they are—feral shifters. Set apart from the rest. Isolated.

“They’re all you have,” I murmur, staring at Kian’s face. “Malix and Frost.”

His hand is nearly cupping my cheek as he tends the scratch on my jaw. We’re only inches apart, and for once, we’re not trying to bite each other’s heads off. He tilts his head toward me a little, and it reminds me so much of the way he rested his forehead against mine that night in his hotel room that I unconsciously mirror the movement.

But before our faces can touch, his expression hardens. He grabs the first aid kit and stands, looking down on me with that stony look I’ve come to hate so much.

“They’re all I *need*,” he says shortly.

Then he walks away, leaving me with this fucking purring cat.

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CHAPTER 22

I WAKE up several hours later, groggy and disoriented from a daytime nap in a strange place.

Sometime while I slept, the cat disappeared, and I must have looked cold because someone tossed a soft white blanket over me. I stretch beneath the cloud-like fabric, testing out all the aches and pains I fell asleep with. I'm sore—and probably will be for a few days—but I'm able to function.

Not a bad thing, considering that if I were human, I'd probably be bound for the hospital. Possibly in a body bag.

I swing my legs off the couch and rub the sleep from my eyes. By the look of the sunlight outside the bank of windows behind the couch, it's early afternoon. There's no immediate sign that my companions are around, and I have a brief moment of fear that they've left me. That they've set me up to lie here and sleep until the homeowner returns and catches me.

But when I focus on listening to the quiet house, I hear low voices filtering into the room from down the hall. Shoving aside the blankets, I stand and get my bearings, then head for the source of the noise.

Kian, Malix, and Frost are sitting around a modern glass and tile table in the kitchen. Kian's got his boots up on the tabletop, while Frost is sitting backward in his chair, leaning wearily on the seatback. I wonder if he's feeling the effects of the poison, because I'm not used to seeing him look so tired. The table's covered in what has to be literally every edible food in the house, as well as an opened case of beers. And the calico cat is on Malix's lap as he slouches in his seat.

I raise my eyebrow at him and slide into the only empty chair. "I see you've just made yourselves at home."

Malix scoffs. “Look at this place. Dude can afford to feed and water us. Have a beer.”

He leans over and shoves the case my way. The calico readjusts on his lap and lies back down, undeterred. I haven’t had much experience around cats, but this one seems oddly comfortable with strangers in her house. Especially considering she can most likely sense our wolves inside us. A lot of animals have a better instinct for those kinds of things than humans do.

I grab a beer, pleased to find it’s at least cold, then pop the tab and study the spread in front of me. Bread, lunch meat, cheese, five different chip bags, hot dogs, mustard, a plate of crinkle fries. I help myself to a couple slices of bread, some bologna, and the mustard. “Did you guys leave any food for the actual homeowner?”

Malix smiles wolfishly. “He’ll just think he’s going crazy when half the bread loaf is gone and he’s sure he *just* bought it.”

I dump some mustard on the bread as I say, “I just hope he’s got a full day at work so we can be long gone before he gets back. It’d be nice if we could steer clear of humans for a while.”

“Not an option,” Kian says gruffly. He’s got his arms crossed over his chest, and he looks right at home in this stranger’s house. It makes me wonder how often the three of them case a place and then use it while the owner’s away at work.

Honestly, it’s brilliant. Even staying in seedy motels that could be paid for by the hour, I’ve dropped a good chunk of change on a place to sleep in the last few years. They’ve probably been spending their nights in much nicer places than I have, and doing it for free.

Frost reaches for a hot dog as he says, “Kian’s right. Questioning humans is our only recourse. Otherwise, we may never find the Tree of Life.”

I arch a brow at him. “You think *humans* are going to know where it is?”

He wraps a slice of white bread around the hotdog, then smashes the bread in a seamless circle around the meat. “No. However, I believe someone will know something.”

Malix agrees. “Won’t know until we start asking around, huh?”

I watch Frost finish his poor man’s pig in a blanket, and it brings back a flood of memories of my childhood with Ridge’s family. Pack life isn’t fancy or expensive. We lived in the middle of nowhere, growing or hunting our own food and cutting corners anywhere we could. Ridge’s mom used to roll pieces of white bread like she was rolling out pastry dough, then wrap the

thin slices around hot dogs before frying it in her cast-iron skillet.

Comfort food. The kind that tugs on heartstrings with the weight of the memories.

Frost finishes smoothing his bread around the dog, then dips it in a pile of ketchup on his plate. He's either unaware I'm watching him, or he doesn't care.

I take a bite of my sandwich, chew, and then swallow before I ask, "What if word has reached this town about what happened back at Erik's?"

"Doubtful," Kian says, snatching another handful of chips from the bag. "This is the desert. These towns don't talk to each other. It's everybody for themselves."

"I know what that's like," I mutter into my sandwich. "So what's the plan, then?"

Frost dips his hot dog again. "We will find random pedestrians in town and inquire about the Tree of Life."

I laugh. "Just walk up to some rando redneck and say, *hey, what can you tell me about a magical tree?*"

Kian lifts his head and levels an irritated glare at me. "You got a better idea?"

"You know I don't," I shoot back.

He bares his teeth at me. "That's what I thought."

And just like that, the little bit of warmth I had for him after he tended my wounds fades.

Fucker.

JUST BEFORE THREE, we help ourselves to some supplies from the house, then head out to get started on the questioning.

It's not my favorite plan, but like Kian so eloquently pointed out, it's our *only* plan.

There isn't much to the downtown area. It's a larger place than the nowhere-ville that Erik lived in, but it's not as big as Oscura. We park our bikes in a small grocery store parking lot then take off on foot, but it becomes clear pretty fast that there isn't a lot of foot traffic on the sidewalks.

"If all else fails," Kian says, "we could go into some of the shops."

Frost holds up a hand, shaking his head “Cameras. We’d get caught on record.”

Kian rolls his eyes. “You think any place in this podunk town has security cameras?”

Malix slides sideways between them. “How about before we crash the stores and brave the cameras, we try that guy over there?” He points out a figure walking down the sidewalk across the street.

Kian moves to step off the sidewalk, but I slap the back of my hand to his barrel chest. “Nope,” I say. “You stay here. You look like you want to kick his ass. We want him to talk, not run like a little girl.”

I hop off the curb and look both ways before jogging across the two lane road to follow after the man.

“Hi! Excuse me?” I say, using my best ditzy midwestern girl accent.

The man turns, his eyes pinched in irritation, but the moment his gaze lands on me, a smile lights up his face. Not a genuine one, since it doesn’t reach his eyes. Just an acknowledgement that at least the girl who’s bothering him is hot.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you,” I say as I stop in front of him. I wind my finger in my dark hair and smile shyly. “It’s just... I’m lost, you see? I’m hoping you might know where I can find the Tree of Life.”

He laughs. “You’re kidding. This is a joke, right?”

I shake my head and do my best to look confused. “No? I’m supposed to meet an old friend there.”

The guy shakes his head, his grin widening. “Come on. A pretty girl like you shouldn’t believe in shit like that. You sound like Crazy Harry.”

I don’t like the way he calls me “a pretty girl,” in a dismissive tone that tells me that’s *all* he thinks of me as. But getting pissy with him over the tone of his voice won’t get me answers.

I widen my vapid smile and throw a little hip pop in. “Who’s Crazy Harry?”

“Just some local weirdo,” he says with a shrug. “He’s always going on about crazy shit like magic. Standing outside the general store with a sign about the end of days or some shit.”

“Does he live nearby?”

