



SHADOW BRIDE

AMANDA RICHARDSON WRITING AS
K. EASTON

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OceanofPDF.com

Shadow Bride

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a full-length, rejected mates, wolf-shifter paranormal romance with omegaverse themes. It is book two of the Shadow Pack trilogy.

Triggers: explicit sex, graphic language, knotting, marking, domestic violence (physical abuse and emotional abuse, not inflicted by MMC), fertility, kidnapping, murder, violence, adoption, missing child, and birth parent relationships.

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PLAYLIST

Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money) by Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money
Do My Own Thing by American Authors
Stand Up by The Cab
100 Bad Days by AJR
Born For This by The Score
Kingdom Come by Jon Bellion
Numb The Pain by Clarx, Anikdote, Shiah Maisel, Catas, Le Malls,
CHENDA
House of Memories by Panic! At The Disco
Let Me Down by Nick Fabian
Rule the World by Zayde Wølf
Healing by Oh Honey
Wolves by Sam Tinnesz, Silverberg
Bloody Mary by Lady Gaga
Cross My Heart I Hope U Die by Meg Smith
Vigilante Shit by Taylor Swift
Dead Or Alive by Stileto, Madalen Duke
New Kings by Sleeping Wolf
Cinderella's Dead by EMELINE
Devil Saint by Luma, Yuppycult

[Link to Spotify Playlist!](#)

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BLURB

I am a prisoner in the place I once called home.

Desolate.

I am thousands of miles away from my mate.

Waiting.

Nothing will ever stop me loving my true mate, Phoenix Adair.

Nothing.

Not even Willow Creek's new alpha, my former best friend, Zade Crawford.

A boy who became a monster.

A man without a moral code, whose perverted goal is to destroy Phoenix and lock me away.

A man who has no idea that my hand in marriage belongs to his sole enemy.

***Shadow Bride* is a full-length rejected mates, wolf-shifter romance. There are strong omegaverse themes throughout, so please read the author's note. Due to the explicit language and steamy scenes, it is intended for readers 18+. While not considered a dark romance, there are darker themes present (see author's note). It is book two of the Shadow Pack trilogy.**

If you like your alphas sweet and caring but with fiery, touch-her-and-you-die vibes, this book is for you. If you like kickass females who aren't afraid to talk back, this book is for you. Happy reading!

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Don't forget to join my reader group, K. Easton's Deviants! There will be a discussion group after release day, and you definitely don't want to miss out on that!

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For my sister

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WHAT WOULD ADRI DO?

DEIRDRE

I PULL my hood further over my white-blond hair, ensuring no one with human eyes can see me in the darkness. Using the car would've been too conspicuous—I didn't want my parents to find it missing—so I decided to walk the two miles to the edge of Highway 17 in my human form. A seventeen-year-old human girl is a lot *less* conspicuous than a white wolf. I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm already grounded, so what's one more thing? If my parents do catch me, which is doubtful, I have an excuse ready that involves meeting up with a guy.

I've gotten very good at playing my parents these last couple of months. So good, in fact, that they almost *want* to turn a blind eye to my misgivings.

Which is better for me, anyway.

Less questions. More pretending.

I am good at pretending.

Taking mainly neighborhood streets, I arrive at the entrance to the Aquinas Trailhead and grab the flashlight from my bag. I navigate the darkness better than a normal human would. Being a shifter means I have spectacular eyesight, even in human form. My sense of smell is remarkable as well. Though the group is nearly eight hundred feet away, I can smell the small campfire and the distinct scent of each shifter there tonight. There's even a hint of burnt marshmallow, which makes me grin.

S'mores.

A couple of minutes later, I walk up to the circle, setting my bag down at the end of the camp. Several people are drinking bottled beer, and the others are tossing around a flask. There are a few metal hangers and a bag of marshmallows, a box of graham crackers, and a couple of large chocolate bars. *Yum.*

Everyone goes silent when I arrive, and one of the male shifters stumbles backward when he realizes who I am.

“Oh... shit,” one of the girls mumbles.

The corner of my mouth tilts upward. “You didn’t think I’d stay away for long, did you?”

One of the males chokes on the alcohol he’s sipping from the flask. Vodka, by the smell of it.

“We, uh...” the girl starts, shaking her head. “We didn’t know who you were before. But your father...” She looks at me with wide, expectant eyes. “Won’t he...?” She leaves her question open-ended.

I huff a laugh and walk up to the guy with the flask, then grab it from him and take a swig.

“What, ground me?” I mock with a giggle. “He already did that.”

The man I stole the vodka from looks terrified, and understandably. If my father knew of this—if *Alpha Zade* knew about this—we’d all be killed, no questions asked. It didn’t matter that my sister was set to marry him next month. Traitors were, to him, the scum beneath his shoe. There was no room for remorse or excuses in his eyes.

Since he’d taken over as alpha, he’d been cruel and relentless, making up for his lack of experience with ruthless brutality. Seven shifters had been executed in the last month. To put that into perspective, his father, Godric, had executed twelve shifters in his *entire* thirty-year reign. The boy I’d known growing up had turned into a monster. When Adrienne left and found her fated mate, it *twisted* something inside him.

It turned him possessive, jealous, and coldhearted.

After Adri left, I started to dig around. When she told me about what our parents did—when I realized my suspicions of her not being their biological daughter were confirmed—it opened my eyes. Suddenly, the large houses and shiny cars felt wrong. The Crawfords were nice—even Zade was kind before he became the alpha. But then I walked in on a hushed conversation between my parents and Godric about how she was likely to stay away forever once she found her birth parents. How Zade had pushed her away.

How it was *his* fault. Zade overheard, too, and it spurred his ascendance to alpha of Willow Creek. The next day, the power coming off him was incredible, but I knew immediately that the shift had also *done* something to him.

And then he started visiting other packs, collecting signatures to win Adri back. He became *obsessed* with getting her back. Even when Godric tried to convince him to marry one of the other nice girls from this pack, he wouldn't listen.

To anyone.

That's when I started to ask around at school. I kept my ears open, and soon, I found this group of *resistors*—the name they call themselves. Young shifters who see through the facade like I do. Who are more like Adri than I realized. People who know what my parents did isn't right. Who have their *own* mysteries to solve. Until recently, I skirted the edge of their meetings, never really joining in, always on the outside.

And then my parents caught me coming home late one night, smelling of beer...

Needless to say, things have changed in a very short amount of time.

I take another swig of vodka. "They won't find me. I mean, I guess there's always a chance Zade could sniff me out," I add, and they all look amongst themselves with worried expressions, shifting uncomfortably on their feet. I stand up taller and hold the vodka back out to the guy I stole it from. "But I'm here now. Again. And I'm ready to help."

They're quiet as they process my words. There are eight people here in total—four guys, four girls. None of them are older than eighteen. All shifters.

Just like me, they're ready for a better future. Ready for a change.

And ready to leave this place behind.

"I mean, she has access to things we've only dreamt of," one of the girls says.

"Yeah, but she'd narc the second she got caught. She's what, fifteen?" He scoffs. "Practically a child."

"I'm seventeen," I grit out.

"Her father is Alpha Zade's beta," another guy answers.

They're talking as if I'm not here.

"Doesn't that give me an advantage?" I add. "Their innocent, little daughter... she would never betray them like that," I say, making my voice

sound whiny. “Sweet Deirdre Pierce? She could never.” I roll my eyes. “They think they’ve won. That I had a momentarily rebellious period. But now I’m grounded, and I’ve been nothing but well-behaved when I’m at home.” My words are shaky. “A lot of the time, it’s to my detriment, too.”

I think of the way my parents have already discussed how they’re planning on marrying me off to Zeek, Zade’s psychotic younger brother, as punishment. There’s a reason they shipped him off to Los Angeles—a reason they don’t talk about him much.

“But I promise, I want the same things you do. Justice. Freedom. What Alpha Zade is doing... it’s wrong. Unforgivable. I want to leave this goddamn place, *just like you*,” I finish, my voice breaking on the last word. “I’ve seen firsthand what they do to outsiders. What they’re capable of,” I growl. “This is *personal* for me.”

They all watch me warily. I know what they’re thinking. I know they have preconceived notions about me—about my family.

“What about your sister?” one of the girls asks, as if she can read my mind.

I shake my head. “She’s not involved, but if she found out, she’d be supportive.”

The girls look between themselves skeptically. One of them smirks. “She’s betrothed to Zade Crawford,” she sneers. “How could she possibly be supportive?”

My lips form a thin line. I guess it’s now or never. Reveal the truth to these people, with no guarantee they won’t tell everyone in Willow Creek, or risk them pushing me away tonight. My parents kept Adri’s whereabouts hidden from the other shifters while she was in Shadow territory. Her absence got chalked up to a bad bout of mono, and now that she’s back to being paraded around as Zade’s fiancée, no one asks questions about her monthslong absence. No one even thinks about questioning the fact that shifters aren’t supposed to catch human diseases as easily.

If I tell them, the truth will be out there.

But without risk, there can be no reward.

What would Adri do?

She’d fucking tell them everything just to spite our family.

“My sister wasn’t actually sick, you know,” I say slowly. They all stop talking, stop *moving* as I continue. “She was in Shadow pack territory. Because their alpha, Phoenix Adair, is her fated mate.” Everyone goes still.

Swallowing, my whole body tingles with betrayal toward my parents. And it feels... amazing.

My entire life, I've been their precious daughter. Their princess. While Adri got to do whatever she wanted, I had to abide by the rules. I was not the wayward daughter. I was their *biological* miracle. Of course they treated the two of us differently. I never looked down on Adri for it—she was my big sister, no matter our blood relation. That never mattered to me. But I got off on pleasing my parents. I felt *obligated* to be agreeable. Adri was the sarcastic one, so that meant I had to be the quiet one. It wasn't her fault. She is who she is, and I love her for it.

But I'm sick of bowing down to my parents.

Maybe I want to be a little bit wayward, too.

“What they did to Adri—not just recently, but when she was a baby—makes me want to vomit. This whole pack is rotten from the inside, and I want to *expose* them. I want to bring Zade down, and I want to get vengeance for what they did to my sister. I also want to reunite her with her mate and leave this place behind. Hopefully, we can *all* get out of this toxic place.”

That's my end game.

I have to hope that Adri will be proud of me. Because while Zade and my parents don't see the minute changes that had occurred to her while she was gone, I do. I see the secretive smirks when she seems lost in thought, talking to her mate, and the dark expressions that shadow her features whenever she looks at Zade. She thinks I don't know that fated mates can communicate through their minds, but I do.

I'm glad she has Phoenix, glad she still has that connection.

She resents our parents and her *beloved* Zade just as much as I do—probably more, actually. She's always stood against the stifling traditions here, against the formality and the pomp and circumstance.

So, *no*. I'm not betraying her.

I'm betraying my parents.

Which is fucking fine with me.

Let them burn.

One of the guys snorts. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “Why would I lie about that? Giving you that information puts them at risk.” The shifters look between themselves again. I smile as I reach down for a beer. “I'm putting everything on the line to be here. I might've been mildly curious when I first started coming here, before my parents

caught me, but now..." I pop the cap off on a nearby rock. "Now, it's personal. I can't watch those monsters marry my sister to the alpha. I can't watch as they tear her further and further away from her *moon-fated mate* and pretend that everything is how it was before."

And there it is.

The truth.

The heart of why I'm here.

Adri has too much on her plate. She can't know I'm here, or she'd worry herself sick. She always watched out for me, always made sure I was okay. She was the epitome of a protective older sister.

Now it's my turn to watch out for *her*. To protect *her*.

"I want to take them down," I add slowly, making eye contact with all of them. "I want to get us out of here. For her. For me. For *you*," I finish, treading carefully on my words.

"Fine," the girl who seems to be the leader says firmly. I vaguely recall that her name is Shayla. "We'll give you one more chance, Pierce."

One by one, the shifters walk up to me, clinking their bottles against mine. One by one, they initiate me in.

And I am the only one who *isn't* a Shadow wolf.

My eyes scan their hair, most of which is dyed lighter to blend in. But their wolves can't lie. You can't dye magical fur.

They all have black fur—just like Adri.

She wasn't the only one stolen from the land she was born in.

And that's just the Shadow wolves in *this* city. I can't imagine how many there are within the entire territory.

"You all deserve to know what happened to you," I say softly. "It's personal for you, and it's also personal for me. I can't betray you. Do you understand why I'm here now?"

They look at me with wide eyes, nodding slowly as realization hits them.

With a huff, I reach down and grab a stick, then spear the end of a marshmallow and stick it over the roaring flames.

"Now that that's settled..." I smirk. "Who wants a s'more?"

CHAPTER I

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MUTE YOU

ADRI

IF I HAVE to endure another formal dinner as Zade's fiancée, I swear to the gods, I just might spontaneously combust. My cheeks ache from plastering on a smile, my palms are sore from digging my nails into my flesh, and the space between my thighs is wet, because my *actual* husband continues to whisper dirty thoughts into my mind—just because he can.

I just came into the pair of underwear you left me, he growls into my mind as I sit eating a salad next to Zade. Squirming in my seat, I keep my face neutral. Imagining him using my underwear like that sends a tremor of pleasure down my spine. Gods, I miss him.

Oh yeah? How many times? I ask.

A dark chuckle reverberates through me. *Every morning and every night. The smell of your pussy is everywhere, and it's too much to resist.*

I choke on my water and Zade slaps my back, an expression of concern on his face.

“You okay, Adrienne?”

I nod, clearing my throat. “Yep. Just went down the wrong pipe.”

Zade turns back to the other shifters he was talking to, and like clockwork, Phoenix continues speaking into my mind. The man has zero filter, and his timing is impeccably inconvenient.

I can't wait to slide my tongue up and down your slit. Inhale your juices and lap them up with my tongue.

Jesus.

My face heats, because I know he'll do exactly that.

You do know I'm out in public, right? It's not like I can mute you.

Another dark chuckle, and I have to actively keep my eyes from rolling. I don't usually tell him when I'll be with Zade, only because there's no off button on this mind-speaking thing. He has a knack for inundating me with this kind of talk if he knows I'm with him, which was funny at first, but in situations like this, when I'm in public, I just turn into a flushed, bumbling mess.

Why would you mute me, Midnight? Are you saying you don't want to hear me come all over your panties again? Just knowing you're in Willow Creek territory with that motherfucker makes me want to burn the whole continent down. And knowing how wet you probably are for me... it makes me rage, and it makes me come so hard when I think of being inside you soon.

He groans, and I know he's telling the truth. He's pleasuring himself again.

I stop the whimper waiting to escape my throat at imagining his thick forearms pumping his long, hard shaft. My clit throbs when I think of his knot expanding, searching me out, waiting to fill me with his seed...

Too bad I'm not there to lick up the puddle you're probably making in your panties.

My breathing hitches, and I take another sip of water. I can feel my face turn bright red, and I can't seem to catch my breath.

Knock it off. I'm at a nice dinner. But yes, I'm wet for you. I'm always wet for you, Alpha.

He groans into my mind again, and I can tell he's close. *Good girl*, he purrs. *Where are you?*

"So, tell me everything," a voice says from behind me. I spin around and see a young woman about my age, with her hand on the back of my chair. She looks vaguely familiar, but beyond that, I have no idea who she is.

"Sorry?" I ask, squinting.

"The wedding!" she exclaims. Taking a seat in the chair next to me, she smiles. Her hair is long and blonde, and her eyes are hazel. Her skin is nearly translucent. She's gorgeous. "I'm Marie Byron," she adds. "We met briefly a few weeks ago. My parents are friends with the Crawfords."

I nod, pretending to remember. The last name Byron rings a bell. I think

her father works with Zade's enforcers in some capacity. I'm supposed to know this, but unlike the close-knit leadership of the Shadow pack, Zade formed a downright *regime*. There are hundreds of people at his beck and call, which is why parties like these tend to be so large and formal. Learning all of the nuances in his pack would be impossible.

"Right! Marie. So nice to see you again."

She smirks. "You have no idea who I am, do you?" She says it in a way that disarms me, and I snort.

"I'm really sorry. I've met about a zillion people in the last month."

She chuckles. "It's fine. Really. I can't even imagine how much work goes into being the alpha's fiancée." Leaning closer, she smiles conspiratorially. "I promise not to tell anyone. I just want the deets on the most infamous wedding to hit Willow Creek in years."

You still there? Phoenix asks in my mind.

Shush. I'm out. Stop distracting me.

You dismiss your alpha so easily. Are you with Zade?

I smirk. *He's here, yes, but I'm not talking to him. You can stop the mental pissing contest.*

He barks a laugh, but then my mind is silent, so I suppose he can take a hint after all. I turn my attention back to Marie.

"Infamous wedding? Really?" I scoff. "It's not that big of a deal, is it?"

Marie rolls her eyes. "They've hired peacocks!" she says excitedly. "Plus, it's at Ventana, and everyone's rooms are paid for..." she trails off. "I dream of finding my mate one day and having a wedding as luxurious as this one."

"I'm sure you will one day."

Since I've completely checked out of any and all wedding talk, I actually didn't know about the peacocks, but it doesn't surprise me. Ventana is also one of *the* nicest places to get married in Willow Creek territory, nestled right on the coast of Big Sur. The Crawfords are throwing an all-out gala, splurging on rooms for all of the guests, a seven-course dinner, and a bespoke, custom wedding dress for me. I haven't seen it yet, but Emma Crawford and my mother insist it's one of the most beautiful dresses they've ever seen.

"And Zade..." Marie visibly shivers. "He's so handsome," she says, her voice low. "You are one lucky girl."

Ever since the decision was made to move up the wedding, I've needed to start parading myself around town publicly. All the girls who hated me in

high school are suddenly my best friends. Maybe it's because Zade is alpha now, or maybe it's because they realize I'm not going anywhere, but girls like Marie didn't talk to me until a month ago—*ever*. I'm immediately suspicious. We're all taught the same things about obedience and submission. I look at Marie, and while she seems nice, I can't trust her. Not really. Not like I can trust Nora.

"Thank you," I answer, sipping my water like I've been taught. "I feel like the luckiest girl in the world," I add, using the same fake smile as before.

Gods, imagine if this was really my life.

She grins as she stands. "Well, I should go mingle. But it was really nice meeting you... again."

We both laugh, and when she's gone, that same feeling of emptiness overcomes me. I'm alone here. I have Deirdre, but she's still grounded—still rebelling against my parents. I support her, but I wish she'd open up to me. She's hiding something, and it leaves me unable to talk to anyone. Add that in with the fact that I have no idea how long I'll have to stay here, how long it will take for Phoenix to gather enough evidence to bring me home... everything feels so up in the air. I hunch forward a bit and wrap my arms around myself as I watch everyone else at this dinner converse.

I miss Phoenix.

I miss Nora, and Kaz, and Valen.

Being back here is strange, and it doesn't feel right somehow. It's like I'm in a bad dream, waiting to wake up.

Are you there? I ask Phoenix through our minds.

I'm always here, Midnight.

I instantly relax. *Was the second time as good as the first?* I tease.

He chuckles. *No. Nothing is as good as your pussy being wrapped around my cock, Adrienne.*

I smile, and just as I'm about to respond, Zade walks up to me, reaching a hand out.

"Let's go," he commands.

"Already?" I ask, looking around.

He narrows his eyes. "I have an early morning."

Nodding, I let him pull me to the coat closet. Our parents aren't here tonight, so he drives me home. I'm lucky I can use my 'trauma' with Phoenix as a deterrent whenever he tries anything. He always asks. He *always* asks, which I'm grateful for. He hasn't crossed that line with me yet, and I can only

hope that he never will.

I've learned so much about what happened after I left Willow Creek the first time. How his anger at my leaving caused him to overpower his father and become the alpha one night. But not before Godric was able to manipulate and verbally abuse him, blaming him for everything that happened. Zade hasn't exactly been forthcoming, but I can understand *why* he changed so much. He has always been adamant about pleasing his family. His father especially. And me leaving created a vacuum for Zade to turn into a person I hardly recognize.