The man steps closer to me, giving me what I figure he thinks is a sexy look. “Oh no, baby. You don’t wanna go anywhere near that psycho.” He reaches up and touches my arm. “But you should let me take you to dinner

tonight.”

“Oh, that’s real sweet,” I say, my voice as syrupy as possible. I’m paging through my brain archives, trying to find the right words to let him down easy, since he seems like the type to get offended the moment I say no. Especially since he’s hitting on a girl in an oversized t-shirt, cotton shorts that hang to her knees, and who’s covered in bruises and scratches.

He’s clearly not picky.

Before I can speak again, he moves a little bit closer and lowers his voice. “Are you aware there are three men watching you?”

I glance across the street where I left the feral shifters. They’re all facing us, arms crossed, expressions dead serious.

Jesus, have they never heard of lying low?

I giggle and hate the sound as soon as I make it. “Oh those are just my friends.”

His dark brow rises toward his hairline. “Is one of ’em your boyfriend?”

That familiar pain pierces my chest—the pain of knowing that all three of them should be my mates, but aren’t. I keep my carefree expression painted in place and say, “Oh no, just friends. We’re traveling together. Looking to meet up with our other friend at that tree I mentioned.”

The guy laughs again, and he gets friendlier with his hand, letting his palm rest on my shoulder as he leans in to speak. “Baby, that tree isn’t real. Someone’s pulling your leg.”

“I’m sure it—”

“Listen, let me buy you dinner,” he says, cutting me off as if I haven’t said a word at all. “We can talk more about it over drinks.”

“That’s real nice of you,” I murmur, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

“That’s because I’m nice.” He slides his palm up over my shoulder and around me, starting to ease me down the sidewalk. “You’ll like the pub. Great food, cheap drinks.”

Jesus. This guy definitely doesn’t know when to stop. If I weren’t trying to get information out of him, I would’ve planted my fist in his face the first time he put a hand on me.

I’m two seconds away from saying “fuck it” and laying him flat on his ass with a well-placed boot when his arm tenses around my shoulders.

I glance up to realize that all three shifters have come to join us on the sidewalk. They’ve fanned out around us, surrounding me and the overbearing

guy. Their stony expressions haven't changed since they crossed the street, but up close, they're a little more terrifying.

The heavy weight of the man's arm vanishes from my shoulders, and he scrams. Right off down the sidewalk in the opposite direction without another word.

Malix lifts his hand and crooks his pinky finger after the guy with a grin. "Bye."

I punch him in the arm. "What the fuck, you assholes? I was getting good information from that guy."

Kian scoffs and glances off over my shoulder. "He talked too much."

I roll my eyes. "Maybe so, but in that 'talking,' he told me there's a town weirdo who talks about magic and the end of days. Sounds like a promising lead."

Frost cocks his head. "Did he tell you where we might find this man?"

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him. "He *might* have, if you neanderthals hadn't scared him off with all your testosterone."

Malix leers at me, then tosses his arm over my shoulders. "Hey, baby, let me buy you dinner..."

"Oh, and you were eavesdropping. Cute." I shrug off his arm, my skin prickling with irritation and awareness at his presence. "Come on. Let's find someone else to ask about Crazy Harry. And this time, don't fucking scare them off until we find out what we need to know."

Malix chuckles, and Kian takes the lead, striding off down the sidewalk.

I slow my pace and fall behind, giving myself some distance from the shifters. With a little space between us, I can allow myself to feel the emotions I shoved firmly away after they chased off our informant.

Shock.

Heat.

Confusion.

My mind whirls with all the conflicted feelings that have haunted me since Kian showed up at Joe's Bar and Grill and turned my life upside down.

There was something almost... *possessive* about the way they converged on me and that man. The way they stared at him like they wanted to tear him limb from limb.

But that doesn't make sense.

Why be possessive about something you don't even want?

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CHAPTER 23

IT TAKES three random civilians before we find someone who can tell us where to find Crazy Harry.

The answer leads us to a small park on the outskirts of town. An old rusted swing set, a scorching metal slide, and a precarious-looking wooden seesaw sit just beyond the park sign. A small group of young evergreens huddle around a man-made pond, where a lone figure stands tossing bread on the ground. Two ducks and three squirrels dart around the sparse grass at his feet, snatching up pieces as soon as they hit the dirt.

We approach the old guy together. The three shifters flank me as if they're afraid to let me get too close to Crazy Harry without them there to buffer. It's another strangely possessive gesture that makes me feel like I don't know what twilight zone I'm living in.

We stop a few feet to the old guy's left, on the banks of the pond. He's a grizzled old man with a giant nose covered in broken blood vessels and a beard that forms a point over his skinny, sunken chest. He's wearing an electric yellow tank top and ragged looking pants. No shoes.

"Excuse me," I say before one of the guys can speak and scare him off, "are you Harry?"

A bushy gray brow arches over his wrinkled eye, but he doesn't look away from feeding the squirrels. "Maybe. Who's asking?"

I exchange glances with Malix, then step ahead of the others. "My name's Amora. I'm seeking the location of something that I think you might know."

Crazy Harry rips the last piece of crust into three pieces and lets them drift to the ground.

After the silence drags on for far too long, Frost speaks up. "White bread

in large amounts can be unhealthy for ducks.”

I jerk around to glare at him. If his head full of useless knowledge scares off our *only* lead, he won't need to worry about the poison. I'll kill him anyway.

Crazy Harry finally looks over at us, that eyebrow still arched—only now, it's aimed at Frost. “Look around you, kid. We're in the goddamn desert. Some days, these animals don't get food unless I bring it. Some days, I bring frozen peas. Some days, I bring a bag of birdseed from the Wal-Mart. And some days, I have old crusty bread. And these sons of bitches appreciate anything they get.”

I try, unsuccessfully, to hide a smile. The crazy guy just dressed down Frost like he's a damn college professor.

Frost inclines his head. “Point taken.”

Crazy Harry shoves his hands in the pockets of his pants and levels his gaze on me. His eyes are a surprisingly pale blue, and they pierce right through me, like he can see inside me. Now that I'm getting a better look at him, he appears a little younger than I guessed at before, though his outfit still makes him look a bit like a California surfer boy gone to seed in his New Mexico retirement.

“Shifters, huh?” he says, his gaze darting between the four of us. “We don't see your kind around here often.”

Kian reacts immediately, stepping toward the old man with his fists clenched. I throw an arm out to stop him. I'm surprised as hell that the old man can tell what we are too, but that doesn't mean he needs to be beat up or silenced. We *want* someone who's got their ear to the ground, supernaturally speaking, so this is a good thing.

“How did you know?” I ask.

Crazy Harry shrugs, then leans down to pet one of the squirrels between its little pointy, tufted ears. “I know a lot of things.” When he straightens again, there's just the hint of fear in his pale gaze. “Are you going to hurt me?”

“No,” I say, giving Kian a pointed look. I drop my arm away from the feral shifter's chest and step bodily in front of him before he can terrify our informant into running. “Harry, are you familiar with the Tree of Life?”

The old man's eyes widen. “I am. Most people don't think it's real.”

“We know it's real,” I assure him. “We just need to know how to find it. Do you know where it is?”

He offers me a yellowing grin. "Sure do."

"Could you tell us?"

He glances at the feral shifters again, then back at me. "What's in it for me?"

Kian growls and takes another step forward, but I throw out an arm to block him.

"What do you want?" I ask Harry.

"Your panties," he says, a twinkle in his eye. That twinkle tells me he's absolutely baiting the three large shifters, who he must think are my boyfriends and/or protectors.