Also, Zade isn't handling his anger about everything very well. My time with Phoenix—my silence, my hesitation, the way I've stopped defying him—has made him suspicious. He's also jealous. Alphas are possessive, and Zade is self-conscious about letting his fiancée go, having to lie and manipulate to get me back, and how much I've pulled away. I know he can sense that I've changed. That something is different. Not knowing is driving him *crazy*. So instead of talking to me like he used to, he's doubled down on the tactic Godric instilled in him—controlling me. Getting me to submit. Forgetting our friendship completely because *we've both changed and things are different now*, per his words.

I visibly shiver anytime I think about what could've happened if I hadn't left. If I'd married Zade. Would he have remained nice? Or would he have inevitably turned into who he is now?

Needless to say, the drive home is awkward and quiet. Zade's jaw is clenched the entire time, and a small wave of sympathy washes over me. He inherited this title. He inherited *all* of this, and suddenly, he's in charge of a huge pack. I may hate him for making me come back here, but I can also dredge up some pity for my ex-best friend.

I *miss* that friend. So much that it makes my eyes water.

After pulling in front of my house, he stops and looks over at me. I stiffen, waiting for him to say something. My throat constricts when I think of that old friend. Of the boy I told everything to. Of my partner in crime. We were so close, but his betrayal wedged a chasm between us that just continues to grow every day. I can't stop it—the old Zade is gone.

“Are you going to sit there, or are you going to give your fiancé a goodnight kiss? *On the lips?*” he growls.

And all the pity, all the sympathy, drains right out of me.

“I'm not ready,” I whisper, using my age-old excuse. “You know that.”

Nothing physical.”

A small part of me is terrified that one day, he’s going to tire of me *not being ready* and snap. The old Zade would’ve never done that.

His grip tightens on the steering wheel, and he bares his teeth. “Good night, then,” he bites out, looking away.

Maybe that day is closer than I think.

I swallow the catty retort bubbling up my throat. My hand grazes the door handle before he scoffs.

“You’re going to have to kiss me at some point, Adri,” he adds, his blue eyes finding mine. “We are getting married in less than a *month*,” he hisses.

“I know.”

Trust me, I know.

My whole life is ticking away, one day at a time.

As I close the door behind me, Zade speeds away, not even ensuring I get inside before he’s around the corner.

Right now? I hate him.

I hate that this is my life.

CHAPTER 2

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ELEVEN SECONDS

PHOENIX

NORA and I glance at each other dubiously before looking back at the small townhouse before us. We're in Vancouver this week, dealing with pack business and appeasing the asshole alpha to the south of us who is holding my bride captive. Like his father, he must get off on bossing all the neighboring packs around, because we spend most of the week drawing and redrawing our borders—something we always do in the weeks after resigning the treaty—ensuring everything is fair. It physically hurts to hold my fucking tongue when he's the one who gets to see *my mate* every goddamn day.

What else could he possibly want? What else could he possibly take from me? He already has everything. He has my whole fucking world. I don't give a fuck if they want the river to be a dividing line or not, but apparently, some of his advisors are unhappy about my wolves using the same river as their wolves.

We're fighting over a fucking river.

But now that the lines have been redrawn, they get a minuscule amount of extra land. I'm sure Zade is enjoying the alpha show-off, but I certainly am not. I give zero fucks about him.

However, the ordeal brought us to Vancouver, and now we're standing in front of the Ashwood residence.

Adrienne's suspected birth parents.

“Well, it’s now or never,” Nora says softly, taking my hand.

She of all people knows how daunting it can be to find your birth parents. Both of ours are dead, but after experiencing such heartbreaking betrayal with Kaz and Jacinda... I don’t trust easily.

“Let’s do this,” I say, pulling us forward.

Coming here means we’re one step closer to finding out if these people are Adri’s birth parents. I didn’t want to send an email or call them. Talking to them in person... I have to see for myself.

We walk up to the front door, and I take in the surroundings. It’s a simple townhouse. Loved and lived in. Light blue with white trim. Nothing is perfect, and I instantly like it. Flowers droop in the front garden, and a recycling bin is nearly overflowing with soda cans, milk jugs, and aluminum tins. The grass in the front garden is overgrown, but there are wildflowers lining the edge of the white fence. It’s... charming. Nora raises her hand to knock again when the door swings open, and a teenage girl looks back at us.

Long, dark hair, golden eyes, pale skin—she’s a dead ringer for Adrienne. My pulse hammers inside my chest. Even her surprised expression as she takes me in, as she realizes who I am, is so similar to Adri’s.

My throat clogs, and I clear it quickly. “Hi,” I say warmly. “I’m Alpha Phoenix.”

The girl, who can’t be older than fourteen, crosses her arms. “Yeah, I know who you are.” Her eyes bore into mine, and I can’t help but grin. Her attitude. Her sass. Her confidence.

Gods, she’s just like her... sister.

It hits me then. This could be my mate’s *sister*.

“Are your parents home?” I ask, holding my hands out in a non-threatening way. It’s not every day the pack alpha shows up on your doorstep.

“Sure,” she says, rolling her eyes as she twists around. “Mom! Alpha Phoenix is here to see you!”

I hear a yelp and then a crash in the kitchen, and I can’t help it when my lips form a smirk. The girl turns back to us.

“Come in, I guess,” she says, her tone indifferent.

I look at Nora, and her face is white with shock. Guess I’m not the only one surprised at the resemblance.

We both step inside just as a woman scurries into view. She has rubber gloves on, and her hair is pulled up into a messy twist on top of her head.

But... *fuck*. This has to be Adrienne's birth mother. If she's not, then I'm going crazy. Dark hair, the same face shape as Adrienne...

"Oh my gods," she whispers, looking between Nora and me. "Is it Niven? Is he okay? He left for work a few minutes ago—"

I take a step forward. "Your husband is fine, Mrs. Ashwood."

She visibly sags with relief. "Oh, thank fuck," she mutters, immediately covering her mouth. "Sorry."

Yep. Definitely Adrienne's mom.

I look at Nora again, and she has a wide smile on her face. When her eyes flit to mine, I know what she's thinking immediately. Do we even need this DNA test?

"Why don't we take a seat?" Nora asks gently. "I'm Nora Storm," she adds. "Phoenix's beta."

Eva nods. "I know who you are." She looks between us for a second before gesturing behind her. "Oh my gods, I've forgotten my manners. Would you like anything to eat or drink? I haven't been to the shops yet, so we don't have a lot of food, but then again, I didn't expect you... I can do tuna and crackers? A salad? We also have—"

I hold my hand out. "Nothing for us, but thank you."

She nods and turns, leading us inside. We follow her into a cozy living area. It's nothing fancy, but it screams *home*. My wolf definitely likes it here. He wants to explore and take in the scent of his mate's family. It's as though an instant connection has been formed—by her blood. Makes sense why I felt none of this when I entered the Pierce home all those months ago.

As Nora and I take a seat on the sofa, Eva discards her rubber gloves on the side table and sits down across from us. There are a few newspapers scattered on the coffee table, and an old cup of coffee. Eva swears under her breath as she reaches over to tidy, but I place a hand on top of hers.

"Please don't tidy on our account," I tell her, and she stiffens.

My nostrils flare, sensing the omega wolf inside her. Which means Adri must've gotten her omega tendencies from Eva and her alpha tendencies from Niven.

It makes me wonder if they're mates—the rarity of omegas and the fact that alphas almost always mate with omegas makes me think that perhaps they are.

And that's *if* they're her parents. We still need their DNA to match. I don't want to get ahead of myself, and I certainly don't want to get

everyone's hopes up if it turns out they aren't related. Although, *how* I'm going to do that is going to be complicated. I can't just tell Eva about Adri. If I'm wrong, it'll just hurt her and reopen an old wound. My eyes flick to the mantel, taking in the pictures of the young girl who opened the door—baby pictures, childhood pictures, family pictures of the three of them.

Their baby was never found. They adapted to their life without Adri. I'm going to need to ask for hair samples without giving anything concrete away. I can't tell them she's my mate, or what her name is. Besides, when we tell them everything, it should be when we're sure.

Eva watches me with wide, terrified eyes, so I cut to the chase.

"While doing an audit on some old paperwork, I came across an article about your daughter. Your older daughter," I clarify.

Eva gasps. "Adrienne?"

Nora stills next to me. The energy in the room is intense, and my heart is beating a mile a minute.

"You..." My throat constricts. "Her name is Adrienne?"

Eva nods. "It was her great-grandmother's name."

Warmth spreads across my chest. I look at Nora, and we both have the same anguished yet elated expression on our faces. I instantly place an indifferent mask on my face and clear my throat.

She should be here with us. She should be here, meeting her mother.

"Alpha Thaler was... How shall I put this?" I say slowly. "He was mixed up in things I'm still trying to understand. It appears some of those things were the illegal adoptions of Shadow wolves to wealthy Willow Creek wolves."

Eva's eyes dart between us. "What?" she asks, her voice breathy. "Adoptions?"

Nora nods. "We've uncovered a few already. Missing babies all around the same time period. With your permission, we'd like to collect some DNA from you and your husband so that we can match it with the global shifter database. We're hoping to reunite families."

Eva suddenly bursts out crying, and I move before I can even think about what I'm doing. I kneel before Eva, taking her hands in mine.

"Mrs. Ashwood," I murmur. "I'm sorry if I've upset you."

Eva shakes her head, tears streaming down her face as her chest rises and falls rapidly. "N-no. You... you didn't upset me," she hiccups, sniffing. "You just gave me hope, that's all."

I nod solemnly. *Me too.* “If you agree, we’ll just need samples of hair—”
“Oh my gods, I have to call Niven!”

I chuckle. “I’ll send a courier to collect the samples tomorrow morning.”
My eyes flick to Nora. “It’s... somewhat urgent.”

My mate. She is my fucking mate.

“Okay. Sure. Yes. Anything,” Eva says, nodding vigorously.

I glance over her shoulder at the younger daughter. “I’m so sorry to intrude,” I tell them both. “Our hope is to be able to unite you with your daughter.”

The girl swallows, slightly paler than before. “I could... I could have a sister?”

“It’s possible,” I tell her gently. “We won’t know for about two weeks, and then we need to make plans for extraction. It will be... complicated. Politically.”

I already know I’ll be hounding the lab every damn hour so that I can get my mate back. I haven’t really thought about how I’m going to contact the Shadow wolves in Willow Creek territory, or how I’m going to get that DNA.

“Okay,” Eva whispers, her voice breaking. “What happens when we get the results?”

“Nora has been helping me with the legality of everything. Since these adoptions were presumed to be illegal, it’s possible there could be ramifications. We’re hoping they settle in a court of law to avoid any sort of conflict, but it would be up to the families to sue. There are other complications, but we can face those when they arise,” I add, thinking of Zade and his signatures.

Eva swallows. “I just want her back.”

“I know, Mrs. Ashwood. We’ll do our best to find her.” I stand up and look between Adrienne’s mother and sister. “I have been wondering... how did Adrienne go missing?” The question has been eating away at me.

Eva sighs, placing her hands on her thighs. “Someone stole her from the front garden,” she says quietly. “She was three months old. I’d gone inside for her blanket. I had her in the stroller, ready to go on a walk.” Her lips tremble. “I’d forgotten her blanket. Someone must’ve been watching us, because by the time I got back outside, she was gone. I traced my steps. I timed it out. Over, and over, and over. And every single time, I got eleven seconds. That’s all it took. Eleven seconds.”

I swallow. “I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes are clear when she looks back up at me. “On second thought, I like the idea of legal ramifications,” she adds, her face contorting. “I’m still so angry about it all. I hope you find her. I hope you find them all, Alpha Phoenix.”

We leave shortly after that, and as Nora and I walk down the road to where we parked, I can’t help but think of the scenario that Eva painted.

Eleven seconds.

Why Adri?

Why did they take her?

What was Alpha Thaler thinking?

I glance back and look around at the surrounding houses. Before today, I was convinced Adri’s kidnapping was random. But I realize now... it might not have been.

Maybe it wasn’t random *at all*.

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CHAPTER 3

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BETTER WHEN YOU DO IT

ADRI

THREE WEEKS.

Three weeks until I'm supposed to walk down the aisle and marry Zade. Phoenix has been eerily silent all week, but he assures me that he and Nora are making progress on confirming my birth parents. That they will get me out before the wedding. As the days tick on without any solid updates—aside from how many times Phoenix comes while thinking of me—my anxiety begins to skyrocket. Plus, Deirdre has been suspiciously closed off. Not in a mean way, but something's up with her. When she's not at home or at school, she's out. Even though she's grounded, our parents hardly keep tabs on her. They're too busy dragging me around from soiree to soiree, bragging about me to anyone who will listen.

I've suddenly become the golden child, and I don't know what to make of it.

I'm sitting on my bed, waiting for Phoenix to answer me, when I hear the telltale sign of car tires in front of our house. Hopping up, I peer out, watching as Deirdre climbs out of the passenger side of an unrecognizable car. *Is she dating someone?* Her eyes snap up to mine and I wave, but she just gives me a faint smile in return. I can't see the driver from where I'm located, and the white car drives away. When I hear her come up the stairs, I wait until she's right in front of my door before I open it.

"It's past midnight," I accuse, taking in her appearance. Muddy boots.

Leggings. A warm sweatshirt. Waterproof jacket and a hat. She smells like smoke and fire.

“I’m aware,” she says, smiling mirthfully as she holds up a watch.

“Mom and Dad still have your phone?” I ask, cocking an eyebrow as I move aside and gesture for her to come into my room. She hesitates for a second, but then she comes inside and closes the door behind her.

“You guessed it,” she says bitterly. “I have a burner phone in my room, but I didn’t need it tonight.”

My eyes flick over her appearance. Six months ago, she was the epitome of a Willow Creek wolf—blonde hair, impeccable clothes, an innocent yet refined air about her. But now? She’s... harder. Sharper around the edges. More suspecting. Her hair is long and wavy. I can’t even remember the last time she styled it. Instead of pink tank tops, she’s wearing black leather trousers and dark green jackets. Her face has zero makeup. I cock my head as I cross my arms.

“Are you... okay?” I ask, my throat catching.

She gives me a soft smile. “I’m fine, Adri. I promise.”

“But you still... can’t tell me what’s going on,” I finish.

She pulls her lower lip between her teeth. It stings a bit—knowing she’s withholding something from me.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why?” I ask, barely above a whisper. “I came back and suddenly you were... different. Is it a guy?”

Her face falls, and she shakes her head.

“A girl? You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

She chuckles. “There’s no one. You’d be the first to know if there were.”

I study her blue eyes a bit more intently. What could she possibly be hiding?

“Dee, is it drugs? Drinking?” My nostrils flare as I sniff her out, but all I get are whiffs of smoke and fire. “Arson? Graffiti?”

Her lips tug to the side as she smiles. “It’s none of those things, Adri.” She opens and closes her mouth a few times before she shrugs. “You weren’t the only one who changed when you found out what happened to you.”

Her words clang through me.

“You mean with Phoenix?”

I rack my brain for any evidence of her behavior that night—the night I found out he was my mate. But nothing rings a bell. I don’t remember much

aside from the searing pain when he inevitably rejected me.

“All of it. Your birth parents. The way Mom and Dad lied. Zade and his... his... need for power. He’s cruel, Adri. I worry about you.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me,” I tell her gently, trying to put the pieces together.

The smoke and fire smell, the clothes, the late nights... What does it have to do with *me*?

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she adds, her eyes pleading. “He’s already executed several people in our pack for treason. They were working with other packs, trying to undermine him after he took over as alpha. They thought they could fight him and win, so he killed them before they got the chance.”

I swallow. I knew this. I’d overheard him telling my father about it. And Phoenix had confirmed in my mind. Despite being so far away, in another pack, he seemed to have first-hand knowledge of the goings on of the Willow Creek pack.

“Are you... spying for Phoenix?” I ask casually, blurting it out before I can think.

Dee barks a laugh. “No. I’ve only met him the one time, Adri.”

I nod, brows furrowed, as I sort through what she’s telling me. Before I can ask any more questions, she sighs and pulls me into a tight hug.

“You don’t need to worry about me. I promise I’m okay. Focus on the task at hand.”

I wince. “You mean my wedding?”

She pulls away and smirks. “I doubt it’ll actually come to that. I just mean... focus on yourself, okay? I know it’s a lot being back here without your mate.”

I nod as she backs away to the door. “You know I’ll never stop worrying, though,” I tell her as she opens the door. “Whenever you’re ready to tell me, I’m here.”

She smiles and nods. “I know.”

And then she’s gone.

As soon as my door shuts, I lie down on my bed.

Is Deirdre spying for you? I ask Phoenix.

It takes him a minute to respond.

Spying for me? No. Though, that would’ve been a fantastic idea. Do you think she’d be up to it?

I scowl. *Leave her alone.* Thinking, I turn my head and glance out of the

window. *She's been out late most nights, smelling like smoke and fire. She won't tell me what's going on.*

He hums in response. *That is strange...*

I just worry about her, I tell him.

I know you do, Midnight.

She's up to something. I'm going to find out what it is.

I'm sure you will, he answers, sounding resigned. I've never met anyone more headstrong than you.

I laugh, which disappears instantly when I think of him lying in his bed. It's well past midnight now, and I imagine his large body sprawled out on his bed.

I miss you so much, I say, the voice in my head a bit softer than normal. I miss your mouth and your hands. I miss the way you hold me. I miss your kindness and your eyes. I miss your cooking. I miss Nora, and Valen, and Kaz. I miss the lake and your house. Sniffing, I curl into a ball. I miss everything.

He's quiet for a minute as my mind plays my words back around in my mind. Finally, he speaks.

I have never missed anyone as much as I miss you, little wolf. Every piece of me, every fiber, aches for you.

I swallow the sob threatening to spill out of me. *Please say you've been making progress with my birth parents. Please say I'm one day closer to going home.*

I have. I promise you, as soon as I have something concrete, I will tell you.

He's quiet for another minute as I mull his words over. Then, he continues.

I know this must be hard for you. Waiting, not knowing. We are making progress. I would burn the world to the ground before I let you marry Zade fucking Crawford. You have to trust me.

I do, I tell him. I trust you. I'm just... missing you.

You have no idea how much I wish you were here right now, Adrienne.

I think I do, I tease.

Oh yeah? Tell me what you would do to me if we were together.

My whole body flushes as my fingers trail beneath my sleep shorts.

I'd make you take your clothes off, I purr into his mind. I'd sit and admire my mate for a few minutes. I'd probably drool.

He chuckles. *And? What else?* His voice, even in my mind, has that husky edge to it that always makes me want to jump him.

I smile. *Then I'd take my clothes off and play with myself.*

Details, Midnight. Give me details. How would you play with yourself?

I'd spread my legs and let you watch as I roved my fingers lower, teasing my clit before inserting my middle finger inside myself slowly.

Keep going, he growls. You better be doing exactly what you're describing.

I am, I retort.

He growls. *And how does it feel? To be inside yourself?*

Good.

Just good? he asks.

It's better when you do it.

He moans. *Fuck, little wolf. Okay, what else? What are you doing with your other hand?*

I smile. *I'm using my own wetness to play with my nipples. I'm upping the tempo. I would watch you stroke your cock.*

Oh, I'm stroking it, he groans.

And how does it feel, alpha?

He roars in my head. *It's better when you do it.*

Touché.

I laugh. *What are you doing with your other hand?* I ask him, repeating the same question he asked me.

Playing with my balls. Imagining your soft fingers. Imagining your hot, wet mouth.

Just my mouth? I tease. There are two other holes I'm a little bit more interested in.