A tidal wave of fury rises up in the air around me as all three feral shifters snarl at the crazy old man and lunge for him.

He cackles and dances away, holding up both hands in supplication. The fear I saw earlier returns to his eyes, and I start to think he really must be a little unbalanced if he thinks it's smart to play with fire like this. He knows we're shifters, and even if he doesn't know that the men are something even more powerful and dangerous than that, he should think twice about pissing off three wolves.

"It was a joke!" he insists quickly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

Kian snarls and snatches at Harry's tank top, pulling him up to his tiptoes. "You want to discuss payment? How about we let you live? Is that good enough for you?"

"Kian," I bite out, a warning in my voice. "Put the crazy man down."

He bares his teeth at me. "Not until he tells us what we need to know."

Sighing, I dig into my back pocket for my wallet and open it to take inventory of the contents. "All right, old man. I've got fifty bucks. Will that work?"

Crazy Harry grins at me over Kian's arm, his weight dangling from his shirt. "Works just fine, little lady."

I tap Kian on the shoulder. "Drop him."

The massive shifter glares at me, his fingers tightening on Harry's tank top. The gold rings around his rich brown eyes glint like the aura around a dying sun, and his brows pull together.

"Drop. Him," I repeat, feeling like I'm arguing with a damn brick wall.

Snarling again, Kian releases Harry's shirt, and the old man hits the ground on his bare feet, then falls backward onto his ass.

I offer Harry the bundle of bills. "Tell us what you know."

He nods, counts the bills, then shoves them in his pocket. His hand re-emerges a moment later with a pack of cigarettes.

“In the northernmost part of the state, the Rocky Mountains,” Harry says, popping a thin white roll that is most definitely *not* a cigarette between his lips. “There’s a place called the Devil’s Teeth,” he adds, a gleam of mania in his eye. He clicks his lighter, then draws in a deep breath of smoke.

“Is it on a map?” I cut in.

Harry shakes his head and blows out the plume of white smoke. He still hasn’t gotten up off the ground. “No. But you can find it. The mountains look like a bottom jaw with sharp teeth and two prominent, vampire canines.” He leaves the joint between his lips and holds up his two pointer fingers, pointing at the sky in a kind of curved, toothy look. “Inside the bowl formed by the teeth is a ravine. The Tree of Life is said to grow in a deep, shadowed part of that ravine, somewhere north of the Devil’s Teeth.”

“How far north?” Frost asks.

Crazy Harry shrugs, and his beard quivers with the motion. “Don’t rightly know. I’ve never seen it.”

I thank Harry for his time, then we leave him sitting on the ground, smoking his joint while the ducks swim leisurely nearby.

Malix falls into step beside me. “Are we seriously listening to the crazy guy?”

“Yes, we’re listening to the crazy guy,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Not all crazy people are crazy. Sometimes, they just know things they’re not supposed to know and other humans don’t believe them. You’re a supernatural creature. You should know that.”

“The place isn’t even on a map.”

“Look,” I say irritably, “I grew up in the mountains. There are plenty of places that haven’t made it onto maps for whatever reason—*especially* places infused with magic. That doesn’t mean they aren’t there. And it doesn’t mean you can’t find them. It’s just more difficult. We still have to try. What do we have left to lose?”

Kian scoffs from ahead of us, his voice dark and hard. “There’s always something left to lose.”

WE GAS up the bikes then head north on the highway. I'm forced to ride with Kian this time, while Malix and Frost carry our supplies. The moment I slide on the back of his motorcycle, I stiffen and attempt to keep space between us.

Tension hums through his body too as he kicks the bike into gear. "Stop fucking around," he snaps over his shoulder. "Hold on or fall off, your choice."

I grit my teeth and slither my arms around his waist. Considering I've already done the bike wreck thing and established that, while I didn't die, it hurt like hell, I don't want to do it again. But I still try to keep space between us for as long as I can.

I hate that there's no way to turn off my attraction to them. Even worse, the longer I'm with them, the stronger the feeling becomes. As we hit our traveling speed, I end up sliding against the vinyl until I'm pressed up against Kian's back, my legs wide on his hips. And fuck if I don't *like it*. I like touching him, straddling him, lying my head against his back as time passes and my eyelids grow heavy.

I want to hate it, but being close to him feeds a part of my soul and soothes my wolf. It's not smart. It's definitely not what I *should* be doing, because heaven forbid I get at all attached to these assholes, but here I am.

In the quiet parts of my mind where I can admit the truth to myself, I know that part of my soul will always want them.

Even though they've rejected me.

Even though they're my enemies.

Since we can't afford to waste time, we don't. It's a day's journey to the Rockies, and then from there, god knows how long it'll take us to find the Devil's Teeth and walk the ravine to the tree. The sun's setting before we finally take a bathroom break and snag some dinner from a fast-food place right off the interstate. Then we're back on the road as the stars begin to come out.

We reach the southernmost mountains early the next morning and find a visitor center in a quaint town at the foot of the first peaks. The sweet little old lady at the counter has never heard of the Devil's Teeth, but she gives us information on the biggest Rocky Mountains visitor center in the area. Unfortunately, the Rockies cover quite a large area, and we need more to work on than we have.

At the next visitor center, we hit pay dirt. The park ranger running the information desk knows the Devil's Teeth, though he's always known them

as the Devil's Fingers. They're a myth, he tells us, but legend says they can be found near Black Mountain.

Black Mountain sits *way* off the beaten path. We park in a small town called Red River, load up our packs, and disappear into the woods on foot. Once out of sight, we shift and begin the upward trek.

It feels good to be in wolf form, racing through the wilderness. Here, the desert is a distant memory, and the air is cold and bracing when it blows through my fur. I feel more in my element now. Less connected to the emotional human side of me, even though my wolf still can't stop yearning for the feral shifters. At least in wolf form, I can focus on the ground beneath my feet and drown out the way my soul screams for them.

We reach the foot of Black Mountain just before sundown and shift back to human form briefly while we gaze up at it.

Malix sucks at his teeth, then remarks, "Don't know about you all, but I don't see anything remotely toothlike."

I can't help but agree. The mountains here are smoother and more rounded than I expected, all of them covered in dense forest that stunts their mountainous appearance even further. These rounded mounds rise all around us, but none of them are the sharp, jagged fingers we were told to expect.

Kian grunts. "We'll have to search on foot."

"After we rest," Frost adds, giving Kian a look I can't read. I wonder if he's hurting, then I wonder why I care.

We hunt for dinner, the four of us working much more seamlessly together than I want. After feasting on some of the fattest deer I've ever seen, we catch some sleep and set out again at first light.

On our second day in the mountains, I have another poison attack.

We're halfway up the peak of Black Mountain in the hope that a more aerial view will help us find the Devil's Teeth, when the pain hits without warning.

I yelp and collapse to the ground, desperately trying to shift back to human form so my wolf doesn't get hurt. Agony ripples through me, all the muscles in my body responding by twitching and seizing. My magic struggles to take hold through the white-hot pain. I cry out, the sound inhuman, my limbs caught mid-shift, my fear rising.

Fuck. What if this is it? What if this is the end?

Then Malix leans over me in human form, concern evident on his face. "Look at me, Amora."

I can't move my limbs or my head, but I still have control of my eyes. I try to focus on him, but he's just out of comfortable viewing range. So he moves closer and carefully lifts my head onto his bare thigh. He cups my face and angles me so that our eyes can meet.

"Breathe, kitty," he murmurs. "Breathe with me."

Even as my body continues to twitch and the pain sears my insides, I follow his instructions.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

Over and over.

His sunshine and fresh air scent swirl around me. That scent falls into me, chasing away the worst of the pain and helping me finish shifting back to my human form.

Finally, the attack ends. I don't sit up right away—I feel weaker than before, like the poison did more damage to me this time.

Like I'm running out of time.

Frost kneels beside me and holds out a bottle of water. "Drink. Flush your kidneys."

Malix helps me sit up, and I take the water from Frost's hands. He looks pale, the golden tan of his skin taking on an almost ashen hue.

"Frost?" I murmur. "Are you okay?"

He frowns and shakes his head, then lays his hand over his abdomen. "It's hurting me too."

Kian barrels over and crouches next to his brother, his hands fluttering almost uneasily over Frost's body. "What can I do?"

Frost waves him off. "We find the Tree of Life. It's all we can do. For me and Amora."

Kian palms Frost's head with a grunt that sounds more affectionate than irritated, then he stands and walks away. It isn't the first time I've seen Kian have an "older brother" vibe with Frost and Malix, but it's the first time I saw real fear on his face. If I've interpreted their stories correctly so far, the three of them were "made," and by default, there's no one else like them in the world.

Kian has been the de facto leader of their merry band of villains since I showed up, and I wonder how he ended up playing that role. They're all the same, so what makes Frost and Malix look to him for leadership? Just his overwhelmingly large and intimidating personality? Or something more?

Whatever it is, they're all obviously close, and each time I see that

affection between them, it warms me. And bothers me.

Because if they're capable of loving each other—needing each other, like Kian said—then they're capable of empathy and kindness. Which also means they're capable of being shifted off their destructive path.

I get to my feet, ignoring Malix's hand as he offers to help me up. Then I move away, needing a little space between them and my senses. We all shifted back from wolf when the attack hit me, which means we're all naked, and my libido wants to throw a fucking party.

I circle around some exposed rocks and lean against the rock wall, breathing through my muddled thoughts. The view from here is beautiful, all open sky, rolling mountains, and so much green. Green like home.

And green like... teeth. About five miles away in a valley.

"Hey, guys," I call over my shoulder as I shove away from the rocks. "I think we found the Devil's Teeth."

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CHAPTER 24

THE TREK TO reach the Devil's Teeth turns out to be a lot harder than it looked from the top of Black Mountain.

We make it back down the mountain by sunset and find a place to camp for the night. I'm not bothered by the break—my body hasn't fully bounced back from the poison attack, and I fall asleep the moment I curl up on a soft patch of grass.

The morning of the third day, we set out through the series of dips, valleys, and smaller mountains that separate us from the Devil's Teeth. We can no longer see the Teeth, since they're well-hidden by the mountainous terrain, but at least we know where they are. For the first time since I agreed to a truce with these men, I can see an end in sight, and it is *glorious*.

And, well, kinda sad, too, I think. The past week, for all its confusing ups and downs, has been a welcome respite from the endless monotony that my life has become over the past two and a half years.

Even in wolf form, the going is tough, and it's obvious that both Frost and I are struggling. But he doesn't complain, and neither do I. If we want to end this torment, we have to reach the Tree of Life. Like he said, that's all there is to it.

I'm so focused on the lingering pain and weakness in my limbs that I don't notice Malix slowing. He's just ahead of me, and I walk right into his hind end, getting his giant fluffy salt-and-pepper tail in my eye.

I bounce back and snap, *Hey. Warn a girl first.*

Sorry, he replies in mind-speak, his tone distracted. *Do you guys feel that?*

The only thing *I* feel is weak-legged and slightly thirsty, but before I can

ask what the hell he's talking about, Kian speaks.

Yes. I feel it too.

I glance between them. All three wolves are facing the same direction, their noses pointing off course from our actual destination.

Feel what? I ask.

Frost catches my eye. The wind ruffles his snow-white fur. *The shadow realm.*

Confused, I ask, *I thought the shadow realm was separate from Earth?*

Kian's dark brown wolf turns a circle, his nose in the air. *Something from the shadow realm. Possibly a weak spot in the fabric between realms.*

A pang of worry stabs me between the ribs. *A weak spot like you've been tasked to find.*

Yes, Kian answers, his gold-ringed gaze latching on to mine.

I freeze beneath that stare. Fight or flight instincts rise up inside me in a rush. If these three men try to leave and go for the shadow realm, I'll kill them. I'm prepared to kill them, even though part of me absolutely doesn't want to.

Sometimes, you just have to do the right thing, even when it hurts.

Silence stretches through the clearing. But I realize very quickly that it's a false silence. The guys are still talking. Exchanging glances, shuffling around, all the mannerisms of a conversation being had.

But I can't hear them.

Goddammit. All those times I thought they were speaking in each other's heads—maybe I was fucking right.

I'm calculating how fast I can shift, reach my knife in my bag, and put it through three different eye sockets. Fast enough to keep them from shifting to their nightmarish shadow wolf forms?

Then Kian speaks again. *Let's keep moving. Finding the Devil's Teeth is only step one. We still have to find the tree.*

They continue walking.

I ease up on the tension in my body and follow.

But as my paws pad over the rocky ground, I glance over my shoulder in the direction of the supposed "weak point." I still can't sense anything out of the ordinary, but I have no doubt that the feral shifters were telling the truth about what they felt.

And yet, the three of them turned their back on finding that place, even though it's their main purpose in life.

They chose to keep searching for the Tree of Life instead.

Maybe it's just self-preservation, since neither Frost nor I probably have long before the shadow poison kills us. Maybe they have every intention of returning to that spot later and trying to breach the divide between the shadow realm and earth.

But in this moment, they chose life over death.

They chose Frost.

They chose *me*.

And that shift in priorities makes me more hopeful than ever that they can be swayed from their dark mission.

THE DEVIL'S Teeth soar into the purple twilight over a small valley dominated by a deep blue lake. The last of the sun's glow casts the Teeth's reflection on the water, giving the appearance of a mouth opening wide to swallow the world.

Kian offers to go hunt for dinner alone, but Frost refuses and goes with him. I'm not usually the type of wolf to say no to a good hunt, but I've been run through the ringer so many times in the past couple days that all I want to do is rest. I leave Malix next to our belongings and head around the rocky beach for a more secluded place to wash the past couple days off my body.

I shift to human form on the rocky beach and step into the water. It's cold, but not as frigid as I expected a mountain lake to be. After days of trekking through the woods living in wolf form, it feels pretty good. Mud shifts between my toes as I walk deeper, and the water takes my breath away as it crests over my hips. Then I take a deep breath and plunge beneath the surface.

I swim forward a few strokes beneath the cold water, content in the darkness and silence. My life before *Oscura* feels like it was someone else's life. I miss my solitude and the calm routine of moving from town to town, picking up odd jobs, enjoying my own company.

But... I haven't hated every moment of my life since Kian walked into that *Oscura* bar either, although I'd never admit that to any of them out loud.

I breach the surface, brushing my now-wet hair out of my face. My feet reach the ground here, but I'm deep enough for the water to cradle every inch

of my body from the neck down. I do a backstroke and breathe deep, relishing the soft scent of the water, the earthy moss, the evergreen pines on the air, the waning sunshine...

My skin prickles with a sudden awareness, and the hair on the back of my neck rises.

Halting abruptly, I put my feet back on the mushy ground and whirl around.

Malix is standing on the shore, still in his wolf form.