He's quiet for a few seconds. *Two?*

I smirk. *Don't be coy, alpha. My desire for you to dominate me includes all ways.*

He roars again. *Fuck, Adrienne. Just thinking about mounting you—I'm already close.*

My back arches at his words, and I swirl my thumb against my swollen nub quicker. My breathing catches as I insert a second finger.

I'm going faster. And there are two fingers.

He lets out a low purr. *Add a third, he commands.*

I do, sending a moan down our mental connection. *I wish I was coming*

on your cock instead of my fingers, I whisper.

Trust me, little wolf. Me fucking too. Tell me when you're close. I'm nearly there.

I groan out loud and squeeze my eyes closed. My whole body is taut, and I begin to tremble as my muscles tighten and bunch in my core, waiting to spring free.

What I wouldn't give to feel your tight pussy squeeze me dry, he says, his voice hoarse.

Gods, yes, I tell him. I want to come all over you. On your cock, on your face, on your fingers... I want it all.

Come for me, Adrienne.

My body stills just before an explosion of pleasure flashes through me. My hips buck against my fingers, and Phoenix is making the most ungodly sounds in my mind...

I quiver and tremble as the last of it leaves my body.

Fuck, I say.

New sheets? he asks playfully.

I told you, I haven't done... that... since—since you...

He growls. *I need new sheets. And a new headboard.*

I moan. *Stop teasing me.*

He sends a low chuckle down our bond. *Get some sleep, okay?*

Okay. I love you.

I love you too, wife.

I'm still grinning when I climb into the shower. Even though I'm impatient about leaving, I'm grateful we have the mental bond. I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have it—if we couldn't talk like this. Especially since Zade and my parents are monitoring all calls, texts, and activity.

I start to fall asleep shortly after that to the images of enormous black wolves and a turquoise lake surrounded by snow-capped trees. I only realize it's a vision that Phoenix is sending me as I'm dozing off. He's giving me a glimpse of my *home*. And I'm eternally thankful for him.

CHAPTER 4

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THERE YOU ARE

DEIRDRE

AS I SHUT my bedroom door, I sigh and lean against it, closing my eyes. I can't tell Adri about what I'm doing. And I hate it. I hate shutting her out of my life like this, but I know it's wiser. It will keep her safe. Not to mention, I know she'll worry endlessly, and she has enough on her plate. I'll tell her everything one day soon, but not tonight. Not until I have an actual plan. Otherwise, she's just going to want to get involved, and I can't risk Zade finding anything out. It's for the best. Keeping her in the dark is for her own safety.

My bi-weekly meetups have become my salvation. Over the course of the last couple of weeks, I've gotten to know the other shifters better. They trust me now. I give them details about Zade and his whereabouts—something easy to ascertain, because of my dad being Zade's beta. Aside from being a double agent, I've been plotting out our escape—looking into emancipation, digging up old shifter laws to see how and when a treaty can be broken. Though I know Phoenix would allow us safe passage, I hardly know him. Still, our end goal is getting out.

I just have to figure out *how* exactly we're going to do that.

Inhaling deeply, I let out a long, slow exhale just as my burner phone begins to vibrate. Narrowing my eyes, I walk over to the flip phone that's been sitting on my dresser all night and stare down at the unknown number. It's possible it's a spam call or something. But, it's also possible it has

something to do with the people I spent all night with, since they are the only ones who have the number.

I flip it open and hold it up to my ear without saying anything. I hear a man sigh before he begins speaking in an unfamiliar voice.

“Is this Deirdre Pierce?”

I stay quiet. A low chuckle reverberates through the earpiece.

“Very well. I’ll assume I have the right number. Can you confirm by pressing any of the phone keys, at least? I have some classified information that could incriminate your sister and her mate if it got into the wrong hands.”

My heart stutters. “Adri? What does she—”

“Aha. There you are,” he purrs.

Something about his voice and the way he says those three words... it makes me feel like I’ve been dunked into a warm bath.

I shake my head, clearing those thoughts away. “Who the hell is this?” I hiss.

“That’s not important. But I have a proposition for you.”

I stand up straighter. “How do I know I can trust you? I have no idea who I’m speaking to.”

“Your sister knows me. That’s all that matters.”

I roll my lower lip between my teeth. This could be someone loyal to Zade, but I don’t think so. If he wanted to incriminate my sister and her alpha, he’d simply do it. I’m a lowly pawn in this new game I’m playing. And how did he get my number?

I decide to trust him and hope my instincts are correct.

“Okay. What’s your proposition, then?”

“I know you’ve formed an alliance with the other Willow Creek resistors.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “How do you—”

“Alpha Zade may think he knows everything going on in his territory, but I know more. It’s my job. I’ve gotten word that you’re meeting in public spaces, out in the open.”

My mind runs through the Shadow wolves I’ve come to know. Did one of them narc? Is one of them a double agent? My heart beats quicker. How does this man know about where we meet? Is Adri safe? Before I can ask any other questions, he continues.

“I’d like to offer you all a secure location. But I’m going to need everyone to sign a confidentiality agreement.”

My eyes narrow further. “And why do you want to help us? What’s in it for you?”

He sighs on the other end of the line. “Because Adrienne is important to me. Because I believe in your cause and I want to help you. Because I hate Alpha Zade with every bone in my body.” He growls the last part.

“Who are you?” I ask again.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Meet me at the industrial park off Highway 17 tomorrow at ten p.m. I will bring the NDAs, you bring your friends.”

I rack my brain trying to think of the location. “You mean the abandoned industrial park? The creepy one with rusty doors just before you enter the forest?” Unease slithers in my core.

“The very one. It hasn’t been used in ages, but I figured it’s better than a trailhead or public park.”

My stomach drops. “How do I know this isn’t a trap?”

The man chuckles. “I know Adrienne didn’t get sick. She ran away. To my pack. Her wolf is small and black. She still speaks to Phoenix in her mind. She drinks her coffee with oat milk—”

“Okay, fine. Point made,” I growl, interrupting him. “How do you know all this?”

“Tomorrow, kid. Don’t be late. I won’t wait.”

CHAPTER 5

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YOUR RIGHTFUL PLACE

ADRI

I WAKE up late the next morning and decide to run my wolf around. Everyone else is busy and out of the house, so I decide to take advantage. My wolf has been feeling restless since we arrived back in Willow Creek. Almost panicked. Assuaging her and calming her nerves takes a lot more effort than it used to. She's skittish—especially around Zade. I try to soothe her multiple times a day, but she doesn't like being back. Most days, she lies down stiffly, ears perked like she's waiting for something. I haven't felt her tail wag in... weeks.

After I pick up some coffee, I drive to Zade's house, holding my breath until I realize his car isn't in the driveway. Parking in the lot behind his house, I grab my small bag and walk onto the trail. I don't smell anyone strange in the near vicinity, so I clamber behind a tree and strip, shifting immediately and hiding my bag behind a blackberry bush. And then... I run.

It feels incredible. My wolf yelps with excitement as we run over our old stomping grounds. I've been back a couple of times since returning to Willow Creek, but not as much as I used to while I lived here. We hunt rabbits, follow unfamiliar scent trails, and then we jog to the river, drinking long, cold gulps of the freshwater. It's autumn now, so the leaves are beginning to change. The ground is cooler, too. My wolf likes it. We decide to rest in a patch of sunlight, and it's refreshing—staying cool while also soaking up the sunlight.

My wolf's tail doesn't stop wagging the entire time we explore for the first time in a long time.

That is... until a familiar scent assaults my nostrils. My wolf whimpers and lies down as Zade's large blonde wolf stalks up to us. He's huge now, almost twice the size he was six months ago. His hulking figure casts a shadow over the warm sun, and my wolf naturally cowers. Unlike my wolf, however, I just feel irritated. He shifts quickly, sitting down next to me as he pulls a pair of shorts on. I avert my eyes.

"What are you doing here, Adrienne?" His voice is low, and I know he probably doesn't mean to sound so menacing. But... he does.

I refuse to shift—refuse to let him see me naked. So I remain still, my wolf placing her head down on her paws.

"I'd appreciate a heads-up the next time you want to shift," he adds, narrowing his eyes at my wolf. His blue irises scan my form, and something akin to warmth breaks his cold demeanor. "I know you've been through a lot these last few months. Sometimes I wish... sometimes I wish I wasn't the alpha."

But you are, I want to bark. I stay quiet, my wolf eyes gazing out over the river.

Zade's hand comes to the back of my neck. My wolf instantly tenses as his fingers come to the scruff there and grip it firmly.

"I wish you'd obey me," he says softly. "I wish this wasn't so hard. Alpha Phoenix had to go and fuck everything up."

Mine. Phoenix is my mate. Mine.

A low growl starts in the back of my throat as my wolf pulls away from him.

Zade huffs a laugh, shaking his head. "It's like he brainwashed you."

I was always like this, I think. *You just chose to ignore it.*

"Sometimes I think about when we're married." He sighs as he leans back into his hands. "Will you love me? Or will our marriage be full of you resisting your rightful place?"

My wolf snorts, and I disguise it by shaking my head and pretending I sneezed.

My rightful place? He's got to be kidding with that bullshit.

"You're mine, Adrienne," he growls, looking down at me.

I was never yours. I have a mate, and he's waiting for me.

"You have been since we were thirteen. Longer, if you count the contract

our parents signed when we were infants. You need to remember that. I need you to remember that.” There’s an edge of vulnerability to his voice, and I almost feel sorry for him. I’d resent him, too, if he’d gone off and lived with his moon-fated mate for two months while being engaged to me.

But then I think of the way he came to Shadow territory and lied. How he manipulated the other packs. How he forged documents, and how he now kills traitors without a fair trial. He’s becoming the kind of alpha everyone warned me about when I mated with Phoenix. The irony is not lost on me. My entire adult life, Phoenix had been cast as the villain, and so many people believed those lies.

And yet, the real villain was within the Willow Creek community.

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but if you don’t comply, I’ll have no choice than to assume you’ve betrayed your own pack,” he says gruffly, driving my point home.

The man before me... he’s a stranger. *What happened to my best friend?* My wolf instinctually pulls farther away from him. Is it fear? Or is it mostly anger? Perhaps, wisely, it’s a bit of both. Zade has tasted power, and he delights in it. *My previous best friend has disappeared, and a monster now exists in its place.*

I was right to stay in my wolf form. I can’t let Zade threaten me. I *won’t* let him threaten me like he’s threatened so many others.

Zade stands, turns, and jogs away. I watch him go as relief washes over me.

Ten minutes later, I get up and jog back to the bag with clothes in it. Shifting quickly, I pull my jeans, sweater, necklace, and boots back on. Glancing at my phone, I notice I have several texts from Zade.

I think it would be best if you moved into my house before the wedding.

That way, I can keep you safe.

I don’t want to overstep, Adrienne, but you’ve given me no choice.

I feel like I can’t trust you anymore.

My heart stutters at the thought of moving into the Crawford residence. I knew it was inevitable. Emma had been helping me pack up my bedroom for the transition immediately following the wedding. We had a honeymoon to Italy planned, and of course the consummation.

Not that I was expecting to go through with any of it... but still.

The notion of moving in *before* the wedding when I never even intended to go through with the wedding sends a skittering of nerves down my spine. If I move in with Zade now, there's no telling what kinds of things will happen—what kinds of things he'll be able to get away with, being under the same roof as me. Even though it's horrible to think about, I don't trust him anymore, and I can't fight him off physically.

After his little warning just now, there's a chance he would never let me leave. He'd keep a constant eye on me. If he noticed anything suspicious... there's no telling what he'd do. I could say goodbye to my nightly sessions with Phoenix.

Phoenix.

I have to tell him what Zade's plans are.

With the threat of his mate living in Zade's house, he could get me out sooner.

I jog back to my car. Once the door is closed, I think about what I should tell Phoenix. On the one hand, maybe I'm overreacting. What if by telling him that Zade is forcing me to live in his house, it causes him to try to get me out early? What if my whining causes something to happen to him? Besides, it will be a couple of days before I'll be ready to move. I can tell him another time. Instead, I ask about my birth parents.

Hi, my love. Has there been any progress with my birth parents?

He answers a few seconds later. *The results are pending, Midnight. I threaten to level the lab twice a day, mind you, so they're working as quickly as they can.*

I chew on the inside of my lip. I assume that means he's somehow obtained a sample...

So, you've met them?

Silence.

I know he's staying quiet because he's trying to protect me. He doesn't want me to get my hopes up until we have definitive results and can corroborate our side of the story with multiple pieces of evidence. I finger the locket around my neck. The picture of the Ashwoods, the DNA test, their testimony—it would be enough for the other packs to take our side. It *had* to be enough.

I promise you, little wolf, the second I have what I need in my hands, I will raze the Crawford house to the fucking ground to get you back.

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CHAPTER 6

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THE NORA STORM

DEIRDRE

NOT ALL OF the resistors are willing to meet at the warehouse tonight. I understand their hesitation, of course—strange caller, sketchy location late at night, a concerning amount of vagueness—but the caller knew so much about Adri. I'd already concluded that it must've been someone in Phoenix's inner circle. Not Valen Stark, but another one of them. I remember Adri saying it was a small but tight circle, and I obviously can't ask her now, or it might rouse suspicion.

I change quickly into black leggings, a baggy black sweatshirt, and black boots. I don't even think I owned a single black item of clothing until a few months ago. Now, it's all I wear. I suppose it's true when people say that once your eyes are opened to certain atrocities, you can't ever unsee them. When Adri left, it was as if my entire world was turned upside down. And then, when I started attending the meetings, I'd suddenly become this whole other person. I wasn't just Deirdre Pierce. I was a pissed-off wolf shifter who loved her sister enough to fight for her. And once I saw the things Godric had turned a blind eye to, like Adri's illegal adoption...

It made me ashamed to be a Pierce.

Maybe—*hopefully*—when all of this is over, I can join Adri in Shadow territory. I haven't asked her yet, but I know she'd be willing to help me once she leaves. I know we *all* want out of this place, where we can live and talk without the threat to our lives hanging over us.

The house is quiet. Adri has been in her room all evening, except for a quick dinner with our parents. Zade is demanding that she move in with him, and I know she's anxious about that. She's probably talking to Phoenix. My parents are likely asleep. They're up at five most mornings now, especially since The Crawfords come over every morning for breakfast. Mom thinks it's romantic, but I know it's because Zade wants to keep an eye on Adri.

Soon, he'll be able to watch her every move.

I grind my jaw as I slip my backpack on. There's not much in it, just a face mask, a blanket, a knife I bought myself for self-defense, and some snacks. It's my turn to bring them tonight, so I opted for chips and dip. I figured we wouldn't be making s'mores inside the warehouse.

Walking down the stairs slowly, I keep an ear out for my parents. My shifter hearing picks up a low, droning sound—my dad's snoring. After slipping out the door, I rush to my car and turn it on without using the headlights. My eyes dart up to Adri's window, and I see her peek through her curtains. I wave at her awkwardly before backing out and speeding down the residential street.

By the time I get to the industrial park, it's two minutes past ten.

Tomorrow, kid. Don't be late. I won't wait.

Nervous butterflies flit around inside my abdomen. I see another car pulling in a few spaces away as my eyes scan the old buildings. Reaching for my knife, I climb out of my car and lock it. Pulling my backpack on, I hold the knife at my side as I wait for the person occupying the car to climb out. The windows are tinted—I can't see who it is. The car appears to be off.

"Psst," someone hisses from the bushes.

I glance over and notice four other resistors hiding between two hedges.

I look back at the car. "Is that—"

"It's empty," Shayla whispers. "We already checked."

I swallow and nod, looking around. "Okay, so he must be inside already."

It's dark here. There are hardly any streetlights, and the large buildings are blocking out the moon low on the horizon behind them. My stomach clenches nervously as I look around. I brought the other resistors here. Shayla is barely sixteen. If something happens to them, I'll never forgive myself.

"I'll go check it out," I tell them. Somehow, since I confided in them about Adri, I've become the 'leader' of the resistors. I have access to things they can only dream about. I see the alpha once a day, and I have access to his house, his office, and his files. I am betrothed to his brother. It sort of all

fell into place.

Swallowing, I continue. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, I need you all to go home.”

“But...” Shayla looks determined. “We should go with you.”

Shayla and I have gotten particularly close. We’re both young female shifters, both fed up with the status quo here. Both looking for a friend to confide in.

It means a lot to me that she—and the few others here—trust me enough to meet up with a stranger.

I can only hope that I don’t unknowingly put them in danger.

I shake my head. “Let me check it out first. I’ll be right back.”

I turn and stalk toward the first building, my hands fisted nervously at my side. My fingers grip the knife tightly as I try the door. It’s locked. I peek inside, but it’s too dark to see anything.

I should’ve brought a flashlight.

I walk around the building slowly, moving toward the back door. It’s also locked. Glancing behind me, I count the other buildings. There are at least ten others to check. The man on the phone didn’t say which one to meet at. It’s possible the car in the parking lot isn’t even his. Maybe he’s not even here. He could’ve gotten arrested, especially if someone from Willow Creek saw him and knew he was a Shadow wolf. It’s technically illegal for him to be here, and I have no doubts that Zade has someone keeping an eye on everyone who arrives at all of the airports across his territory.

I’ve barely taken one step when an arm reaches out for my wrist and someone pulls me into the shadow of the building.

“I told you not to be late, kid,” a man snarls as he pulls me tight against his body. His voice is familiar, gritty and low, just like on the phone.

I yelp, tugging myself away. To my surprise, he lets me go. “Don’t touch me,” I hiss.

He takes a step forward, and the light from the moon suddenly illuminates his face. He’s gorgeous. Tall and muscular, but more lanky than Phoenix and Valen. He has short, black hair—definitely a Shadow wolf, through and through. I can’t tell what color his eyes are in the darkness, but they appear to be lighter in color. He has a sharp jawline, and his high cheekbones probably make women weep daily. He narrows his eyes as he takes me in, surely forming his own opinions.

“Deirdre Pierce?” he asks, cocking his head. His expression isn’t kind—

he's certainly a bit rough around the edges. His eyes scan me again, and something flashes over his eyes. It feels like he can read my mind. Like he's somehow able to read everything about me.

"Maybe," I answer. "Perhaps you should tell me who *you* are."

He frowns. "Who do you think I am?"

I scoff. "Obviously, you're a Shadow wolf. You must work for Phoenix. And since you know so much about Adri, I assume you're in his inner circle."

His lips twitch, but he doesn't smile. "Beautiful *and* observant," he murmurs.

I furrow my brow. "Are you going to confirm my assumption, or are you going to make me keep guessing who the hell you are?"

The corners of his mouth quirk upward, and he crosses his arms. Despite the cool weather, he's wearing only a black T-shirt and faded jeans. My eyes flick down to his Converse.

"I'm Kaz Yearwood. You were right, I am in Phoenix's inner circle."

I smirk. "I knew it. What exactly is your position within the inner circle?"

He clucks his tongue. "Not so fast. Let's get the rest of your wolves safely inside."

I narrow my eyes. "Why are you helping us? How are you even here?"

He gives me a tight smile. "The less you know, the better. The last thing I need is for Zade to interrogate you."

I nod. "Okay. I'll go get them." I turn just as I hear a click of a door unlocking. Glancing over my shoulder as I walk, I see him pocketing a set of keys.

Interesting. Why does Phoenix's enforcer have keys to an abandoned warehouse in Willow Creek?

Once we're all inside, Kaz leads us into a windowless conference room. The others look half-terrified, half-intrigued. He sets his knife and phone down on the table as a show of peace, and we all do the same.

In the light of the room, I can see the day-old scruff lining his jaw and the gray and red tattoos snaking down his corded forearms. His short hair is shiny and jet black—unruly at the top and front, but tidy on the sides. His eyes flick to mine, and his light blue eyes have flecks of silver in them. He swallows, the only sign that he's nervous. Clearing his throat, he looks at me and gives me a wan smile.