He looks like a shadow, nothing but reflective violet eyes beneath the tree canopy as he watches me. Even though I'm completely covered by the water, his gaze still makes me burn. I maintain eye contact, a challenge in my expression. I'm not going to let him ruin my bath or force me to leave.

Magic ripples over him. His salt-and-pepper fur recedes into his smooth, dark skin, and his chiseled physique seems to burst from his giant wolf in slow motion. Still holding my gaze, he stoops down and picks something up off the ground, then he wades into the shallows. Taking his time. Muscles rippling. Every inch of his gorgeous fucking body on display.

The last time I saw this much of his body, I was watching him stroke his cock. The reminder sends a thrill of heat straight through my core.

As he descends, all the shadow tattoos on his skin flow upward on his body, as if fleeing the chilly water. It's hilarious—especially combined with his serious face and battle-ready body—and I *almost* laugh. I manage to bite it back.

Malix dives under, and I startle, looking around for him. Is he coming for me?

I turn my back on the shore and wade a little further, only to realize it's much too deep for me to touch here. I'm forced to go back a couple feet, only for Malix to surface right beside me.

I glare at him. "Can I have some privacy please?"

His hand emerges from the water. "Thought you might like some soap."

I stare at the small round bar in his hand, all the bluster fading from me. "Oh. Yeah, actually, that would be cool."

As I pluck the soap from his fingers, he gives me an amused grin and then backs off, giving me extra space.

Turning around, I start rubbing the soap over my body beneath the water. Not the best way to scrub myself, but I'm not too keen on walking further inland and having Malix stare at my naked body while I wash.

Well, maybe I'm too keen on that. And that's scarier.

I rub the bar through my hair to get a good lather going, then offer it back to Malix. "Thanks."

"No problem, kitty."

Shoving my hands into my hair, I roll my eyes and start scrubbing. I listen to the water lapping at Malix's body as he washes up, trying desperately not to think of his nakedness below the surface.

I rinse my hair out by ducking beneath the water, then resurface, turning my face into the cool breeze.

Don't think about Malix.

Don't think about Malix.

Don't think about Malix.

Chanting it in your head is thinking about Malix, you fucking dumbass.

Giving in to my insanity, I glance over my shoulder at him. He's not much taller than me, so most of his body is underwater here, too. The emphasis is on his neck and shoulders, both of which are strong. Corded.

Biteable.

Jesus, I need a distraction.

"So," I say, "once we're done with the antidote, are you guys going to go back to that place where you sensed the shadow realm?"

"Sure will," he replies cheerfully. "You gonna try to stop us, kitty?"

"Sure will," I parrot back in my sweetest voice, making sure there's an edge of challenge beneath it.

We glance at each other. Malix has that stupidly charming grin on his face, as always, and against my better judgment, I grin back.

"I'm pretty sure you just told me to fuck off in kitty speak," he says, tossing the soap between his hands twice before he chucks it at the shore. We watch it bounce across the rocks and then come to rest.

"Not even a week in my presence and you just know me *so well*," I quip.

Malix chuckles. "See, that's why I like you, kitty. Funny, smart, give no fucks..." He trails off, and it feels like he was going to say something else.

I catch his violet gaze, and something shifts in the air between us. The acknowledgement that he likes me settles into a sudden, charged silence.

For the briefest of seconds, I consider telling him that I like him, too. Or I would, if I let myself like him. He's a lot like me—strong, stubborn, loyal to the people he loves. Malix reminds me every day that he's meant to be my mate, simply by being himself.

If we weren't diametrically at odds, all three of them would be my perfect complements.

Our teasing banter vanishes under the weight of the silence between us.

"What are you?" I ask softly. "I know you were 'made' or 'created' or whatever, but what does that even mean?"

Malix's smile fades away and he moves toward me, seemingly considering his words. He stops before he gets *too* close, but even still, his sunshine and fresh air scent overtakes me. I fight the urge to step back—I want him to talk to me. To give me answers.

He lifts a hand out of the water and rubs his palm over his short black hair. His shadows move sluggishly over his bulging biceps. "I am the son of a shadow and a shifter woman."

I raise an eyebrow. "Um. How?"

"Magic," he says with a shrug. "Magic was used to create me, but I had a shifter mother who birthed me."

"Had?"

Malix nods. The moon is rising over the mountains, and it glints off his eyes. He's beautiful. Otherworldly.

Sad.

"She died when I was four," he murmurs. "Because of me and my twin sister. Carrying us, all the magic and shadow, it... my mother never recovered."

"You have a sister?"

He clenches his jaw and looks away, out over the lake.

"She died too," I guess, my heart sinking at the tightness of pain around his eyes.

Malix swallows visibly and blinks his long, dark lashes several times before he looks back at me. "Kian and Frost are all I have left."

The pull between us, that insistent tug that never seems to go away, suddenly feels stronger than ever. I can't stand the way his brow is drawn together, the pain in his eyes, the fact that his smile has just completely vanished. I want to give his happiness back to him and take away everything that's making his heart ache.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

What the fuck am I thinking?

It's a good goddamn question, but I'm walking forward before I can even begin to think of an answer.

When I reach Malix, I don't hesitate.

I just wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

His soft, full lips are wet with lake water, and they stoke a fire in me that rages through every nerve ending. He makes no move to touch me, but his lips respond to mine, kissing me back.

My heart's racing when I pull away from the kiss. Our eyes meet, and I want to tell him how sorry I am about his mother, about his sister, about this shitty lot in life he and his brothers have been handed. But the words don't come. They feel insignificant.

So I just turn away and start making my way to shore.

When I get back there, I swear I'm going to go into hiding forever.

I *kissed* Malix. What the fuck? Have I forgotten my entire reason for being? I'm supposed to kill him, not kiss him.

The water splashes around my thighs as I reach the shallows. I'm almost knee deep when a hand grabs my wrist and jerks me to a halt.

Startled, I whirl around to find Malix right behind me, water cascading off his torso like he's some kind of water god. The tattoos that wind over his shoulders and arms look like deep shadows on his dark skin, and his violet eyes glitter in the moonlight as he stares down at my face like he's reading my soul.

Then he tightens his fingers on my wrist and yanks me toward him.

Our bodies collide, and he crushes his mouth to mine.

CHAPTER 25

MALIX'S LIPS are full and warm, and he kisses just like he did in my imagination—with a fierce, powerful sort of hunger that belies his usual laughing demeanor.

He's not laughing now.

He's not teasing or taunting.

He's *claiming*.

His hands tangle in my wet hair, cupping each side of my head as he slants his lips over mine, his tongue plunging into my mouth. I grab on to his forearms to steady myself, feeling the corded muscles flex under my touch, and we stumble through the shallow water aimlessly as we keep kissing like we'll never stop.

The slippery, muddy lake bed shifts under my feet as Malix walks me backward, and then hard, rough stone meets my back. A large boulder juts up from the water, and he pins me against it as his hands leave my hair to drift over my body.

He captures one of my nipples between his thumb and finger, and I hiss when he pinches and twists it lightly.

"Fuck, kitty cat," he groans. "Make that sound again."

"Don't call me kitty cat," I shoot back hoarsely, nipping at his lower lip.

He grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls my head back, dropping his own head to attack my neck with sucking kisses.

"You like it," he mutters against my skin.

"No, I don't."

"You like *me*."

"No. I don't."

He chuckles and licks at my pulse like he's tasting my lie. I don't want him to say anything else, so I grab a fistful of his hair and yank his mouth back up to mine. It's easier to shut off the voice screaming warnings in my head if I pretend this is just about sex, just about the inescapable chemistry that sparks between us.