"Are you from Shadow pack?" Shayla asks quickly.

Kaz's smile grows. "Don't tell on me, alright? I'm not supposed to be here."

They all look at him with surprised expressions. Surprised, and... reverent. It's possible this is the first time any of them have ever seen a Shadow wolf. The first time they've ever seen someone who looks like *them*.

"I'm Kaz Yearwood, Alpha Phoenix's enforcer. The first thing I want you all to know is that you'll always have a home in Shadow territory," he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine. "When all is said and done, if you ever need a way out, please reach out to me." He hands us all a card with a number on it. "When we found out what was happening with Shadow pups being illegally adopted into Willow Creek, we devised a plan. If any of you ever need to get out last minute, call that number and give them your location. We'll evacuate you in a matter of hours. Minutes, if we can. I know Zade is on a wild spree of outing treasonous shifters."

A cold sweat breaks out across my forehead. *Minutes*. I can't imagine needing to leave that quickly. For now, things seem stable. But I realize, maybe a bit belatedly, that might not always be the case. At some point, and probably soon, Zade is going to lose his shit. When Adri goes back to Shadow territory... none of us will be safe.

Zade will interrogate everyone to save face. Six months ago, he probably would've left it alone. Accepted that she'd found love elsewhere. But now, after mating with Phoenix? He was an eighteen-year-old alpha. He was insecure, unstable, and stressed out. Like a caged animal, he would probably do *anything* to save his reputation. An alpha losing his partner to another alpha wouldn't look good. It would make him appear to be weak, and others might think of challenging the young alpha for his spot. He's not stupid. He knows all of this. And when Adri decides to leave Willow Creek again, he will *rage*.

"Even minors?" Shayla asks, her cheeks pink from the cold. Her black braids are tied up in a bun at the top of her head.

Kaz sighs, running his long fingers through his hair. "Yes. Right now, we're going through all the missing person's records for the last twenty years and matching them up with the global shifter databases." He swallows, looking at the other wolves. "The problem is, those DNA samples are only given when our wolves make themselves known. So, we have these black wolves but no proof they belong to Shadow parents. However, Alpha Phoenix is hoping to open an investigation, matching the DNA of all wolves

globally, which we have, to their parents.” He looks straight at me. “We’ve already uncovered one family. We think. But our hope is to reunite as many families as possible.”

One family—Adri’s family?

“How many of us are there?” Ryle, another one of the shifters, asks.

“We estimate about two hundred in your pack,” Kaz says slowly. “Obviously, there are you guys, and a few others who probably have no idea. We suspect Alpha Thaler spread everyone out so that no one would get suspicious.”

I swallow the nausea creeping up my esophagus. This may not apply to me, but it applies to Adri.

She isn’t the only one.

There are *hundreds* of others who were stolen from their parents.

Hundreds of shifters who felt as Adri did growing up—different and out of place. The pitying looks she got, as if people felt *sorry* for her. And to think she wasn’t alone because hundreds of other pups were stolen as babies...

I roll my shoulders to dispel the fury.

“So, how is this all going to work?” I ask, crossing my arms and standing up straighter. “How will we collect the DNA from these families?”

“Nora Storm is in charge of reaching out to the families,” he starts.

Shayla gasps. “*The Nora Storm?*”

Kaz’s lip twitches. “That’s correct.”

“And then what?” I ask, trying to convey that we’re on a time crunch. Surely, if he’s Phoenix’s enforcer... “What about Adri’s wedding in three weeks?”

He cocks his head as his eyes bore into mine. “There isn’t going to be a wedding, kid. You and I are going to work together to make damn sure of that.”

My breathing hitches at his intense gaze as his eyes look at all of us individually. *So quick to include me.* It ignites a warmth inside my chest. *Like he already considers me a part of his inner circle.*

“So, is everyone in?” he asks. There’s a collective murmur of agreement, and Kaz smirks as he hands us all an NDA to sign. “These will keep both parties safe, should either party get caught.” His gaze lands on mine again. “Remember—call that number if any of you are ever in trouble.”

He says it to the group, but his eyes never leave mine.

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CHAPTER 7

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NOT FROM HERE

ADRI

MY WEDDING DRESS is the most hideous thing I've ever seen. Aside from being entirely wrong for my curvy body shape, the color errs on the cooler side, which washes me out and makes me look sickly. It's a pure silk dress that pulls in all the wrong places, fanning out past my knees and making me look so much shorter than I already am. The sleeves are tight, but the shoulders are too loose. I look like an eighties wedding barbie. I can't *believe* the money they paid for this atrocity.

"We can... have it altered," Emma says, her large blue eyes assessing the fit of the dress.

"Surely not," my mother adds, resting her chin on one finger as her gaze scans me critically. "It's silk. It's not like we can take it out."

"Maybe we can add panels?" Emma suggests, sounding nervous. "On the side—something stretchy. The shoulders need to be taken in, but the arms..." she frowns before snapping out of it quickly and giving me a reassuring smile. "We'll figure it out," she says calmly. "The ladies here at Lily Bridal will help us."

"It's just the downside of pushing the wedding forward," my mother adds, tilting her head. "Of course, asking them to take certain... parts... out will make people gossip."

"Come with me, Adrienne. We'll get you sorted," Emma says quickly.

I glance at my reflection on the pedestal one last time before taking

Emma's hand. She drags me over to the three shop workers. I'd barely glanced at them when we arrived, but as I snap my head up to greet them, I realize that one of them is not like the others. One of them has black hair and brown eyes.

She eyes me warmly, her eyes twinkling when they meet mine. *Knowing.*
A Shadow wolf.

My muscles tense up at the realization.

I'm not alone.

Which means Alpha Thaler did this to other families.

It makes me wonder how many of them there are and how long I've been oblivious to the fact that I wasn't completely alone.

"The dress is lovely," she says, her eyes roving over the material.

"We have a problem, Lily," Emma says gently. "We have two weeks until the wedding. Can you fix this?"

Lily eyes me and narrows her eyes. "You're Alpha Zade's fiancée?"

I nod. "Yes." I stand up straighter, hoping she understands what I'm trying to convey.

I'm here against my own accord. I'm not from here, and neither are you. I don't fit in, despite trying my whole life. Please get me out of this fucking dress.

"I think we can make this work," Lily says, her hand coming to my sleeve. She clucks her tongue as she gets to the shoulders. "We may have to change the shape of the dress. With her figure, something form fitting would be best." Her brown eyes meet mine. "You remind me of myself on my wedding day," she muses.

I clear my throat. "Did you... get married here?" I ask carefully.

Her eyes flash for a second before she shakes her head. "No. My husband and daughter were killed in an accident, and I came here to start over."

She willingly came to Willow Creek? It doesn't make sense. There's more to the story, but I can't ask her in front of Emma.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I tell her truthfully.

She gives me a sad smile. "It was over thirty years ago."

"Lily helped both your mother and me with our dresses," Emma says, grabbing Lily's hand and squeezing it once. "I can't tell you how happy it makes me to see Adrienne being taken care of in the same way her mother and I were."

Lily nods once. "Of course. It's my pleasure." She turns back to face me.

“Let me just get your measurements and we’ll make the dress perfect for you. Please follow me into the back room.”

I follow her, eager to get away from Emma. Once we’re in the back and out of earshot, I clear my throat.

“You’re not from here.”

Lily’s eyes twinkle with mirth. “You’re not either.”

Something passes between us—some kind of understanding of *otherness*.

“Why did you come here?” I ask her as she pulls a tape measure out. I can see the hesitation on her face, so I continue. “I’m not... This place doesn’t feel like home. Not anymore.” I look down at my socks, trying to keep myself from crying. “I don’t want to marry him.”

When I look up at her, she’s watching me with a small, kind smile. “You love someone else.”

I nod again. “My mate. He’s... north of here.”

We’re skirting around actually saying anything incriminating, but I can tell by the way her eyes crinkle that she understands me completely.

“I came here when I was grief stricken. Grief makes you do all sorts of funny things. When I arrived in Willow Creek, I knew I was breaking the treaty. So, I laid low and opened this shop. I never thought I’d find love again. But I did, and we’ve been married for fifteen years.” She sighs as she wraps a measuring tape around my waist and then my bust. “Sometimes home is not always where we grew up. Sometimes, home is the place where you find love.”

I play her words in my mind as she continues measuring me—first, my arms, and then my inseam. Finally, she helps me out of the dress.

“Whatever happens, I hope you’re able to find your way back home, Adrienne.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “Me too.”

She hangs my dress up and turns to face me. “Your mate... is he worth risking everything for? The Crawfords are powerful. I worry you’re putting yourself in harm’s way.”

I chew on my lip for a few seconds. “He is. I know I’m probably biased because I’m his fated mate, but he’s a good man. A great man. He’s brave, and kind.”

“And Alpha Zade?” Her voice is soft—gentle.

I don’t answer, worried that perhaps my answer will incriminate me.

I don’t trust people easily.

She continues. “Please be careful. While Emma has been nothing but kind to me over the years, her husband and sons are live wires. They scare me.”

I nod, understanding and rage burning through me.

It’s like living in a regime with dictators for alphas.

“Me too.”

I thank her and walk out of the back room to find my mother and Emma discussing veils and shoes.

I couldn’t care *less*.

After we leave Lily Bridal, Emma and my mother take me out to lunch, and I try to quell the nervous butterflies flitting through my stomach. Tonight is the first night at Zade’s house. Luckily, his parents still live there, and I’ll be staying in the guest bedroom until the wedding night.

The wedding night I hope never happens.

Phoenix has been eerily silent today, and even though he answers me whenever I ask a question, I also know he’s busy with whatever he’s planning.

I barely eat my lunch, citing nerves about the wedding. In fact, despite the dress being too small, I’ve lost quite a bit of weight since being back here. Nerves and anxiety have caused me to skip meals. My jeans are loose, and none of my bras fit correctly. It’s hard to find joy in eating when you’re back in the place you hate, secretly married to the man of your dreams, but you have to pretend to be engaged to a monster instead.

All I can do is read alone in my room and try to pass the days in my wolf form, running in the woods behind his house. Something tells me the reason he wants me to move in is so he can keep a closer eye on me, which means it’s very likely he *will* forbid me to run my wolf whenever I want, citing safety or something equally as asinine. Now that I’ll be living with him, there’s no telling how many restrictions will be placed on my life.

Please hurry, I tell Phoenix through the bond.

CHAPTER 8

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FUCK. ZADE.

PHOENIX

THE SECOND MY phone lights up, I snap it up and press answer.

“Do you have the results?” I practically snarl.

“Um, apologies, alpha. I’ve been meaning to call you sooner, but we had to be sure...”

My heart races in my chest. If the Ashwoods are not, in fact, related to Adrienne... my stomach drops at the thought.

Save my mate—my *wife*—but risk war.

Risk my friends’ lives.

Risk my *pack*.

If we can’t gather enough evidence...

There’s no way in fucking hell I’ll let my wife walk down the aisle with that asshole. It’s just a matter of if my involvement will start a world war amongst all wolf shifters in North America.

“It seems the samples have been tampered with,” the man says on the other line.

“Let me speak to your manager,” I growl, growing uneasy.

“I, um... I am the manager, alpha. I’m so sorry, but it appears we’ve been compromised. I’m having the security team run through the camera footage to see if we can figure out who—”

“Compromised,” I interrupt, suddenly feeling cold. A knife of despair runs through my core when I think of how much Adrienne trusted me to get

her out. How much she's relying on me. Even just this afternoon, her desperate plea...

Please hurry.

I roar with anger. "How the fuck is a high security lab compromised?" I ask, my voice unfriendly.

"Well, we believe one of our researchers tampered with the samples. Not just the high-priority one... but all of them."

"Tampered with how, exactly?"

There's a beat of silence I hate the sound of. "They are... gone. The samples and all of our data are missing. It's as if they were never here. Nothing else was touched—just the twenty or so samples we had from you."

Fuck.

Zade.

I am going to kill him. I wasn't sure before, but now there's no doubt in my mind that I'm going to fucking kill him.

Not just because of Adrienne, though that was reason enough. But for the twenty-three families we'd given hope to. For forty plus parents who were still grieving their missing children. We'd started slowly, just to see what we could find. Collecting DNA samples from various families who had children under six months go missing at any point in the last thirty years. There were numerous hits. We chose twenty-three to start—all families within the city limits of Vancouver, though Kaz was heading up the investigation across the wider pack, with Deirdre Pierce's help in Willow Creek, of course. According to him, there were supposedly over two hundred missing children from our pack living in Willow Creek.

And Deirdre Pierce was the one locating children in Willow Creek.

She started off by sneaking into Zade's office. Locating and securing all files for shifters who didn't have a live birth record. Adoption within Willow Creek was allowed, so there were quite a few to sift through. But Deirdre was able to steal nearly two hundred records—two hundred wolves who had most likely come from Shadow territory.

And thanks to the global shifter database, we had blood samples for *all* of them accessible by all packs—something started decades ago, for transparency.

Now we just had to match everything up.

"Figure out who did this," I say.

"We will, alpha."

I grunt. “You have seventy-two hours to collect more samples for our high-priority case and analyze the results. They are not to be left unguarded. Do not tell anyone you are doing it. Run the DNA and send me the data. I still need to corroborate it with another lab in another territory. My enforcer is in charge of that.”

“Yes, alpha. I will personally see to it that no one knows we are rerunning the DNA.”

“Guard. It,” I bite out. “With your life.”

“Of course. I will have the results for you soon.”

I hang up and let out a shaky breath as I run my hands over my face. It’s late, but I hope Adrienne is awake. I just need to hear her voice.

Just a few more days, little wolf. I am doing everything I can.

I know you are, she replies back.

I smile when I hear her voice—when I feel her presence. *How was your day today, Midnight? Surely, better than mine.*

She’s quiet for a beat before she sends a visual message down our bond.

My claws explode through my fingertips, digging into the leather couch. My canines cut down from my teeth, and a guttural roar explodes through my chest.

Fuck me.

It’s Adrienne in a wedding dress, except it’s not meant for me.

It’s meant for the alpha I’m going to kill as soon as I have the results.

What are you doing to me? I growl.

It’s hideous, she answers, and laughs lightly. *I thought you’d find it funny...*

My claws rip through the leather. *Next time, maybe don’t send your rightful husband a picture of you in a fucking wedding dress intended for another man.*

She laughs, the high, tinkling sound running between our minds.

Jealous? she taunts.

Brat, I growl. *Always such a fucking brat.*

True. But at least I’m your brat.

Fuck yes, you are, I tell her. *If I were there, I’d rip that dress to tatters. Then I’d set the pieces on fire as I bent you over his couch and claimed you as mine.*

You don’t need to claim me. I’m already yours.

Fuck. My little wolf always knows exactly what to say.

Prove it.

There's enough of a beat of silence to make me question her surroundings.

Little wolf, I murmur. Are you alone?

Yes, she says slowly.

I sit up straighter. *But...*

I don't want to tell you, she says matter-of-factly.

Tell me what? I try to keep the possessive growl out of my voice, but it still sounds slightly accusatory.

Well, Zade made me move in with him.

I stand up, resisting the urge to fully shift so that I can kill something and pretend it's Zade motherfucking Crawford.

Taking a few deep breaths, my claws retract and the fur begins to sink back down beneath my skin.

What? I ask, again trying to temper my tone. *When?*

He insisted last week. I moved in a couple of hours ago officially. He wasn't home, thank gods. I tried to stop it, but... he's the alpha. Who's going to question him?

You are, I tell her.

I tried. But he says it's for my safety. We're not... sharing a room or anything. I'm sleeping in the guest room.

I take a few more steady breaths. It's not her fault. She doesn't deserve my anger. I know she's probably even more uncomfortable than I am at the notion of living with him under his roof.

Suddenly, my wolf perks up. Call it a pissing contest, call it whatever you want, but she's *my mate, my wife*, and I'm going to prove just how much she belongs to me.

How close is your room to his? Is he home now?

I'm sure she's thinking I'm asking because I am curious to know if they're far enough away.

Yeah, he's home. He's a few doors down from me. I've locked my door—
Touch yourself, I command.

There's another beat of silence. *What? Here? Now?*

Are you busy? I taunt.

Her trepidation trickles down our bond. Suddenly, a zap of anger.

Oh my gods, she growls. *Seriously?*

I grin. *What? You know you like the idea of moaning my name in his*

house.

Do I? Or is it some sick, twisted fantasy of yours?

Probably both, I chuckle.

What if he hears me?

I certainly hope he does, little wolf.

You are ridiculous, she admonishes.

Touch that wet pussy for me, Midnight.

Absolutely not.

Very well. I'll have to take things into my own hands.

I take the stairs to the second story two at a time until I reach my bedroom. Ripping my clothes off, I stand in front of my full-length mirror and begin to stroke my hard shaft. I make sure to send her an extra-long mental visual of what I'm doing.

You're incorrigible, she says. There's a hint of something in her voice though, so I moan loudly and send it down the bond.

I wish I could press your sexy as sin body against this mirror as I watch myself fuck you from behind, I growl.

You're not going to break me, she says sternly.

What, so now that you're under his roof, we can't have mind sex anymore?

I hear her laugh at the term I've coined for these types of conversations in our brains, so I continue.

My cock is so hard. And my knot? It's begging to be inside you. Using my hands isn't the same as sinking into your hot heat, feeling your slick on me, tasting it...

Gods, Phoenix, she whispers.

Don't say God's name right now. I am your moon-fucking-fated mate.

She's quiet for a minute. I know. I miss you.

Touch yourself, Adrienne, I demand, sending some of my alpha power down our bond.

She purrs in response. Okay. Fine. You win.

Good girl.

How should I touch myself?

I work my hand faster, sliding my palm over my head and using my precum as lube.

Pretend it's me. What would I do to you right now?

You would press me against the mirror and trail your hand down my

back.

And then? I ask, grunting.

Are you really going to make me say it?

I smile. Fuck yes, I am. Tell me.

Why don't you tell me what you would do?

I laugh, but she continues.

Please, alpha...

Fuck.

Me.

I'd run my hand down to your ass and spread your cheeks so I got a full view of what's mine. And then I'd drop to my knees and eat you from behind. I'd push two fingers inside you, curving them as I massage your G-spot. Your knees would quake as I brought you close, as you began leaking your slick onto my face.

Keep talking, she begs. Her voice is ragged. Just knowing she's touching herself in that asshole's house...

Don't be quiet, Midnight. I want you to scream my name.

Phoenix...

Like that, but louder, I command. Do it. Tell me you'll say my name as your pussy contracts around your fingers.

Fuck, Phoenix...

My cock twitches as I throw my head back. One hand shoots forward to rest on the mirror as my orgasm sweeps through me quickly.

I'm coming so... hard... fuck... I tell her. Coating the fucking mirror.

Her pleasure extends my orgasm, and I groan as I finish spraying the mirror. Breathing heavily, I rest my forehead against the glass.

Tell me you said my name.

I did. Loudly.

I grin. I hope that motherfucker heard you.

I'm sure the whole house heard me, you asshole.

Chuckling, I walk into the bathroom.

Then my job here is done, little wolf.

CHAPTER 9

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FLATLINED

ADRI

THE NEXT MORNING, I wait until the house is quiet before heading downstairs. Just as I round the corner, I go still as Zade's eyes meet mine. He's sitting at the kitchen island with his head in his hands. There are bags under his eyes, and he looks so much more defeated than I'm used to seeing him lately. My heart sinks when he averts his eyes. It reminds me so much of earlier this year, back when he wasn't my alpha but my best friend. *Only* my best friend. When I could win arguments. When we could have healthy, productive discourse without me hating the person he'd become. When we'd laugh and enjoy each other's company.

I cross my arms and lean against the threshold of the kitchen, my eyes scanning his wrinkled T-shirt and jeans before they rove over his face. His face is unshaven, which is strange to see. He's normally so polished. Seeing him like this makes me sad.

It makes me miss my best friend.

"Hey." His voice is ragged, tired.

I'm fighting an internal battle. On the one hand, I want to have sympathy for him. But on the other hand, he demanded I come back to Willow Creek.

He took away my freedom by making me move in with him.

He took me from my mate.

Still... I feel sorry for him. Just a little bit. How could I not? It's *Zade*.

"Hi," I respond, my tone clipped. "I'm just getting some coffee, and then

I'll be out of your way," I add, trying to keep my voice from wobbling.

Despite our current circumstances, I have to hope that my best friend is in there somewhere, buried beneath all of the new muscles and anger. His eyes flash to mine, and my throat catches at the hatred I see there.

This is exactly what I feared months ago. That he'd grow up to be ruthless like his father. That we'd lose track of who we were to each other. He used to be my *person*. I never loved him like that, but he meant everything to me. I could be myself around him. He was the first person I wanted to tell when I got good news. If someone had told me four months ago that we'd be awkwardly staring at each other with thinly veiled hatred... I wouldn't have believed them.

I couldn't have imagined *this*.

The distance.

The lack of warmth.

It's like we're complete strangers.

I clear my throat.

We *are* complete strangers.

"Adri," Zade says, rubbing his face with his hands. It's the first time he's used my nickname since I've been back in Willow Creek.

Oh gods, please don't let him bring up last night. Despite Phoenix's pissing contest, I truly hope he didn't hear me moan Phoenix's name. That would make all of this so much worse.

"Yeah?"

Sighing loudly, he looks at me with a clouded expression. He almost seems... drunk. Or high. *Something*. Unease slithers through me.

"What happened to us?" he asks, crossing his arms and cocking his head as he studies me. "We used to be so close. You were my best friend. I know you never wanted to marry me, and that's fine. I figured that we liked each other enough to tolerate it. Friends with benefits, or whatever," he says slowly, brow furrowed. "But now, it's like you can't even stand to look at me."

I swallow. I could tell him. I could confess everything. I could confide in him, just like I used to. I could forgive him for betraying me, for keeping my adoption a secret. I could maybe even forgive him for taking me from my mate, as long as he allowed me to go back. His eyes bore into mine with a sort of reckoning I've only ever experienced a handful of times. This is his olive branch. And perhaps it's mine, too. Whatever conversation we're about

to have will change the course of our relationship. It will uphold any semblance of friendship...

Or it will cause everything we ever had to crumple into dust.

“I told you, I’m still dealing with everything that happened with Phoenix ___”

He slams his fist onto the marble island, and to my surprise, it cracks under his newfound strength. My wide eyes find his. He’s breathing heavily, and his chest rises and falls as he stares at me with resentment.

Not the kind of resentment or hatred that can be overcome but the kind that’s bone deep. The kind that weaves cracks into your soul.

Zade became alpha with that hatred. It molded his personality and corrupted everything good about him.

He hated me for leaving. He hated me for wanting to stay with Phoenix. He hated me for not being happy. And that hate would swallow everything we ever thought we had.

“Do not say that bastard’s name in my house,” he seethes.

I press my lips together. *Pissing contest, indeed.*

“Zade, it’s not... It just feels like things are different now,” I say gently. “When I left, something cracked inside me. I was alone for weeks. I had time to think. About you. About us. About what I wanted my life to look like. I’ll never be the same person again. You understand that, right?”

His jaw tics as he studies me. “You fucked him.”

“What?” My wolf begins to growl, and her hackles rise at his cruel tone.

“Stop fucking lying to me!” he roars, standing up and sending the chair into the kitchen cabinet behind him. The force is enough to shatter the wood. I stumble back at the sheer volume of his command, at the surprising violence of his actions. “He’s your moon-fated mate. Of course you fucked him. You’re always wearing his fucking shirt.”

I look down at the faded dark gray T-shirt, fisting it in my hands.

“You think I wouldn’t notice the way you’ve been moping around? I can smell that fucking mutt all over you from a mile away.”

I swallow and stand up straighter. “I told you,” I grit out. “You should’ve let me stay.”

“In enemy territory?” he snarls. “With that—*those*—vile, savage wolves ___”

“They’re not vile,” I interrupt him, feeling my body spark with anger. “Stop saying that. Stop putting them down. I am one of them—”

He clicks his tongue, interrupting me before he gives me a monstrous smile. His eyes go nearly black as he walks closer to me. Not only is he a good nine inches taller now, but he's packed on enough muscle to make me feel small compared to him. He's nearly as big as Phoenix now. My hands shake as he stops an inch from me. I lift my chin and stare into his eyes, but I don't recognize him. I don't know who this person is. I can't see the old Zade anywhere in his expression, on his face... it's like becoming alpha erased everything he once was.

"Admit it," he commands, using his alpha power.

My wolf whines as she lies down. *Do not roll over for him*, I tell her. *Do not submit. We only have one alpha we submit to, and he's a thousand miles away.*

I stand up taller, refusing to break eye contact. Zade's nostrils flare as his hand comes up to my throat.

"You will obey me," he murmurs. "You will submit to me. That defiance in you will wither away once we're married."

I scoff. "Can you hear yourself? Who the hell do you think you—"

"I am your fiancé. I am your fucking *alpha*." He bares his teeth, and his fingers wrap threateningly around my neck. "Maybe I should mark you. If I'm not mistaken, you seemed to like being bitten by that mutt."

I try to pull away from him, but he uses his other arm to hold my body against the doorframe. The one around my neck tightens, and a thousand things swarm my mind at once as his fingers press against my windpipe.

He's strangling me.

Zade is strangling me.

My hands come up to his arm, and I dig them into his flesh, silently begging him to let me go.

"No," I squeak. "Please, don't."

"Admit. It," he growls as black spots appear in my vision. I claw harder at his skin, trying to get him to loosen his grip around my neck. "Did. You. Fuck. Him?"

I hold out, waiting for him to let me go. My eyes widen, pleading with him. I try to speak, but he just squeezes my jugular tighter, pressing my back into the doorframe with more force. My wolf barks, and I frantically try to get him off me using my nails.

He's going to kill me.

The thought makes my eyes water with emotion. Zade, my best friend,

will *kill* me over this. As my vision fades, his eyes never change. He's snuffing the life out of me... and the only thing he cares about is if I fucked Phoenix.

Finally, I nod. The movement is subtle, but he lets me go.

I collapse to the floor, gasping for air as I begin to sob. Tears stream down my cheeks as I inhale as much air as I can. As I register what just happened. I look up at Zade, and he looks both horrified and angry, his face flickering between the two emotions. He runs his hands through his hair and takes a couple of steps back.

"I knew it," he says finally, looking down at me on the floor. "I fucking knew it."

I cry harder. He just strangled me.

He got so angry that he almost *killed* me. The Zade I knew would never have hurt me. He wasn't a violent person at all.

Wasn't.

Past tense.

I'm crying too hard to speak. My heart is breaking in half. I knew he had the potential to become a monster... but this is so much worse. My whole body is shaking as I stand.

I will not cower.

I will not submit.

Not to him.

Wiping my cheeks dry, I take a few calming breaths as I look up at Zade. There's a flash of remorse in his expression before the fury returns.

"Do you think I'll ever let you out of my sight now?" he seethes. He runs his hand over his mouth, looking away. "I can't trust you. I can't fucking believe I'll be fucking another alpha's seconds. The thought repulses me, Adrienne." He pauses and a look of disgust overtakes his face. "When we're married, I'll always wonder if you'll go running back to your mate." He exhales a couple of times loudly, shaking his head. "I *really* wish you hadn't fucked him, Adri. I don't want to do this. I don't want to hurt you."

My lower lip trembles. "You don't have to hurt me. *You* made that choice. *You* are responsible for your own actions, Zade," I hiss.

"I know. And so are you. Therefore, you're not to leave this house without my explicit permission. Wherever you go, you will take my enforcer. I am already checking your cell phone records, so no need to do anything differently there. And when we're married, you'll lie down on your back and

let me erase every single piece of that feral brute.”

My face pales. I’m shaking so hard my teeth chatter. Whatever he’s doing, whatever sort of power he’s exuding, is clashing with my human side. My wolf is pacing, whining incessantly. It feels... unnatural.

My omega and my alpha are fighting to respond, mixing and mingling so that I’m not sure what to do.

“You’re going to lock me up like a fucking prisoner?” My voice quivers.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” Zade murmurs, walking up to me. He reaches out and places his hand on my neck, over the skin that’s throbbing with pain. “You didn’t have to fuck him.” Sighing heavily, he gives me a withering look. “Your *mate* is trying to cheat his way to getting you back. But I took care of it, don’t worry.”

What the...

His words are threatening, and I’m afraid to ask, but I have to know if he’s referring to the lab results. I have to tell Phoenix if it’s true.

“What?” I ask, confused.

Zade chuckles darkly. “He’s trying to ‘*prove*’ that you’re a Shadow wolf. But wouldn’t you know, all of his ‘evidence’ just miraculously... disappeared,” Zade continues, using air quotes.

No.

How the hell did he know?

“Cheaters don’t win, Adrienne,” he purrs. “You are mine. You have always been mine.”

I glare up at him. He’s lost all sense of normalcy. All sense of reality.

“Fuck you, Zade.”

The corner of his mouth tilts upward, and he gives me a sad smile. “You will. In ten days.”

And then he turns to go, leaving me in the aftermath of our dying relationship.

Whatever heartbeat our friendship had just flatlined.

CHAPTER 10

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THERE WILL BE NO FUCKING WEDDING

ADRI

STARING INTO THE MIRROR, I hardly recognize myself. Dark purple bruises in the shape of a hand—the hand of my former best friend—have formed.

Panic and repulsion creep up my throat. I can't let anyone see me like this. Dee might try to kill Zade if she knew. And Phoenix... he would ruin all the things he had planned if he even *suspected* Zade was hurting me physically. If he knew...

It would start a war, and I can't risk anyone getting hurt.

I swallow, but it hurts. I can't fathom eating. It's not like more weight lost will really make a difference. I look like a different version of myself already. My curves are nearly gone, and my face is... gaunt.

I don't leave my bedroom for days. It's easier just to hide from everyone. Dee and my mother both come in and check on me, but I make the excuse of having a headache, ushering them away before they can see the ring of bruises around my neck. Zade doesn't come—because of course. I'm sure he's ashamed yet too proud to apologize. And Phoenix just thinks I'm busy with wedding preparations.

I haven't had the heart to tell him about the break-in at the lab. It's likely that he already knows. I'm sure that's why he hasn't been updating me.

Every time he reaches out to me, I will myself to sound busy, annoyed, perky... a little more like I used to feel all the time. He makes a comment on my third day of isolation, but I tell him I'm in the middle of lunch and I'll

contact him later.

I am a liar, of course.

I am willing to bear the physical pain if it means I get out of here with Dee, unscathed. Because I've already decided I'm taking her with me when Phoenix comes for me. And for that to happen, everyone needs to continue on like they have been. I couldn't fathom leaving her here unchecked with Zade. She'd most certainly be in danger, especially considering I will likely piss Zade off to no end once I'm gone.

So I spend my days reading, escaping my horrific reality the only way I know how—with my smutty books. I don't leave my room, and Emma is kind enough to deliver my meals to my door, though I don't eat much of anything. I don't know if she suspects something is wrong, but I can't risk things getting worse by people knowing Zade's true nature.

One day, but not now.

Not until Phoenix can run the DNA somewhere else.

Not until we have concrete *proof* that I'm a Shadow wolf.

Not until I am away from this goddamn hellhole.

Every day that passes without an update sends shards of disappointment through me. When I agreed to come back with Zade, I thought I'd be gone for three days, tops.

It's been three *weeks*.

I know a lot of that is because Phoenix wants to be thorough, and also because Zade is interfering. Still, I withdraw into myself a tiny bit more every morning I wake up in Zade's guest bed. Every morning I'm not with my *mate*. Maybe he won't match the DNA on time, and I'll have to go through with consummating my marriage to Zade.

I close my eyes and swallow.

It would most certainly be rape—something I can't even believe I have to assume about my former best friend. My throat constricts at the thought of lying down for him, of erasing Phoenix in the ways he promised...

I really hope it doesn't come to that.

I triple check the driveway from my guest bedroom window to see that all three cars are gone. Deciding to venture into the house, I quietly walk down the carpeted hallway and marble stairs.

Six days until the wedding.

Less than a week.

The next six days are packed full of events. My bachelorette party, which

will be held here so that Zade can keep an eye on me, is tomorrow night. The final dress fitting is in three days.

And finally... the rehearsal dinner in five days.

The only reason I haven't broken down into a complete mess is because of Phoenix. I miss him so, so much, but I refuse to lose faith in him. I *know* he will not let me marry the monster keeping me captive.

I round the corner of the kitchen, only to see a blond man standing at the sink, staring out of the window. Slowly backing up, I realize he's speaking to someone on his phone when I see him gesticulating. White wireless earbuds are poking through his shaggy blond hair.

"I'm telling you, man. It's surreal to be back. The clout I'm going to have being the alpha's brother..." He chuckles in a way that makes me think of Zade. "I'm going to get so much fucking pussy."

Zeek.

Zade's brother.

I haven't seen him in years. After his first shift, he became highly unpredictable and violent, so Emma and Godric shipped him off to boarding school in the southern part of our territory, near LA.

"And get this—I'm betrothed to Deirdre Pierce." He pauses, his sinister laugh sending shivers down my spine. "Bet she's never sucked cock. Won't take me long to train her. She'll be desperate for it."

Pig.

My wolf growls at the way he's speaking of my sister. I want to say something, but I'm also afraid of being in the kitchen alone with another male Crawford.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll tear that pussy up so hard, they're going to need to get us a new mattress from all the virginal blood."

I stiffen, my blood running cold at his words. I know Deirdre is betrothed to him, but they're both only seventeen. I can't imagine they'll announce the engagement until they're at least eighteen, like Zade and I...

Zeek laughs again. "We're doing a soul bonding ceremony soon. She won't have a choice."

My pulse speeds up, and my claws shoot through my palms as he continues speaking.

"No, man. It's ancient magic or some shit. I dunno. My parents are doing the same thing to Adrienne and Zade the night before their wedding."

A cold sweat breaks out across my skin.

What?

What the hell is a soul bonding ceremony?

“I don’t know. Apparently they’re going to kill her mate and do it after.”

What?

“Yeah. Killing him will sever their bond.” He pauses. “The idea of Adrienne mated to a Shadow wolf mutt is unthinkable.” Another pause. “Fuck if I know. My dad said something about the blood of two neighboring pack alphas.” He chuckles and it sounds so sinister. “Zade’s got them on their knees for him. It’s quite terrifying to see my brother in his new role,” he adds with a laugh.

My eyes prick with tears as I back away even further. If Zeek saw me eavesdropping on this conversation...

I still remember the way he looked so *inhuman* after he shifted for the first time.

Like he’d given in to the beast form fully.

“No. She’d never fuck a Shadow wolf. She and my brother have been tight for years. She won’t even remember him in a couple of months.”

I retreat back into the grand foyer, taking the stairs two at a time until I’m safe in my room again. After making sure the lock and deadbolt are secured—something I installed my first night here—I sit down on my bed and begin to sob.

Betrayal like nothing I’ve ever felt floods through me. They’re going to attempt to *kill* Phoenix to force a bond between Zade and me. What the ever-living *fuck*? Emma agreed to this? Godric? *My parents*?

I suppose it doesn’t matter. Willow Creek is now ruled by an alpha who feels like this is his only option. I never should’ve confessed. I never should’ve told Zade about sleeping with Phoenix. This is *exactly* what I was trying to prevent when I first arrived. I had to hide what we meant to each other because I knew Zade would try to exploit it.

Zade is planning on killing you, I tell Phoenix.

An amused chuckle comes straight down the bond, and I nearly bow over with relief.

He can try.

I’m serious, Phoenix. He’s going to try to kill you the night before our wedding, and then he’s going to force a soul bond.

Another chuckle. *Doesn’t that require blood from—
Two neighboring packs.*

Right, he says glumly. Listen, little wolf. Don't worry about me. I have my guys waiting on the results for the DNA. Any day now, okay? You have enough to worry about.

But I am worried about you, I tell him. I don't trust him. He's—

I catch myself before I give anything away.

He's different now. I take a deep breath and continue. I think he knows you're trying to prove my heritage.

He does, Phoenix agrees.

You knew?

Of course. I know every fucking thing that happens in this territory. Yours too, thanks to Kaz.

Kaz?

I'll tell you everything soon. Just... keep everyone placated. The last thing we need is for them to do something rash.

Too late.

Swallowing, I nod. Okay. The wedding is in five days—

There will be no fucking wedding.

His words are so menacing, so possessive, that they send a spark of pleasure down my spine.

Phoenix...

The only reason I haven't marched over the fucking border and declared a war is to spare innocent lives, but rest assured, Midnight, there will be no fucking wedding. I am well aware of the countdown. If I have to barge into his fucking house and throw you over my shoulder like I dream about doing every waking moment, then so be it. I. Will. Burn. The. World. To. Get. You. Back.

I choke back a sob at his words, and he continues.

I'm so sorry that you have to be there. That you have to pretend. I have the DNA results under control. I have my safety and everyone else's under control. I am well aware of the threat to our lives. His mutts haven't exactly been discrete about sniffing out the border these last few weeks. He's practically a pup. He's making up for losing you, and he's insecure. He's intentionally being vicious to make a point. He's puffing his chest out for all to see. Think of it as an alpha temper tantrum.

Promise me you'll be safe?

I promise, little wolf. I will see you soon, okay? Let's talk later when Valen isn't sitting right next to me, the prick.

I huff a laugh. *I love you.*
I love you more, he counters.

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CHAPTER II

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KAZRIEL

DEIRDRE

ADRI'S BACHELORETTE party is the saddest thing I've ever seen. I keep trying to cheer her up, but she's sipping on her champagne in a corner as she watches a few of the girls we hardly know dancing to the cheesy music. I assume she's talking to Phoenix, so I pull my phone out and check my texts, having felt my burner phone vibrate a couple of minutes ago.

Tonight. 10pm.

I groan. It's almost nine. How the hell am I going to break away from my sister's bachelorette party while she's moping around like this?

Sorry. Adri needs me tonight.

There's a beat of silence before he answers.

Fine. Text me when you can get away. But it has to be tonight.
I'm flying back to Vancouver tomorrow morning.

I bite my lower lip. So he *is* flying into Willow Creek territory every week. That can't possibly be very safe, can it? He must have his ways, seeing as he hasn't been caught yet. Kaz Yearwood is quickly becoming a massive enigma. I don't ask questions. I just follow orders.

I don't answer, hoping he'll take my silence as agreement. Instead, I shove the burner phone back into my bra and walk over to Adri.

“Want to dance?” I ask, holding my hand out.

She gives me a drunken smile, which unsettles me. I don’t want her here alone, drunk, and by herself with only Zade and Zeek as roommates, the latter of which is something out of my nightmares. The only consolation I have is that I plan to file emancipation paperwork tomorrow so that my parents can’t demand that I come back to Willow Creek. All of the resisters have done the same.

Kaz is helping us.

When Phoenix comes back for Adri, he’s also coming for all of us.

“I suppose,” she slurs. “Who even *are* these people?” she asks, stumbling as she stands.

She’s gotten so thin—her sparkly dress hangs off her body. Of course she’s not eating properly. She’s miserable.

I laugh and shrug. “Your future friends,” I tell her, smirking.

She snorts. “They’d rather eat me alive than be my friend.”

Taking her hands, I lead her to the dance floor Emma erected in the ballroom earlier. Early 2000s music I don’t recognize blasts through the speakers.