Malix grunts into my mouth, his cock pressing against my stomach as he grinds against me. His wet hands slide down the curve of my waist and over my hips, and he palms my ass as he lifts me in his arms. With my back still pressed to the rock behind me, I wrap my legs around him, and now the base of his cock is pressed right up against my pussy in a way that makes me shudder.

Fuck. This is so much like it was in my imagination that night, but somehow a thousand times more intense. I roll my hips, working myself shamelessly against his shaft, and Malix lets out a muffled growl.

I'm already soaked for him, and we're so close—it would take so little effort for him to slip inside me, to drive himself in to the hilt. But some part of both of us clearly remembers that's a bad idea, because I can feel him holding back just like I am.

His cock slides through my folds, and my mouth drops open on a whispered curse. He's not inside me, but it's close enough to the real thing to send heat surging through my veins. I hook my ankles together behind him, resting them on the swell of his muscular ass and using my thigh muscles to help me move against him.

"I never told you what I was thinking about, that night at Erik's house," he murmurs roughly. "Don't you want to know?"

"No."

He chuckles, but that sounds like a growl too.

"I was imagining what you'd feel like. How tight and wet your pussy would feel wrapped around my cock. I was thinking about what I'd do to make you scream."

"Shut up," I demand, palming the back of his head and dragging him closer so I can kiss him again. I seal my lips against his as if that will keep the truths I don't want to admit buried away, as if I can stop him from saying another word if I just kiss him hard enough.

It works, for a while.

He nips at my lower lip, biting it before licking the sting away, then delving his tongue deep inside my mouth. My lips feel swollen and almost

bruised from the force of our kiss, and I'm gasping for breath when he finally pulls away. He grips my hips, looking down at me as he holds me against the wall.

"The look on your face just about killed me, kitten. Were you close to coming just from watching me? I swear your pupils got so fucking big I couldn't see any of that gorgeous green in your eyes anymore. Just black. Just *heat*."

He drops his forehead to mine as he says the last word, pulsing his hips so that his cock glides through my pussy lips again, and I whimper at the sensation.

"I wanted to watch you touch yourself," he adds, his voice low and hoarse. "I wanted to see you come apart. I could smell your scent, and it drove me fucking crazy."

"Goddammit, Malix," I rasp.

We're both practically whispering, like we're sharing an illicit secret between us. And hell, maybe we are. We're supposed to hate each other. We're not supposed to want each other, and it feels like a dirty secret to hear him admit that he does.

Maybe that's why I give him a secret of my own.

"I *did* touch myself," I breathe out, bracing my arms on his shoulders as I move against him. "That night. In bed."

"Fuck." His curse is low and deep, and his hands tighten on my hips almost like a warning.

I should heed that warning. I should stop talking.

I should shove him away and hope like hell that getting some distance between us will allow sanity to return.

But instead, I murmur, "I thought about you. And Kian. And Frost."

Malix's head jerks back, and I expect to see anger in his eyes like I saw in Kian's when I returned to the house that night. But there's no fury. No jealousy. Just raw desire in his burning violet irises.

His fingers press deeper into the flesh of my hips, and I can feel his cock pulse against me. I could make him come like this, I realize wildly. I could get him off just by rubbing up against him like the cat he always teasingly calls me. I could push him over the edge just by talking, by telling him the things I've never admitted to anyone, and he could probably do the same to me.

My legs are already shaking with it, my body so keyed up with arousal

that every brush of his cock against my clit feels like fire.

I'm soaked and empty and so fucking *hungry* for him.

"What did you think about?" Malix demands. "What did you imagine?"

He sounds almost desperate, his voice still low and hoarse. His breath is coming faster, and the feel of it gusting over my damp skin makes goosebumps scatter down my arms.

"You were inside me," I murmur, the simmering heat in my belly dissolving into molten lava. "Kian was behind, inside me too. Frost was watching. Touching himself."

"Fuck." Malix makes another choked noise, and his cock pulses against me again.

He's close. Right on the verge of coming.

I should let him finish like this. I should chalk it up to a stupid mistake, a moment of weakness, and walk away with *some* part of the emotional barrier between us still intact. But the wild, primal part of me that nearly went to him when he held out his glistening hand to me on that moonlit night—she can't stand the thought of that.

Reaching down between us, I fist his cock and use my thighs to lift myself up a little as I notch his broad crown at my entrance.

Malix stiffens for just a second, his breath stuttering just like mine.

Then he drives his hips forward and pulls me down, impaling me in one hard thrust.

I fall apart on his cock, pleasure spreading through me as the aching feeling of emptiness is replaced with nothing but Malix. The fresh air and sunshine scent of him surrounds me, mingling with the scent of water and pine, and he shouts raggedly as the first hot jet of his release spurts into me.

I can *feel* him coming, and my walls clench around him like a vise, my body writhing in his arms.

The intense burst of the orgasm fades, but he doesn't stop fucking me. He's still hard, and now that he's inside me, neither one of us is teasing the other. Neither one of us is holding back. It's like we know we'll never get a repeat of this stolen, illicit moment, so we're throwing ourselves into it headfirst.

The rough surface of the rock scrapes at my back and digs into skin as he drives into me hard and fast, but the pain feels good. It's as if I *need* it as a counterpoint to the overwhelming pleasure surging through me.

I hang on to Malix, sliding my fingers through his tightly curled black

hair as I come again.

He doesn't slow his pace at all, although I can feel how tightly I'm gripping him. His thrusts become short and choppy as he pounds into me, and when he spills inside me again, the feel of it sends me over the edge one more time.

I'm shaking, and I'm stuffed so full of his cum that it's sliding down my legs already, slick and wet as it cools in the night air.

Malix's hold on my hips is so tight that I imagine for a second that he'll need a crowbar to loosen it. He draws in several deep breaths and releases them, and his nose nuzzles my cheek. His lips ghost over mine, not quite touching them as we breathe together. Then he pulls out and sets me back on my feet.

The chill of the water that laps around my calves makes my muscles tighten, and I lean back against the boulder as I make sure my legs can really support me. Malix takes a small step back, looking at me with an expression he's never worn before—one I can't quite read.

"Fate's a fucking bitch," he murmurs quietly.

My heart clenches. I don't know what those words mean to him, but I know what they mean to me.

They mean that what should be the happiest and best thing in my life is the worst and most painful thing instead. They mean I'll probably always be stuck between what my heart wants and what my minds know is right. They mean that even though Malix wants me and I want him back, there's no way for us to be together as long as we're at odds.

Is it possible to sidestep fate?

To change the course of one's destiny?

I think of all the little things I've seen the feral shifters do, those tiny but undeniable signs that they're more than just heartless, callous monsters.

Is there some other way to stop them from carrying out their horrible mission besides killing them?

Goddammit. This is all so fucked up.

I shove away from the rock, trying to master my chaotic emotions as I get my legs under me. I know the smile that I flash Malix doesn't reach my eyes, but it's the best I can manage at the moment.

"Fate may be a bitch," I tell him in a low voice, "but so am I."

With that, I turn away from him and stride deeper into the water, embracing the chill of it as it rises up around my body.

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CHAPTER 26

AFTER WASHING UP AGAIN and letting the mindless task of scrubbing at my skin settle my thoughts a little, I climb out of the water. There's a towel waiting for me on shore—thanks to Malix, I suppose, though I never saw him return with it. It's not the thickest of towels, a little travel thing, but it does the job. I dry off and wrap the damp fabric around me to go dig some clothes out of my bag.