It’s evident that our parents chose the playlist.

“Fuck everyone, then,” I tell her, shaking my hips to a Good Charlotte song.

“Fuck everyone!” she yells, and a few of the other girls look over at us in surprise. I mimic drinking a glass so that people will assume her outburst is from the champagne. She dances with two hands in the air, and for a second, she reminds me of my carefree, rebellious sister from this summer. I giggle as the song switches, but then my face falls into a frown when I feel my phone vibrate in my chest.

While Adri is distracted, I pull it out, glancing down at the screen.

Change of plans. Meet me now.

I narrow my eyes as I text Kaz back.

I told you. I can’t. Adri needs me.

His response comes immediately.

Bring Adri. Just get here.

So bossy.

I place the phone back in my bra and look around nervously. I mean... no one would know if we left, would they? Emma will be back tomorrow morning. She wanted to give us the night to let loose. These girls have free food and alcohol—they won't even think to check for us. My mom is expecting me to sleep over with Adri. Zade and his asshats have a hotel in downtown San Francisco. My stomach flips nervously as I grab Adri's hand.

"Change of plans," I tell her, pulling her toward the front door. Grabbing our jackets and my purse, she harrumphs when I try to stick her arms through the arm holes like a child.

"Ow, Dee," she whines. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Her face lights up. "Is Phoenix—"

I shake my head. "No. Let's just get to my car, okay?"

She scowls at me, wrinkling her nose before stumbling forward. I grab her elbow to steady her.

"Fine. As long as you promise we can get tacos."

"Sure, Adri. We can get tacos," I tell her, smiling.

"Three tacos. Five. No, ten."

I laugh as I drag her to my car across the street, grateful I had the foresight to abstain from drinking.

"You can have as many tacos as you want."

She laughs maniacally. "Tacoos!" she yells, and I hiss nervously, looking around as I shove her into my passenger seat.

"Be quiet," I tell her. "Who knows if Zade has cameras or something here."

"Fuck Zade," she says glumly, looking out the window.

My throat constricts and I swallow. "Fuck Zade," I agree.

"Fuck Willow Creek," she says, her voice louder.

I laugh. "Fuck Willow Creek."

She turns to me suddenly, her mascara smeared all around her eyes. "You're coming with me, you know. When I... when I leave this place for good."

I nod. "I know."

I can practically hear the wheels spinning in her mind. "Where do you go every night?"

I press my lips together as I make my way to Kaz's warehouse. I turn the

radio on and enter the freeway. It's only two exits to Highway 17. Adri's eyes are closed as she mouths the lyrics to a sad love song, and I press my lips together as I get onto the 17.

"I can't tell you where I go..." I say slowly a few minutes later.

"Oh, come onnn, Dee!" she whines, pouting her lips when I look over at her.

Pulling into the parking lot of the warehouse, I turn the engine off and look at her with a large grin on my face.

"But I can show you."

Her mouth drops open and she squeals excitedly. "I can't wait!" Glancing around, she furrows her brow before turning back to me with a confused expression. "But where are we? What is this?"

"You have to promise to keep this a secret," I tell her, trying to keep the smile from my face. "And... you might recognize my coconspirator."

Her eyes light up, and we both exit my car. My eyes slide over Kaz's plain Toyota. Adri stumbles over the heels I made her wear, so I loop my arm through hers as we make our way to the warehouse entrance.

The door is already open, and I walk inside, pulling a giggling Adri behind me.

It takes her a few seconds to realize what she's looking at. The warehouse is large, but we've set up a few tables against the back wall to go through records and pilfer through the things I bring him. There's a circle of chairs in the middle, a small office kitchen, and a row of cubicles we all ignore. Adri's eyes rove over to the man standing on the other side of the warehouse, and once she realizes who it is, she sprints toward him.

"Oh my gods, Kaz!"

He jogs to her and pulls her into a tight hug. "Adrienne."

He sounds... relieved. My chest aches as I watch them together, and then he sniffs, turning to me.

"Is she *drunk*?"

Adri bursts out laughing. "That I am, Kazriel."

He furrows his brow as his eyes snap back to hers. "That's not my name."

She purses her lips and shakes her head. "I just made it up." She points an accusatory finger at his face and scowls. "Stop being so serious all the time."

Kaz looks back at me, a frown on his face.

I clear my throat. "Well, tonight was her bachelorette party. You demanded I bring her. So, here we are."

Something flickers in his eyes at my attitude, but we're soon interrupted by Adri squealing loudly. She whirls around to face me.

"You're dating *Kaz*?" she asks, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

I snort. "Umm. No. Kaz and I are gathering medical records from Willow Creek and matching the names to the blood samples from the global shifter database."

Adri's face flashes with confusion. "Okaaay. And what does that mean?"

Kaz's lips twitch and he looks at me. "Deirdre and I have been working together for a few weeks. Phoenix suggested I reach out to her."

"I knew it!" Adri hisses, glaring at me. "So you *are* working with Phoenix."

I smirk. "Sort of." I take a step forward. "After you left, I heard rumors of other Shadow wolves in Willow Creek. I started putting feelers out, and then I began attending their meetings, but Mom and Dad caught me coming home late one night."

Adri opens and closes her mouth. "It's why they grounded you," she says slowly, sounding sober all of a sudden. Shifters metabolize alcohol quicker than humans, so it would make sense if she really were sobering up. Her eyes are watery when they find mine. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrug. "I wasn't withholding it to be malicious. But when you came back and told me everything you'd been through..." My eyes flick over to Kaz. "Anyway, a few weeks ago, Kaz reached out to me, and we began trying to locate the rest of the Shadow wolves in our territory."

Adri's hand goes to her throat. "And did you find them?"

"She did," Kaz interjects. "She's been sneaking into Zade's office for weeks. She got her hands on the medical records for nearly two hundred shifters that we suspect were born in Shadow territory—there was no record of live birth. We're waiting to match the blood DNA that every shifter banks at birth via the global shifter database with the Shadow wolf parents who lost their children as infants."

Adri's eyes water even more as tears threaten to spill out from behind her mascara. "You *what*? Zade could've killed you, Dee. You would've been marked as a traitor."

"I know." I rock back on my heels. "I waited to tell you because I didn't want you to worry. But I don't care if I get caught. This..." I inhale sharply and take a deep breath. "This is important. What they did—what our parents did—was wrong. Alpha Thaler instigated it, and Alpha Godric was

complicit.”

Adri’s lower lip wobbles. She looks at Kaz. “And you?”

Kaz gives her a warm smile as he fills in the blanks. “Everything is contingent on receiving the DNA results. We’re analyzing nearly two hundred samples. We had a... hiccup... last week,” he says slowly.

Adri scoffs. “*Fucking Zade.*”

Kaz’s eyebrows shoot up. “You knew?”

Her cheeks flush. “He told me.” A tear slips down her cheeks. “Phoenix said he had everything under control.”

“He does.” Kaz wraps an arm around her. “He practically kidnapped one of the lab assistants to run the samples at night after everyone else goes home. He has twenty guards staked out around the perimeter. It’s taking longer because we have to stop during the day—we don’t have access to our own lab—but we’re so close.”

Adri lets out a choked sob. “How close?”

“Any day. Tomorrow, the next day. We want to have all our ducks in a row before we go public.” He cocks his head as he studies her. “Are you... wearing a dress?”

She scoffs before she bursts into tears again. “Dee made me do it.”

Kaz lets out a low chuckle as he looks at me with twinkling eyes before turning back to her. “He misses you,” he tells her, his voice low. “More than you can even imagine.”

I give them a minute to catch up as I glance down at the papers on the table. Working with Kaz has been... interesting. He’s smart but quiet. I have no idea what he’s thinking most of the time. *Closed off.* He seems almost like a different person right now. Warmer. Brighter. I cross my arms and look over the reports. Phoenix has orchestrated a massive mission, planning it around the clock for weeks. He has people on standby just behind the border, ready to fly into Willow Creek and extract anyone who is willing to go. I’m not the only resistor in Willow Creek. In fact, our group is only one of many.

Kaz has been going city to city putting out feelers.

I have no idea how he’s pulling it off, since he looks like... that. He’s a dead giveaway for where he comes from.

Massive. Black hair. Golden skin. Dangerous, but also... bewildering. Impenetrable. Exactly as you would expect the head enforcer for the most powerful alpha in the world.

Adri is babbling about something, and Kaz’s silver eyes rove over me for

a second, nodding his head once in thanks. The two of them walk back over to me, and Kaz's long fingers graze the papers he has scattered there.

"Permissions to use the airport," he says slowly. "We will have one commercial airliner waiting at every major airline. Two pilots each. They will leave Friday evening at seven sharp, regardless of if we have the samples."

Adri frowns, definitely looking a bit more sober now. "But if we don't have the samples, we can't prove that I'm a Shadow wolf. That any of them are Shadow wolves."

Kaz nods slowly. "We'll deal with it if it comes to that. Phoenix is hoping for a 'shoot and ask questions later' situation. Zade will likely declare war immediately, but we're hoping the other packs don't follow suit."

"And if they do?" I ask cautiously.

Kaz's eyes burn into mine. My skin flushes under his scrutiny. "Then we fight."

Adri shakes her head. "So, Friday night?"

"We're hoping to have the samples well before that point so we can trigger the other things we have in place. Nora and I are working together to send out a mass communication amongst our pack and then the surrounding packs. We're hoping Zade will surrender."

"He's just going to say we're lying." Adri scoffs, an expression of veiled hatred written all over her delicate features.

Kaz shakes his head. "We have a statement from Red. We're corroborating our evidence with several labs at the same time. Then there's the physical evidence. There's strength in numbers, Adri. Before, Zade was only thinking about you. Once the other packs see the hundreds of Shadow wolves here, we will have a much better chance. Zade hasn't exactly been exemplary with his international relations as of late. His executions have raised more than a few eyebrows."

"I don't trust him," Adri mutters.

"Who are they going to trust? The alpha that's never caused an issue for over twelve years? The alpha who has formed alliances with the other packs? Or the new alpha who acts before he thinks?"

Adri presses her lips together. "Yeah, but all the other packs are wary of him. Of us. It's the exact reason why they signed that damn petition in the first place."

"I think they all expected us to back down. But once they see our plan, we're hoping they'll realize the gravity of the situation."

“And if they don’t?”

Kaz shifts his stance, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “We’re taking a chance, Adrienne. *I’m* taking a chance.”

Adri’s lips wobble. I can almost see the thoughts spinning around in her mind. I lay a hand on her arm.

“Hey,” I tell her. “Whatever happens, it will be worth it.”

She looks at me with wide, nervous eyes. “But I’m not worth—”

“Stop,” I tell her, gritting my teeth together. “Don’t say that.”

“Alright. Friday,” she says softly.

“Or sooner,” I tell her gently.

She turns to Kaz. “Take care of him, okay? The Crawfords want him dead.”

“What?” I gasp.

She nods. “I heard Zeek talking about it over the phone. They plan on killing him and forcing a soul bond between Zade and me.”

“Tell me you have a small penis without telling me you have a small penis,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

She laughs, but her smile drops from her face immediately. Her brown eyes look back at Kaz.

“Keep him safe, Kaz. Please.”

He nods once. “It’s my job, Adrienne.” He looks at me. “I trust you’ll tell the others about Friday?”

I nod. “SFO. Seven sharp.”

“Terminal three. Tell them to find Cindy at check-in. She will take care of them. There will be a back entrance she can guide them through so they don’t look conspicuous.”

I nod again. “Of course. I’ll take care of everyone here. Emancipation paperwork is complete for everyone, so there should be no problems there. Will you call me if you receive the results before then?”

Adri’s eyes are as wide as saucers when she looks at me. “Emancipation paperwork?”

I nod. “I filed it for myself, as well as all the shifters who wish to leave Willow Creek. It gives them the right to leave Willow Creek, according to international shifter law, even if they’re under eighteen.”

Adri looks gobsmacked. “So this is what you’ve been up to?” Her voice is hoarse with emotion.

I nod. “I told you. When I found out about what our parents did... you

weren't the only one affected."

Something akin to pride flashes across her face. "You're such a badass, Dee. I'm so proud of you."

She collides with me, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Thanks, Adri."

"I'm supposed to protect you," she chastises. "Not the other way around."

I huff a laugh. "I guess it's my turn now." Squeezing her once before taking a step back, I look up at Kaz. There's something earnest about his small smile, like he's satisfied. Like he's *impressed*. It fills me with confidence. "Come on. Let's get your drunk ass home."

Adri scoffs. She points a finger at Kaz. "Don't let Phoenix out of your sight."

His lips twitch upward as he tilts his head. "He can take care of himself." Adri doesn't look convinced, so Kaz sighs, leading us to the door. "I'm catching a flight home in an hour. I will make sure I stay with him until we're all safe. Don't worry about your husband too much. You have an important job to do."

I gasp. "Did you just say—"

Adri's face cracks into a conspiratorial grin. "Oh. Yeah. I left that part out when we talked." She loops her arm through mine. "Bye, Kaz. See you in three days."

I'm too stunned to speak, so I just wave at Kaz as we head out. I climb into the driver's seat, but I don't turn the car on.

"*Husband?*" I whisper.

Adri giggles, showing me her right hand. Showing me her... *wedding* ring. "I was going to tell you. I was just trying to find the right time."

I smirk, taking her hand in mine. "Congratulations, sis. Seems I wasn't the only one hiding things after all."

Adri's quiet while we drive home. When I glance over at her after pulling into Zade's driveway, she turns to face me, appearing fully sober now.

"Zeek... he said some other things the other day on the phone." She swallows. "You know I would never let him hurt you, right?"

My throat burns as I look at her—the way her cheekbones have hollowed out, the bags under her eyes.

"I know. Adri, are you okay? Has Zade..."

She shakes her head. "I'm fine. And we're getting out of here in three days, remember?"

I nod, unsure if I believe her. “Three days.”

“Dee?” she asks, her voice sounding small. “Will you stay with me?”

“I was planning on it. I have my overnight bag.”

“No, I mean... until we leave Willow Creek?”

I smile. “Of course. You’re my sister.”

She nods, looking so vulnerable all of a sudden.

She’s only a teenager. We both are. And yet, instead of enjoying her life, she has to deal with all of this bullshit just to be with the man she loves. The man the universe blessed her with.

“Thanks. I can’t wait to get the fuck out of here.”

I sigh heavily. “Me too. Me fucking too.”

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CHAPTER 12

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FIRST PRIORITY

PHOENIX

I'M BOXING with Kaz when we get the call. It's Friday morning, and we were planning on heading to Willow Creek tonight regardless. *Enough is enough.*

Just as I suspected, Adri is Eva and Niven Ashwood's biological daughter. Hundreds of other results have turned up positive for our suspected matches, corroborated by four different labs. *How the hell had they gotten away with this for so long?*

As soon as I hang up, I trigger the things we've already set in motion.

Throwing my boxing gloves onto the floor of the ring, I jump down. Nora is already speaking to one of her contacts in the Meridian and Penrith packs, our immediate borders. She'll contact the rest of the packs in North America on the flight to SFO. There are pages of signatures from research professionals endorsing the results. Both humans, under an oath of secrecy, and shifters. It would be suicide to defy these results. I've made damn well sure they're substantiated by the best.

Valen is working with Kaz and Deirdre to prepare the shifters, and I attach the results to the mass communication that will go out to every registered resistor. It will be their ammunition—their proof that they are, in fact, Shadow wolves. This will secure their emancipations into an airtight argument.

Hopefully.

"Phoenix." Nora tugs my arm back just as I take a step forward to go

shower. She looks at me with wide, nervous eyes. “Be careful, okay?”

She and Valen are staying behind in Shadow territory while Kaz and I fly down.

“You know I’ll be careful.”

She nods once. “I’ll call Eva Ashwood.”

I nod. “Yes. Good idea.”

She looks at me tentatively. “And the others?”

“Of course. Call as many of them as you can. They can only help our cause, and they deserve to know we are bringing their children home to them.”

Her eyes water as she sniffs. “You know this is a huge deal, right?”

I nod once. “I know. We should contact Red as well, to ensure he’s safe. He should... he should know about how much of this is because of him.”

Her throat bobs. “Tonight, hundreds of young shifters will be reunited with their rightful families. You did this, Phoenix.”

I look down at the floor. “We did this, Nora.”

“Alpha—”

I pull her into a tight hug, and she sobs as my arms wrap around her. “I know. I know this hits close to home for all of us.”

“I’m excited to bring her home.”

I close my eyes. “You have no idea, Nora.”

“If someone took Iris away, I don’t think I’d be able to cope until she was back. You’re holding it together pretty well.”

“I’ve been channeling everything into hatred for Zade,” I tell her. I’m not lying. I *will* kill him.

She pulls away and wipes her cheeks with a swipe of her fingers. “I know. Just... be careful. Things are precarious right now.”

I nod. “I know.”

Smiling, she pushes me toward the door. “Go shower. You stink. And then go get your fucking mate back.”

AN HOUR LATER, the communication has been sent and the neighboring packs have been notified. Valen and Nora are rushing around trying to tie up any loose ends. I pocket my phone and wait for Adri to signal that she’s awake. I

know Deirdre was letting her sleep in this morning, and I can't fucking wait to tell her the good news. I make myself a cappuccino while I wait, feeling antsy.

I am going to bring my mate back home today.

Kaz comes sauntering into the kitchen a minute later. He turns the kettle on to make some tea. I raise my eyebrows at him as he grabs his matcha shit.

"You got in late last night," I tell him. I'd been notified of his arrival just after three in the morning.

He shrugs. "Wanted to make sure Deirdre didn't need anything else from me before today."

"I see."

His eyes snap up to me. "What's that look for?"

I shrug, finishing my cappuccino. "Nothing. You've been meeting up with her quite often. I assume that means the two of you get along?"

He scowls. "She's a child. Don't give me that look."

"And yet, she's much braver than we were at that age. Adrienne, too."

He looks at me before stirring some bright green powder into his hot water. "That's a given."

"You like her," I tell him, watching the way his brow furrows at my words.

"I think she's intelligent and smart. Capable. Like I said, she's a kid."

"And in a year, when she's an adult?"

He gives me a rude gesture. "It doesn't matter. She's been through a lot. She doesn't need any complications."

"By complications, you mean a shifter of her rival pack who is sixteen years older than her?"

He nods. "Something like that."

"Okay. I'll stop hounding you. Will you be ready to go soon?"

He nods. "Yep. Nora and Valen have everything covered here."

"Do we need to go over our action plan again?"

He shakes his head. "We have two thousand strong at the border. I've given word to every airport, no matter how small, to notify us of any Willow Creek planes in our territory. Deirdre was able to figure out their plan for tonight. Apparently, Zeek, Zade's brother, was planning on showing up to your house unannounced."

I raise my eyebrows. "Was he now?"

Kaz chuckles. "Anyway, the pup will be apprehended as collateral and

released back to Willow Creek after we take care of Zade. Chances are, he'll be too scared to admit that he failed. The Crawfords are a prideful bunch, so he'll likely go back and tell them he was successful."

"And the Crawfords? What are we going to say to them tonight?"

Kaz snorts. "I will present them with two choices. They can allow Adrienne and Deirdre to come to Shadow territory, or—"

I grunt. "I'll take great joy in the alpha choosing to fight me." *He's an egotistical, dangerous idiot, but I will defeat him.*

Kaz looks thoughtful for a moment. After a long pause, he asks, "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I've killed another shifter before, Kaz."

"But... he's an alpha. You're a Shadow wolf. You know what will come of—"

"I will be signaling war. I know." He presses his lips together, and I continue. "However, with the results of the DNA tests at our disposal, I am hoping they hear us out. We've always known it was a risk."

"Well, we have taken precautions if it comes to that. I'm working with our spies to ensure everyone gets out of the venue safe and sound."