Kian is building a fire while Frost and Malix skin the deer the other two shifters brought back with them. All three of them glance up as I return in my handkerchief-sized towel. I crouch beside my bag to dig out my jeans and a clean tank top, and I notice both Frost and Kian tilt their noses into the air.

Toward me.

Fuck. Can they smell the lingering scent of sex on me? Even *after* I washed off in the lake again?

They turn their suspicious gazes on Malix, who just smiles charmingly as if he has no idea what they're thinking.

Frost looks away out into the darkness beyond the light of the fire, something like hurt in his expression, though it isn't exactly easy to read him. Kian catches my eye, anger tightening his lips as he sizes me up. I put my chin in the air and drop my towel, pointedly facing him naked as I step into my jeans.

I refuse to feel bad about having sex with Malix. First of all, it was fucking amazing, and I'm not even going to lie to myself that it wasn't. Second of all, they're all three my mates and they know it, so not one of them has more right to me than another. And lastly, Kian rejected me three years ago. He doesn't get to be pissy about *shit*.

Plus, it's not going to happen again, so he can calm the hell down.

My jeans got some gnarly rips in my accident. A big patch of fabric is torn over my right thigh, where I got the worst of the road rash, and both knees have frayed holes, too. On the plus side, the big hole on my thigh leaves the last of my rash open to the air. Good, because it itches like hell.

Yanking my shirt over my head, I head over to join Frost and Malix at the deer. "Need help?"

Malix grins and hands me a knife. "Go ahead and saw off bits for grilling."

I start working on the deer's muscular hips, keeping my head down and avoiding eye contact. I don't want anyone to bring up the fact I had sex with Malix and try to air grievances like a couple of petulant pups. I'm too exhausted to deal, and the low level pain I've been sitting with since my bike wreck is heavier than it was earlier.

But luckily, Kian avoids the topic. He joins us and starts placing cut steaks in the fire. "If that crazy motherfucker is right, we should be close to the Tree of Life. We found the ravine while we were hunting. It's narrow and fairly short. I figure we'll find the tree tomorrow."

Malix whistles. "Damn. Crazy to think we've almost made it."

As I set a steak aside on a tiny piece of aluminum foil that Frost dug out of his pack, it occurs to me that I have some pretty mixed emotions about finding the tree. Once we've got the ingredient we need, Frost and I can dose ourselves and get this horrible fucking poison out of our systems. And that's good news, right? But it'll also mark the end of our agreed upon truce, and like Malix told me earlier in the lake, their plan after that is to head off back toward that weak point between the realms.

Meaning we'll be on opposing sides again, and I'll have to hunt them down and kill them.

That thought hurts more than I'd like.

While we cook the meat and eat dinner, I stay quiet, lost in my thoughts and worries. The three of them aren't exactly chatty either, though God knows they could just be sitting there conversing with their minds in whatever secret shadow person way they have. Yet another barrier that keeps me from ever truly being a part of their world.

Not that I want to. At least, not the world they're aiming for.

We clean up after dinner, then pick places around the fire to lay down and rest. I'm packing up my dirty clothes and my knife, getting ready for an early

start tomorrow, when the pain hits.

I gasp and go down hard on my knees.

My body might as well have fallen into a bonfire. I'm aflame from head to toe, and I can't breathe. I fall to my stomach on the grass and gasp for air, but it's like my lungs have forgotten how to work. My limbs go stiff, and the nerves all over my body feel like broken glass, sharp and shattering and tearing me apart from the inside even as I can't move.

The world tilts. I roll onto my back to the sight of Frost's pale, concerned eyes and realize he's the one who rolled me. Dark edges press in around my vision, blocking him out, and I'm still gasping, still trying to get air through my useless throat. All I know is agony, my muscles cramping, my organs screaming.

Frost's cold fingers close over my throat, and suddenly, some of the pressure eases. Enough for me to wheeze in a lungful of air.

My whole body twitches and my vision goes dark, then comes back, then goes dark again. I struggle to stay conscious, but it's hard. I bob in and out of the blackness, and the black is where it doesn't hurt. If I stay there, I won't have to feel like this.

But I'm not ready to die, and the darkness behind my consciousness scares me.

I don't know how long the poison attack lasts, but eventually, the pain fades enough for all my senses to return. Frost is still holding my head, his cold fingers tracing calming circles on my temples. I shake for a while longer, hoping the last of the pain will vanish, but it doesn't.

It lingers inside me. Everywhere, a part of me, here to stay. Lower level, but constant.

Malix leans over me and smiles, although worry glints in his violet eyes. "How you feelin', kitty?"

"Peachy keen," I reply through gritted teeth.

Frost raises an eyebrow, looking at me like he doesn't quite believe me, but I ignore him and sit up, groaning with the effort.

"I just need rest," I assure him, brushing his hands away.

Malix and Frost remain sitting beside me while I rearrange my crap and lie down, using my backpack as a pillow. We usually shift to wolf form to rest because it's easier on the hard ground, but I don't have it in me right now. I curl up on my side, facing away from the dying fire, and close my eyes.

The guys move around a bit more, talking in low voices as they finish cleaning and packing away their own things. Then the clearing goes silent.

Still, I hurt all over.

I watch the underbrush and trees sway gently on the breeze. It's peaceful, and on any other night, it'd be the perfect focal point for me to meditate on and pass out like the dead. But tonight, the pain is just too real. Too raw.

Why didn't it go away?

Because I've reached some kind of critical juncture where the poison is half a day away from killing me?

I take a deep breath and let it out, my gaze following the tree limbs as they dance gently back and forth.

Master the pain. You can do this.

Suddenly, Frost's spicy warmth appears at my back, distracting me from the hurt.

He lies down behind me without a word, then snakes an arm around my waist and tugs my back against him. His long, lean form spoons me, and the weight of his arm over my torso chases away my focus on the pain.

I breathe in his scent and sink against him. His presence, the connection between us that stretches like a taut wire connecting us heart to heart... all of it eases some of the agony burning through me. I don't know how or why, but within moments, I feel better.

Frost's breath tickles the skin of my neck as he whispers, "You're hiding how badly you hurt."

"After the attack, the pain didn't go away."

He tightens his arm around me. "I thought something like that."

He tucks a leg between mine, and it's such a claiming position. Not in a sexual way, but in an affectionate way. The way a guy might cuddle his girl in front of the TV on movie night. It sends my heart into overdrive and confuses all of the already muddled feelings inside me.

Closing my eyes, I focus on every part of him where he touches me.

"Do you feel like this all the time?" I ask.

"Yes."

I slide my hand up and rest my arm over his, entwining our fingers. "I'm sorry."

Nobody's more surprised than me when I realize I actually mean it.

Frost doesn't respond with words, but his arms tighten around me until I forget where he ends and I begin.

Wrapped in his warmth, I finally sleep.

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CHAPTER 27

THE NEXT MORNING, we're on the move before the sun even rises after Kian drags us all from sleep. He spares a loaded glance for Frost, who's still wrapped around me, then tells us to get a move on because we're burning daylight.

And it's not even daylight yet.

His aggressive mood lasts all morning as we navigate the Devil's Teeth and descend into the ravine behind the formation. He's obviously in fine form, hard-edged as ever. Both Frost and I are moving slow, and I assume it's because he hurts as much as I do, if not more. But anytime we fall behind, Kian's on our asses, pushing us to move faster.

I know he wants to be rid of me, but damn.

The ravine isn't so much a ravine as it is a deep, narrow valley between multiple small peaks. The trees are thick and lush, and the temperature stays cool and steady in the shadow of the canopy. Which is nice, because my body temp is running a lot higher than it should be, even in wolf form.