"Adrienne and Deirdre are first priority. Got it?" I look at Kaz pointedly.

He nods. "Of course, alpha."

"Adrienne doesn't know I'm coming to Willow Creek. She's going to be distraught if Zeek lies about my death, but you need to get them out. All of them. And if something happens to me..." I trail off, making sure he's aware of the protocols that are in place.

Valen becomes the alpha of this pack.

It doesn't need to be said, and I know that Kaz would serve Valen just as faithfully as he's served me.

I give him a curt nod. "Be ready in twenty minutes."

CHAPTER 13

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RESIST THE URGE

ADRI

GOOD MORNING, little wolf.

Phoenix's purr in my ear makes me turn over in bed with a giant smile on my face.

I can't wait to see you later, I tell him.

Deirdre and Kaz, as well as Phoenix, have been relaying the plan that they've been working on for weeks. Kaz will be coming to make sure Deirdre and I get out okay. There are precautions in place to ensure Phoenix stays safe in his territory while Deirdre and I evacuate during the rehearsal dinner. We're hoping everyone will be too distracted to notice us slinking off to the bathroom together.

We got the results.

I sit up straight in bed. *And?*

The Ashwoods are your birth parents, Adrienne. I've had it confirmed with four separate labs.

I'm sobbing before he even finishes his sentence. The room spins as my throat stings with emotion. My fingers graze the gold locket around my neck, tears slipping free and onto the duvet. The one my mother—my *birth* mother—gave me. Or left me. Whatever the story is, this is the single piece of jewelry connecting me to my birth parents. My body shakes as I cry. As the weight of not knowing slips off my shoulders.

I have parents.

Oh my gods. I don't know what to say.

Congratulations, Midnight. You're officially a Shadow wolf.

When can I meet them? I ask eagerly.

Follow Kaz's orders tonight. We can arrange something when you get back home.

Home.

I am going home.

I have birth parents.

I am leaving this place with Deirdre.

I am going home.

Zeek will be on his way here soon, Phoenix says, his voice almost a growl. We'll apprehend him until after you and Deirdre get out with the rest of the resistors.

Okay. Are you sure you're going to be safe?

Stop worrying about me, Adrienne. It will all work out.

You're not doing a very good job at convincing me, I tell him.

He chuckles down our bond. *If I go silent, don't worry. Just... trust us.*

Okay?

His words make me nervous, but there's nothing I can do. *Okay.*

I'll see you tonight, my love.

I love you.

Love you too, Midnight.

I pull my knees to my chest as I soak up all the information he relayed. The Ashwoods. Tonight. Deirdre. Kaz. Nora. Valen. I will be home soon. The next time I wake up...

It will be in Shadow territory.

Home.

With my true husband.

My true family.

My wolf perks up instantly at the thought. Grinning, I leap out of bed and take a long, hot shower. When I'm done, I pull on a new pair of jeans. I had to go down a couple of sizes, but at least I'm not pulling them up every five minutes. After I dry my hair, I pull on a black turtleneck sweater and black Converse before I head downstairs. I've already decided I'm going to ask Zade for permission to run around this morning to dispel my wedding nerves.

When I get down to the kitchen, Zade and Zeek are sitting at the island, with Emma and Godric behind them. They're whispering in low murmurs,

and goose bumps pebble my skin.

Talking about murdering Phoenix and forcing a soul bond, no doubt.

“Hi!” I chirp, smiling widely at their shocked expressions. “Good morning!”

I’m not a perky person, and I truly wish I could bottle up their surprise at seeing me in a good mood.

“Adrienne,” Emma breathes, tilting her head with a soft smile. “Happy wedding eve.”

Gag.

“It certainly is,” I answer, looking at Zade. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with Zade.”

His eyes narrow in suspicion. *Okay, maybe I should rein it in...*

“That’s wonderful to hear, sweetheart,” Godric says, his voice low. He looks between Zade and me with an almost worried expression. “We are thrilled to have you formally join our family. It’s been a long time coming.”

I grind my teeth together as I pour myself some coffee from the pot. Even before I found out I was a Shadow wolf, I never wanted to get married to Zade. It had always felt just... wrong. Surely they don’t really want me in their family. They know who I am. How do they lie so fucking easily?

“Mmm, it certainly has. I feel like it was just yesterday that Zade and I were sneaking out and talking about being betrothed.”

Zade chokes on his coffee, and his eyes widen for a second before he coughs once.

“And Deirdre will follow suit next winter,” Zeek says proudly, puffing out his chest.

Over my dead fucking body.

“Yep. We’re both so lucky,” I say sweetly. Looking at Zade, I give him an adoring smile. “Zade, can I please speak to you?”

He hops off his stool instantly, and he follows me into the dining room. Before I have a chance to ask his permission to leave, he shoves me against the wall with a hand against my throat.

“What the fuck was that?” he hisses, his eyes dark with rage. His blue eyes study my face, narrowing with suspicion. “You’re up to something. I don’t trust you.”

What the hell?

I claw at his hands as black spots float into my vision and a tear runs down my cheek. *He’s pure evil.*

He's too far gone now. His soul is corrupted.

If it wasn't evident before, it is now.

There's no saving him.

He releases me, and I gasp for air and try to keep myself from crying too loudly, lest his family in the other room hears me.

"Do you want your *fiancée* to be bruised on her wedding day?" I spit.

To his credit, he furrows his brow in concern.

I asked Deirdre to do some research on people changing once they became alphas. Apparently, it's pretty common. The power, the nerves... they eat away at everything you were before. And since Zade became alpha at such a pivotal moment in his life, he took to the darker side of his soul like a moth to a flame. Only the most powerful shifters can resist the urge to turn into brutes.

"The next time you physically injure me, you may want to be sure we're not about to have a very public ceremony the next day." I swallow, rubbing my neck. "The bruises lasted almost a week last time."

He takes a step back, his eyes scanning my face. There's an inkling of worry—of *regret*—playing across his features. But then he clears his throat, and his face slips back into the heartless mask he normally wears.

"What did you want to speak to me about, Adrienne?" He crosses his arms.

"I wanted to ask your permission to run today." My voice is neutral, but his eyes try to bore into my mind in order to read it. I continue. "I just want to let my wolf out for a bit. You can come with me if you want to. Pre-wedding jitters."

Please say yes. And please don't come with me.

He narrows his eyes. I stand up taller and ball my fists at my sides.

"No."

My heart stutters. "What? Why?"

He leans in close, his breath ghosting my lips. I try to back away, but he pins me against the wall.

"Like I said. I don't trust you."

I sigh. "If we're going to be married, you have to trust me, Zade."

His nostrils flare. "Don't patronize me, Adrienne."

My lips wobble. "*Who* are you?" I hiss. "Certainly not my ex-best friend. I don't even know you anymore. It's like you became a monster when you became alpha."

His blue eyes flicker with rage. “Yeah? Because I feel like I’ve been holding myself back from showing you my true colors.”

A noise behind him startles both of us. Zeek is in the doorway, watching us with a sly grin on his face, something he schools quickly when Zade sees him.

“Uh, sorry.” He clears his throat, looking at his brother.

He’s not sorry. He loves the idea of Zade using force to control me. He will never touch my sister.

“The plane is ready, Alpha Zade. I wanted a word with you before I go.”

The plane.

The plane Zeek is planning on using to murder my moon-fated mate.

My lips curl as Zade backs away from me. I can’t contain the rage flowing through me.

“Going anywhere fun?” I ask Zeek, cocking my head as I push all of my alpha power outward.

Zeek rubs his mouth with his hand. “Just taking care of a problem.”

I begin to tremble with fury as I look back at Zade. *Control your temper, Adri. You cannot let them suspect you know anything.*

How I just want this to be over. To be with my mate and away from these vile shifters.

“I’ll see you tonight,” I tell Zade curtly, stomping out of the room as Zeek smirks at me. Just as I round the corner, I hear Zeek mutter something.

“Seems like she needs a refresher course on behaving like an omega.”

Zade just growls his agreement, and I rush back upstairs to my room.

Tonight.

Tonight.

Tonight.

It can’t come soon enough.

The quicker I’m out of this hellhole, the better.

CHAPTER 14

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NOT THE FIRST TIME

DEIRDRE

ADRI and I manage to pack our lives up into a single backpack, knowing neither of us will ever be coming back to the house we grew up in. Zade, after being persuaded by Emma, managed to let Adri out of his sight so that she could get ready for the rehearsal dinner in the house she grew up in. Three enforcers are standing guard outside, but nevertheless, it's nice to spend this last day with her in our childhood home.

As I finish curling Adri's long, dark hair, she sighs and closes her eyes. She's been extremely quiet all day, which is not normal for her. I pull the dress that Emma picked out for tonight off the hanger in her closet. It's a sleeveless white dress that's cinched at the waist and has a turtleneck with gold beading. She steps into it, wearing Emma-approved lingerie, quiet as she sits down at the dressing table. She looks at herself in the mirror as I sweep her hair back into a ponytail.

My hands still when I notice the purple marks around her neck.

She notices where my eyes have stopped, her face going pale until she clears her throat.

"Zade doesn't like it when I defy him," she explains, her voice sharp and resolute.

My throat catches. "He—Zade did that?" Fiery protectiveness explodes inside me, and my white wolf whines uncomfortably. She's fiercely protective of Adri, as am I.

Adri nods. "It's not the first time."

I drop her hair and take a step back. "Why didn't you tell me?" I whisper. She shrugs. "Does it matter?"

I step forward and gently pull her hair back into a ponytail, securing the clear elastic around her thick hair. After wrapping a piece of hair around the elastic, I use hairspray to smooth out any bumps, combing her scalp gently without saying anything. When I'm done, she stands and looks at me. The turtleneck nearly covers the blooming bruises, but just in case, I dab some foundation over her soft skin, ignoring the tear sliding down my cheek.

"Stop," she croaks. "You're going to make me cry." Her watery eyes look up at the ceiling.

When I'm done, I step back. She looks... regal. Beautiful, as always. My lip wobbles when she clears her throat and stands tall.

"I could kill him," I growl.

She nods once. "Trust me, Dee. Me too."

I press my lips together as we stare at each other for a few seconds. I look around her room. Glancing down at the clock on her dresser, I shake off my emotions and walk over to my dress before quickly shedding my clothes and stepping into it.

"We should go. I wouldn't want to be late for Lord Zade."

Adri smirks. "It's going to work out tonight. Right?"

I nod. "Yes. Kaz will take care of us. He won't let anything bad happen."

I'd gotten confirmation that Kaz was already hiding out in the basement of the venue.

Waiting to strike.

She fidgets with her hands. "What... if it doesn't work out?"

I inhale once before letting out a shaky breath. "Then you and I will run."

She nods. "Okay. Good. That's a good plan." She doesn't look convinced.

We both step into the heels Emma approved. Everything we're wearing is Crawford approved. It makes me sick. My dress is the same dark blue color as Zeek's tie. As the maid of honor and best man, Emma thought it best we match tonight, too. *Barf.*

When we get downstairs, our parents are waiting by the door. My father, dressed in a formal black suit, kisses the top of Adri's head. My mother is wearing a light pink dress.

Navy blue and pink—the two colors Emma picked for the wedding.

My mother takes Adri's hands. "I'm so proud of you, Adrienne."

Adri averts her gaze and looks down. So unlike her. These weeks back in Willow Creek have nearly broken her. Six months ago, we were leaving for dinner with the notorious and feared Shadow wolf Alpha Phoenix and his equally dangerous second, Valen. She was so snarky, so sarcastic, so vibrant. Now? She's a fraction of herself—smaller, more demure, quieter. I swallow the thickness threatening to make me choke out a sob.

We were going to get the fuck out of here.

"Thanks, Mom."

I hear the derision in Adri's voice as she says it, but neither of my parents notice. In fact, it seems as though there's a lot of things they're choosing not to notice lately. Whether it's for their own self-preservation or some other reason, I'm not sure.

We all climb into the car. Shayla is across the street, watching for us to leave so that she can use the key I've hidden under the doormat. She'll grab our things and meet us at the airport. I couldn't risk explaining a backpack away. I glance over to where I suspect she's hiding out, nodding once and plastering a hopeful smile on my face.

I glance back at the house before I climb into our dad's car. Adri does the same. We both stall for a few seconds before climbing in at the same time, and then she looks at me across the back seat, reaching for my hand as we pull away.

The rehearsal dinner is at the venue, near the coast of Big Sur. It's about an hour's drive, weaving over highway 17 and down the coast. I don't let go of Adri's hand the entire time, soaking in the coast and the place I called home for seventeen years. Though I was born a Willow Creek wolf, I'm excited to shed that part of myself after tonight. I'll be with Adri, but she's a Shadow wolf. They all are—except for me.

Still... I'll be leaving everything I've ever known. Willow Creek wolves aren't exactly worldly, and while I tried to learn as much as I could these past few months, the thought of leaving everything behind is daunting.

And exciting.

Thankfully, I'll have Adri by my side the entire time.

Once we arrive at the venue, my dad pulls into the valet line, and only then do I look at Adri and nod once.

This is it.

We walk in, and of course everyone fawns over Adri, asking her a million

questions about the wedding, Zade, the honeymoon to Italy he planned for this summer—the one she won't be going on. She handles it all extremely well, remaining poised and elegant, even when Zade saunters over to her and gives her a kiss on her neck. She stiffens when he does, and something violent flashes behind her eyes when his hand snakes around her waist.

Even though he's my alpha and my wolf would never be able to overpower him, I still have the urge to claw his eyes out.

Just before dinner is served, Zade clinks his champagne flute and walks up to the stage. When I look at Adri, she's eyeing him skeptically. Everyone quiets as he takes the microphone from the DJ.

"Tomorrow, I get to marry my best friend," he starts, and everyone in the room swoons. Well, everyone except Adri and me.

She looks at me, and I swear I see a tiny eye roll. I don't laugh even though I want to. Her eyes sweep over the crowd of people. I know Kaz is going to text me once he has everything ready for our departure. It's just after five... our planned time of escape is five thirty, when everyone is sitting down to dinner. I take a steadying breath as Zade continues his speech.

"It wasn't always easy for us," Zade says smoothly. "Betrothed when we were babies, we found out about the betrothal when we were thirteen. Remember that Adrienne? Sitting on top of my father's car overlooking Willow Creek, wondering if we'd ever like each other enough to get *married*?" A few people laugh, but Adri just looks at him with a neutral expression.

"And then, this summer..."

Adri stiffens.

"Our relationship was tested. Stretched. Pulled apart by the brute in the territory above us."

A few people gasp. Adri's eyes widen. I look at Zade as my hands open and close at my sides. *What is he doing? What angle is he playing?*

"I won't go into details about *that*, to save my future wife's dignity."

Adri's cheeks flush with embarrassment. I take a step closer to her.

"What the hell is he doing?" I ask.

"I have no idea," she mutters before plastering a smile on her face.

"I have grand plans for this pack," Zade continues. "And I'm excited to have my beautiful wife at my side—hopefully pregnant with our pups very soon."

Adri pales.

“Don’t worry,” I mutter, taking her hand. “Twenty minutes. Hang on for twenty minutes.”

She nods, her throat bobbing as she swallows.

“I know my ascension to alpha of the prestigious Willow Creek pack has been different from how my father reigned,” Zade says, tipping his glass in Godric’s direction. “I learned from the best, and as wonderful as his reign was, I feel it’s time we take our pack to the next level.”

Godric looks a bit sick at Zade’s words.

“My father once told me to go after what I wanted with everything I had. With that in mind, I am pleased to announce that the threat up north has been eliminated.” His eyes snap to Adri’s. “Entirely.”

There are gasps and hushed voices as people take in his words. Adri looks torn between outright fury and desperate, unrelenting grief. Her face ripples with confusion as she mouths the word *no*. Her eyes are wide, and I can see her mumbling words to Phoenix in her mind. The deathly white pallor of her skin tells me she hasn’t been successful in reaching him using their mental bond. A trickle of fear flashes through me.

What if our plans went wrong? What if Zeek really did kill Phoenix? Kaz?

“Earlier today, my brother ventured into the shithole that is the Shadow territory, and with the help of our enforcers, we were able to successfully execute Phoenix Adair and his entire inner circle.”

He’s lying.

The thought jolts through me with so much confidence, I wonder quietly if I’m somehow mind-linked with someone.

But then I look at Adri...

Her eyes have gone wholly black. Claws pierce through her freshly painted fingernails, and her skin ripples with the threat of a shift. Squeezing her wrist as tightly as I can, I drag her back into the anonymity of the crowd as her face contorts into a mask of grief. Fangs snap down from her canines, but everyone is too enraptured with what Zade is saying to notice Adri partially shifting.

“Adri,” I warn, pulling her away from the crowd as quickly as possible.

Zade says something else into the microphone, but I’m not paying attention.

Until he lets out a low, wicked chuckle. “Speaking of, where is my delightful little fiancée?” Zade asks, looking out into the crowd. “Come up

here and join me, Adrienne. Let's celebrate the death of our rival on the eve of our marriage."

Oh, fuck.

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CHAPTER 15

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DON'T

ADRI

ANSWER ME.

Phoenix!

Answer me.

Fuck!

My mind is reeling as I scream my demands through my mind, trying to reach my mate.

“We were able to successfully execute Phoenix Adair and his entire inner circle.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and quell my wolf, who is downright fucking raging at Zade’s words. If my human doesn’t kill him, my wolf might try.

No.

She *will*. Even if she dies in the process.

I snap my eyes up at Zade, still talking. Still smirking. His hands gesticulate to the sides as he charms a room full of people who believe him. Who *cheer* when they hear that my mate is dead.

Not just my mate. My rightful *husband*.

The hands that inspire these people are the same hands he wrapped around my neck, strangling me.

Twice.

Deirdre is saying something next to me. She’s tugging me away. No one looks at me—they’re enchanted by the words their alpha is speaking.

Brainwashed idiots.

Please answer me, I beg Phoenix.

He can't be dead. I would've... felt something. Surely, I would've felt it if he were dead. Zade is lying. He's putting on a show for everyone, taking a stand as the new alpha...

Manipulating. A liar. Someone who hurts women. Someone I don't even recognize.

Disgust, fury, grief—they slam into me all at once. I nearly buckle with the alpha strength that flares through me. I can see how Zade used his power for hatred. How his jealousy and insecurities turned his power ugly. Because right now, all I want to do is *hurt someone*. I grit my teeth, and my lips curl back as the power undulates just under my skin. It would be so easy to channel this power into hatred. It would be so easy to let it corrupt my soul.

I snap my eyes to Zade just as he says my name.

“Speaking of, where *is* my delightful little fiancée? Come up here and join me, Adrienne. Let's celebrate the death of our rival on the eve of our marriage.”

The audacity.

I'm panting when Dee mutters something under her breath. The room quiets, and I swear I can see everyone's eyes on me. A few people near me take a step back, surely reacting to the power I'm giving off.

I am a Shadow wolf.

I am part omega, part alpha.

Right now, the alpha side wins.

Right now, I want nothing more than to maim and kill Zade Crawford. My hands are balled at my side, and I lift my chin proudly.

I am Phoenix's *mate*.

I know Zade's words were likely just a show of power. But the fear of losing my mate... I crack my neck as I take a step forward.

I'm going to shift.

And I'm going to kill him.

Zade, to his credit, looks perturbed at the expression on my face. He falters a bit, taking a step back as I approach the stage.

I will kill him.

Gladly.

Happily.

I will rip his throat out, and I will—

Don't.

Phoenix's words clang through me. I stiffen, gasping audibly as the single syllable clangs around in my mind. The fact that he's alive, that he's telling me what to do—

Realization crushes me.

I never told him through our bond what I was going to do. Which means...

I scan the crowd, looking for him. For my mate. My wolf has been doing somersaults, but I thought it was because she was excited to enact revenge on Zade. But now... her tail wags excitedly.