In the late morning, we stop long enough to eat and hydrate before Kian prods us back into motion. The low level pain I woke up with has sharpened over the course of the morning. Not as bad as when I had the last attack, but a constant ache that leaves me winded and irritable. No matter how bad it gets though, I keep pushing through and keep my complaints to myself.

No use in pissing off Kian this close to our goal.

After what feels like hours of traveling and searching, I sense the Tree of Life before I even lay eyes on it.

The magic is potent—an energy that radiates throughout the forest, pulsing like a heartbeat. Just being near the power emanating from the tree

eases the growing pain inside me.

We break through a bunch of tangled undergrowth and step out of the constant forest into a small clearing. The Tree of Life soars high overhead, the most massive evergreen I've ever seen. It has to be ancient; it's probably stood in this clearing since before people even mapped this area. I'm not even surprised the tree has magical properties.

Kian shifts first, then rifles through his pack for the mason jar of potion. "What's the ingredient we need? Leaves?"

Frost shifts to human and tugs his clothes from his bag. "Sap."

Kian sets the jar on the grass and reaches for his own clothes, as if just remembering he's naked. "Do we know how much we need?"

Malix yanks his shirt on over his head, his voice muffled as he responds. "Erik didn't say."

Frost nods. "I imagine only a few drops would do. Witchcraft potions aren't highly complicated."

I pull on my jeans and tank top, then venture toward the magic tree as they continue discussing the merits of using too much sap or too little and how to extract it.

It seems warmer beneath the tree's low-hanging branches. I trail my fingers over the soft, layered bark and listen to the tree's heartbeat with my fingertips. I notice something shiny from the corner of my eye, and I find sap oozing from between the bark. I slide my fingers through the puddle and manage to get about a tablespoon's worth in one swipe.

The guys are still bickering when I return. I reach past Kian and turn my fingers over above the open mason jar. The sap plops right off my skin into the potion.

A ripple passes through the air. Something invisible to the naked eye, but potent nonetheless—a wave of magic as the potion completes.

"See," I tell them with a snarky grin, "the trouble with you assholes is you always need a plan. When the *real* answer is, just do it."

My voice is a lot stronger than I expect it to be. The pain's growing by the minute, even though we're no longer moving across the rough terrain. At least now, I can drink the potion and feel like myself again. Relief settles over my aching body as I watch Kian close the jar and give it a couple of good shakes to ensure the sap is all mixed in. But on the heels of my relief, I can sense another poison attack coming.

Kian passes the jar to Frost first, who's standing across from us. He sniffs

the liquid, examines it, then chugs half of it down in one go.

I sway on my feet and my vision goes blurry. I catch myself on Kian's arm and pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting through the wave of pain.

Malix taps me on the shoulder. "Your turn, kitty."

Gathering my wits about me, I straighten and take the jar from his fingertips. I don't hesitate—I just toss back every last drop.

It's thick and gelatinous, with the slight taste of sulfur. I fight the urge to retch and close my eyes, clenching my fists at my sides.

Waiting.

For something.

Anything.

Then, slowly, a cool sensation slides through my veins, washing away the pain. My vision clears, and the throbbing behind my eyelids vanishes. I glance at Frost to see if it's helping him too, and I notice a little bit of black smoke that's wafting from his body. On second glance, I realize it's happening to me, too, as if the poison is seeping out from under my skin.

I glance around at the three shifters and grin. "I think it worked."

But even as I finish speaking the words, a new kind of pain clutches me.

It's not the same as before, with the poison and the cramps and seizing. This is like a vise-grip in my chest, as if my heart's being squeezed right out of me. I press my hand to my chest, fighting for breath, but I can't get enough air in my lungs. My head goes woozy, and I drop to my knees in the grass.

All three men move closer, looming over me. I struggle to look up at them through the pained tears in my eyes.

Kian stares at me coldly for a moment before he says, "I sever our mate bond."

Agony rips through my chest like he's stabbed me in the heart.

Frost speaks up. "I sever our mate bond," he says in his smooth, even voice, his face as enigmatic as always.

Another stab of pain makes me cry out. I collapse to my side, breathing hard, blackness pressing in on the edges of my vision.

Then Malix tosses something on the ground in front of me as he takes a step closer. "I sever our mate bond."

It's a... a vial. I clutch at the grass and try to sit up, but I fall back to the ground, staring at the little glass tube. Something dark clings to the sides of the glass, though it's otherwise empty.

Oh god.

A sharp, painful realization burns through me as I stare at it, shaking my head as if denying the truth will somehow make it not real.

They did this on purpose.

They had a second potion, and they must've added it to the antidote before I drank the damn thing.

A potion to break our mate bond.

Fury chases away the pain, and I snarl at them. "You *motherfuckers*. Why?"

Kian crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at me, a strange, unreadable expression on his face. "We have a purpose, Amora. You cannot stop us. And you cannot be a part of it."

Then all three of them shift into their monstrous shadow wolf forms and sprint away.

Leaving me behind.

Our bonds broken.

Shattered.

Destroyed.

I stare after them into the shadowy trees long after they've vanished, breathing shallowly as I try to claw my way back from the abyss of pain that hollows out my chest and threatens to swallow me up like a black hole.

I know now, of course, why the men were so hard to track before. Their shadow wolf forms are literally shadows—they don't even leave a scent trail.

They're gone.

My eyes sting, and I let out a wild, furious scream. Birds scatter from the trees as the sound bounces off the mountain's surface and echoes back to me. When the echo finally fades, I go quiet.

Birdsong fills the clearing again after a few moments, and the steady thrum of the Tree of Life's heartbeat brushes gently at my skin.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I manage to sit up. The worst of the agony is passing, and I manage to stumble to my feet. The Tree beckons me with that pulse of power, so I walk slowly over to it, dipping beneath the low-hanging branches. I lean my forehead against the bark and press my palms to the trunk, taking a few deep breaths of the ancient energy.

Within moments, I'm more clear headed.

A few more minutes after that, I feel strong enough to stand on my own.

Shoving away from the tree, I rub a hand over my chest and square my shoulders.

I may not be able to track the men in their shadow wolf forms, but that doesn't matter. I'll still find them.

And this time, I won't have any distractions. They broke the mate bond, but that goes both ways. I won't feel that soul deep pull toward them anymore.

I won't have any soft feelings or affection for them.

Nothing will hold me back from my goal.

This time, when I hunt them down, I'll fucking kill them.

Thank you for reading! Amora's story continues in *Untamed Mate*, book two in the *Feral Shifters* series.

Find it on Amazon:

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Want to read more about Ridge and how he met his mate? The *Claimed by Wolves* series is now complete! Turn the page to find out more.



Wolf shifters are real. And three alphas have claimed me as their mate.

For years, I've been kept prisoner by my uncle, hidden like a piece of trash in the basement of his house. Beaten, broken, and neglected, hated by him for reasons I can't even understand.

But one night on the back roads of rural Montana, I see a chance for escape.

And I take it.

I run.

...straight into the arms of a naked man.

No. Not a man. A wolf.

Ridge, the man with dark hair and honey-colored eyes, is the alpha of the North Pack. I can hardly believe shifters are real, but how can I deny it when I've seen him transform with my own eyes?

I don't trust him. I don't trust anyone. Still, that doesn't change the overwhelming pull I feel toward him. And when the alphas of the East and West Packs step forward and claim me as their mate too, I feel that same desperate urge to claim them back.

But the part that scares me most?

There's only one reason all three of them could form a mate bond with me.

I'm a shifter too.

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