Just like she did the night I met Phoenix.

I touch my hand to my lips, hiding my smile.

He's here somewhere.

He's here. *Alive.*

"Earth to Adrienne." Zade's cruel voice snaps me out of my stupor. "Come on. Don't make your future husband wait too long. You're already making me wait for something else," he chides, both amused and aggravated.

Several people chuckle.

I stand up taller and continue on my way up to the stage. My eyes flick back and forth over the crowd, looking for a particularly tall man with black hair. Golden eyes. A scar slashed straight through his right brow. *Mine. My mate.* He's here somewhere. He has to be. He told me to trust him, so I did. I trusted him to stay alive. I trusted him to get me out of this situation, and he will.

Phoenix is *here.*

It's all the strength I need to place one foot in front of the other, walking up to the stage.

Zade reaches out for my hand when I make it to the edge of the stage. Instinctively, I raise my hand for him to pull me up, but a loud roar sounds in the large room.

Phoenix's booming, lethal voice sounds from somewhere in the back of the crowd.

"Don't you fucking *dare* touch my mate."

CHAPTER 16

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COMPLICIT

PHOENIX

I HAD MYSELF UNDER CONTROL. Truly, I did. I even managed to keep myself hidden away in the basement with Kaz, even though all my wolf wanted to do was barge into that party and grab my mate. Still, all things considered, I've remained level-headed about the whole thing. I had over a month to plan, to scheme. I could wait twenty minutes.

That is, until Zade spoke the words that set my whole body into a senseless rage.

You're already making me wait for something else.

Something he would surely never experience. Not while I was still alive.

Easing my way up to where Adrienne is looking at me with relief and pure admiration, I nearly stop walking when I take her in physically. I haven't seen her since the day Zade took her. Sure, I got glimpses of her over the last couple of minutes, but now that I'm mere feet away from her, my eyes track everything. The hollow cheeks, the dark circles, the dress with a *goddamn* collar. And then... *bruising*.

What. The. Fuck.

Huffing, I step closer. The crowd quiets. A few people run away. Zade says something snarky, explaining away my presence to his admirers, but I barely hear him over the roaring in my ears.

When I'm close enough, I reach out for her collar and pull it down slightly.

Marks. The marks of a hand—of a large hand.

Around my mate's neck. My *wife's* neck.

All semblance of control snaps.

I shift immediately, and Adrienne jumps back, a wicked grin on her face.

I glance up at Zade with my wolf's eyes. More people run out of the room. He pales, and then I feel Kaz's wolf behind me. Suddenly, Zade shifts, his clothes ripping to shreds as he and his father all shift into large white wolves.

They're big.

I'm bigger.

Did he hurt you? I ask Adrienne, glancing down at her. Even in wolf form, I'm still taller than she is. *Did he give you those marks?*

She nods once in confirmation, and it's all I need.

I'm at a disadvantage being below him and he knows it. His muzzle grips the back of my neck, forcing my submission, but I roar and fling him off, sending him sliding across the stage.

He's up in an instant, but I jump out of the way and turn around to tackle his wolf to the ground. His teeth gnash at my throat as he twists underneath me. His jaw snaps, and then he kicks me in the chest, knocking the air out of me.

I let him go. I can't get close enough to his neck to force his submission.

We circle each other for a few seconds, and with each step, my anger grows.

I want him dead.

He will pay for what he did.

I don't care if I start a fucking war.

Just as Zade leans back on his haunches, readying for another attack, a man shouts behind him. "Zade!"

A low growl emits from my throat. *He* managed to get into Shadow territory earlier today and kill several of my guards before we pushed him back out again. *He* lied to his own alpha, his brother.

"Zade," his brother murmurs, looking between us. "I'm sorry. I tried to get in, but this mutt had *thousands* of guards waiting for us."

Zade's wolf looks at me and narrows his eyes. He can't speak, but I recognize the fury. It mirrors my own. Two alphas fighting over one wolf.

Mate.

"Just let us go," Adrienne says slowly, looking between Zade and his

brother. “Deirdre and I will go with Kaz and Phoenix. Let us. There’s no need to fight. Zeek, you agree, right?”

Zeek’s nostrils flare. “He’s here now. I say they battle it out. See who’s more deserving of you.”

Adrienne stomps her foot. “No. I am choosing for myself. No one needs to die.”

Zade growls, and Zeek looks between us nervously before his eyes flick back to Adrienne.

“You’re engaged to Zade,” Zeek says, his voice cruel. “Surely, you can see how much of a downgrade it would be to tether yourself to this mutt,” he sneers, looking right at me.

Before anyone can retort, Zade lunges at me. I twist around and swipe at his neck with my paw and jump back. My claw slices through his fur, and he yelps in pain.

I hear the mothers crying out, but I don’t give a fuck. *He had his hands around my Midnight’s neck.*

Zade shakes his head, blood spattering across the stage. *It’s not enough.*

Kaz is guarding Adrienne and Deirdre in wolf form—facing Godric’s wolf form. They won’t interfere, though. Everyone knows a fight between two alphas is a fight only we can have.

Phoenix, Adri warns in my mind.

He hurt you.

It’s all I say before I growl, baring my teeth as Zade jumps at me again. This time, I preempt him and lunge for his feet. He doesn’t expect that, shifting slightly as he falls onto his back. I twist around and overpower him, my teeth sinking into the fur on the back of his neck. It was quick, but I have him now. He flails against me, but I can feel the alpha power seeping away from him. Once he’s done struggling, he doesn’t move. He’s alive, and his blue eyes find mine as he whines.

I shift back into a human.

Zade does the same.

His neck is bloodied, and he’s panting as Kaz tosses me a pair of shorts.

“No one has to know that I won,” I grit out, pulling the shorts on. “Technically, I can claim this land as my own. But I won’t. I’m taking *my* mate and her sister back to Shadow territory.”

He looks up at me with narrowed eyes. “And what? I have to explain to everyone how the brute from up north stole my bride?”

Such a young, scared alpha wolf.

“She’s a Shadow wolf, Zade,” Deirdre says. Both Zade and Zeek look at her with surprise and disgust. “Phoenix ran her DNA against her birth parents. Four labs have corroborated it.” Adrienne’s mom weeps, but no one moves to comfort her.

Complicit.

They were all fucking complicit.

“Just let us go,” Adrienne whispers to Zade.

Zade looks between her and me. Taking a step closer, I wrap an arm around her waist, and his eyes nearly bulge out of his head.

“Fuck that. They’ll never take me seriously if I let her go with *you*.” He snarls the last word.

He’s quick as a wolf.

But he’s quicker as a human.

He grabs something from behind the podium, and it takes me a second too long to realize it’s a gun.

A loud bang sounds just as Adrienne screams my name.

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CHAPTER 17

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PURE WRATH

ADRI

THE BULLET GRAZES MY SHOULDER.

Fuck. That hurt.

I hear his roar before he shifts again, lunging at Zade, already on top of him before I blink. There are screams of agony, of terror, of anguish... and then everything is silent. Phoenix steps back from Zade's mangled body.

He's gone.

I should be repulsed. I *should* be horrified. There's a hole in the side of Zade's neck where Phoenix ripped his muscles out, severing the carotid arteries. Blood begins to drip down the side of the stage. It's so quiet that I can hear Emma's garbled whimpers clear enough to make me close my eyes. My pulse roars in my ears. I open them as Phoenix turns to look at me with blood on his maw, his canine expression unsure.

Deep down, I know the loss of my oldest friend will hit me. I know myself well enough to know that I will forever be nostalgic and miss who Zade was before he became alpha of the Willow Creek pack. The camaraderie, the closeness, the nicknames, and the comfort I felt growing up with him... the grief will come, I know. My throat catches for a second when I think of never getting my friend back.

But the man lying on the stage wasn't my friend.

He hurt me.

He wanted to violate me.

He tore me from my true mate.
Instead of grief, relief washes over me.
Relief that he's gone, that he won't try to manipulate his way out of this.
Relief that he won't hurt me any more—bullet notwithstanding—and that he won't hurt Phoenix.

He won't hurt *anyone* anymore.

I clench my teeth and turn to Zeek. "We tried to warn you."

Zeek looks like he's about to be sick. He looks back at his parents—Godric, who looks white as a ghost, and Emma, who is sobbing in her husband's arms. With Zade dead, Zeek will automatically become alpha of the Willow Creek pack at just seventeen. Even if Phoenix could make a claim, I know he never will. That's not how they do things here. The Crawfords have been ruling this territory for decades.

"Let's go," Deirdre whispers, grabbing my arm.

I turn to look at my parents. "We're leaving now."

My mom takes a step forward. "Adrienne—"

I shake my head. "I don't want to hear it. Phoenix is my mate, and I belong with his pack. I'm taking Deirdre with me."

"Like hell you are," my dad growls.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Dad," Deirdre hisses, producing a piece of paper and flinging it at his feet. "You have no control over me anymore. I've filed for emancipation."

Our dad blanches. "You can't possibly... Your betrothal."

I register a growl coming from... Kaz? But I don't have time to dwell on it because Dee cuts him off, sneering at our father. I swell with pride.

"I'd sooner rot in hell than marry that prick," she says sharply, looking at Zeek. "Let's go," she adds quickly.

"You'll regret this," Zeek murmurs from the stage, glaring at Phoenix with a mix of rage and grief. He glances at me. "And I'll make sure every other pack knows what a filthy traitor you are, Adrienne Pierce."

I glance at Phoenix, who's now back in human form, and, somehow, wearing another pair of shorts. My lips curve up, and before I can think, I give him my best retort.

"Actually, it's Adrienne Adair. Phoenix and I are already married."

KAZ RUSHES everyone out of the venue to a waiting car. We speed away before anyone can chase us, and the instant the four of us are encased in the moving vehicle, Phoenix is on me, moving my hair to the side to look down at my shoulder. It's bleeding, but it doesn't look as bad as it feels. The right side of my dress is covered in blood, but with some stitches. I'll be okay.

More than okay.

I have my *mate* back.

Every frazzled nerve in my body is calmer now that he's here.

Feeling his, though—his warm body against mine...

It's like the other half of my soul is complete.

"Midnight," he purrs, pulling me gently into his side. I hear him smell my hair, smell *me*. My wolf is purring as I settle into his side with my good arm. She's been so agitated these last few weeks, and having her mate back instantly relaxes her. A warm sense of peace works through me, via my wolf. I sigh contentedly as we get on the highway. Despite what the future may hold, I am so fucking glad to be back with Phoenix.

"Gods, I missed you," I breathe, looking up into his worried golden eyes. "So fucking much."

My voice catches in my throat, and in an instant, his mouth is on mine.

I combust, moaning as his tongue parts my lips. My body responds, my wolf flops onto her back, and I nearly forget about the pain until someone clears their throat.

"Um, should we take a separate car so that you two can—" He yelps. "Ow. What?"

"*Let them have this,*" Dee hisses, and I smile against Phoenix's lips, pulling away with as much self-control as I can muster.

I'm gasping for air as I wipe my mouth and turn to face Kaz and Dee.

"Sorry, I—"

"Please don't fucking apologize for kissing your husband," Phoenix growls.

Something feral inside me fires to life at his words, and my stomach swoops low as his hooded eyes flick across my face.

I smirk. "I was *going* to tell them sorry that I can't help myself."

His lips part and then he's on me again, his hands clawing at me as gently as he possibly can, his breath tickling my jaw, his stubble scratching my chin...

He's the one to pull away, suddenly looking uncomfortable. Turning to

me, there's a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Later." A promise or a threat, I'm not sure. But that one word sends shivers across my skin.

"Is this what happens when you mate with someone?" Dee asks, her voice mildly disgusted. "It's like they're horny teenagers."

Kaz snorts. "You think this is bad? Try being around them while they denied their feelings for each other. It was infuriating. For *everyone*."

"Hey, fuck you," Phoenix jokes with a smile. He turns to Dee, suddenly seeming to realize that she's there. "I don't think we've formally met."

"The dinner," Dee interrupts. "I was there."

Phoenix's lips press together. "Right. Of course you were. Sorry, I was a bit distracted." His eyes bore into mine again, and my skin burns.

"I'm Deirdre," she chirps, holding her hand out.

"Very nice to meet you. I'm—"

"I know who you are," she chides, though she's smiling.

"Dee," I mutter. "Manners."

Kaz laughs again. Dee looks at him with contempt, her blue eyes burning with annoyance. He looks down at her, and the smirk immediately drips off his face. My eyes scan the way she's sitting close to him, leg to leg, and how she seems almost *comfortable* to be around him. I was too drunk to remember how they interacted the other night in the warehouse, but seeing them together is... interesting. I'm just about to make an observation about it—tit for tat, after all—when Phoenix clears his throat.

"So, I guess we should expect the other packs to declare war this weekend."

CHAPTER 18

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I REGRET NOTHING

KAZ

I PULL my phone out as Phoenix begins to explain what will happen next. Even though we prepared for war—*expected it*, even—I can't help but feel like I'm being interrogated by the two female shifters in this vehicle.

It's going to be a long as fuck drive to SFO.

"What do you mean war?" Adrienne's disbelieving voice is shrill.

"I thought you said the proof would absolve us of any threats?" Dee's husky voice carries through the cabin of the SUV. I turn to face her, realizing she's speaking to me.

"Well, this motherfucker had to go and kill the alpha of the Willow Creek pack," I retort, glaring at Phoenix.

He just sits back in his seat, a smug, satisfied smile on his face. "I regret nothing," he says, his arm still wrapped tightly around Adrienne's thin shoulders.

"I thought the plan was for us to negotiate," Dee says slowly. "Get Zade to release us."

"Yeah, well, he fired a gun at Adrienne," Phoenix says matter-of-factly. His fingers graze at Adrienne's neck, and she closes her eyes at his touch. My shifter eyes can see the purple bruises at the base of her neck, even in the darkness. Phoenix was justified to kill that fucker.

"We're prepared for war," I say slowly. "I thought it might come to that, if we weren't able to get the DNA results in time. We weren't prepared five

weeks ago,” I tell Adrienne. “But we are now.”

“Against five other packs?” she asks, her voice wobbly.

I nod. “I have it on good authority that three of them will join our cause once they know the real story.” I hold my phone out. “I’ve already sent them the footage of tonight.”

Dee shifts next to me, her mouth dropping open. “You have evidence.”

I scoff. “Of course I do. I’m Phoenix’s head enforcer. Do you know how many scuffles I have to clean up on a daily basis because of this hot-headed idiot?”

Phoenix and Adrienne laugh, but Dee is still frowning, her brow furrowed. “But even if two other packs take their side, we’re still outnumbered. Shadow territory is the least populated pack in the entire continent.”

“It’s also the most densely packed with resources,” I tell her gently. I want to ease her worries, smooth my thumb over the crease between her eyes. “Oil, wild game, wood, coal, and natural gas—all things that other packs rely on.”

“Okay, so what’s the plan, then?” Adrienne asks. “Zeek will tell everyone what happened, but you have a video with proof of Zade’s intent to harm me.”

I nod. “Precisely. The smart packs, the ones not afraid of Zade or Zeek, will ally with us. I have no doubt that unless the Crawfords are blackmailing packs, all of them will eventually ally with us. No one wants a war. The ones who ally with Willow Creek right now might just need some convincing.”

“Convincing?” Adrienne asks.

“I’m sure Zeek will spin some tale of the beastly brute up north who stole his bride away,” Phoenix says slowly. “Until we can prove that this is... consensual.”

Adrienne’s mouth drops open. “I married you. And you’re my fated mate. How many other ways are there to convince an entire pack of my choice to be with you?”

The question hangs in the air, and I narrow my eyes at Phoenix. “You should tell her.”

“Tell me what?” Adrienne asks, narrowing her eyes.

To my delight, Phoenix looks wholly uncomfortable. “Willow Creek is... How do I say this nicely?” He rubs his mouth with his free hand. “They consider themselves civilized, despite the sickening events of tonight. The

Shadow pack, as well as the surrounding packs, are a bit more primitive. They are persuaded by magic, and folklore, and other things that Willow Creek wolves might deign unsavory.”

Adrienne stiffens. “Like... what?”

I hide my smile behind my hand. I knew this conversation would come up at some point. Watching Phoenix squirm is... priceless. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this uncomfortable.

“Moon-fated mates are rare. You know that. I know that. But there’s an element to the bond you might not know about.” He wipes a hand on his jeans. *Gold*. “If a female wolf rejects the bond, even if... even if she is rutted by her alpha, she will not get pregnant with a pup. Only when she accepts the bond fully will she fall pregnant during her heat. It’s a long-forgotten bit of magic that no one really pays attention to, but those neighboring packs might be convinced if you—if we... And I’m not saying that we have to. You’re so young, and I only just got you back. And it’s your choice, of course, your body—”

“Wait a second,” Adrienne hisses.

Gold. Pure, fucking gold.

Phoenix babbling like a moron is the highlight of my day.

I clear my throat to hide my shaking, silent laughter. “Adrienne, we can certainly find another way to convince them,” I tell her smoothly.

“That’s barbaric,” Deirdre says under her breath.

“It’s supposed to be a gift,” I tell her, my voice a little too hard. “A pup born from moon-fated mates is always powerful. A gift from the universe. Rare. *Cherished*.”

Deirdre’s cheeks flush, and it makes her seem younger, more innocent. I clear my throat again and look away as Phoenix continues.

“Midnight, we will find another way,” Phoenix says, his lips curling into a smile. “I was just giving you some context.”

“So, you’re saying I need to get pregnant or find some other way of getting the other packs to believe us all so that we don’t start a war?”

Her tight voice hangs in the air, and my stomach drops at the realization of our implication.

“Adrienne, we didn’t mean to upset you. The other packs—they all have civilized alphas running the show. With Zade gone, we can convince them of the DNA results. Of the plan to kill Phoenix and soul bond you to Zade.” I clench my jaw when I glance quickly at Deirdre. “And Zeek’s plan to do the

same to Deirdre. We can do a press conference in Greenwood tomorrow. I'll have Nora set it up. We can go territory to territory if we have to, meeting with any alphas who need extra convincing. We can put out statements and give witness testimonies. Trust me, I've had five weeks to think of ways to prevent us from going to war."

Adrienne swallows. "Okay. Yeah, that all sounds good." She looks at Phoenix. "Whatever you need... I'll do it."

Phoenix pulls her closer and mutters into her ear. She instantly relaxes, settling herself into his side.

"Do we have a medic waiting at the airport?" Phoenix asks me, a worried expression settling across his features again. His eyes flick to Adrienne's shoulder.

I nod. "And I've confirmed that all resistors in the San Francisco area are currently on board our plane."

I can feel Dee's eyes snap to mine. I give her a small smile as Adrienne and Phoenix mutter more sweet nothings to each other.

"You did this," I tell her, hoping she understands what I mean.

Her lips do that thing where they pull to the side, and I watch her face, mesmerized. "We did this," she corrects.

"Good job, kid."

Her eyes flicker with something akin to disappointment before she schools her features into a mirthful smirk.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get the hell out of here."

CHAPTER 19

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THE FOREST AFTER A RAIN

ADRI

I KNEW Dee had been working with the other Shadow wolves hidden away in Willow Creek, but I didn't expect the camaraderie they all shared or how they looked up to Dee as their leader—not that she wasn't capable, but because I've only ever known her as the docile people pleaser of my childhood. But here, as she goes seat to seat on the commercial jet that Kaz commissioned for us, a spark of something is visible in her eyes.

She's a natural leader.

For the second time tonight, I'm filled with pride.

Pride for rejecting our home pack just as I had done, seeing it for what it was.

Pride for watching her become strong and capable—something I've always known about her. My parents tried so hard to stamp it out of both of us, but she'd seen the deception just like I had. As I observe her determined expression, it makes me wonder just how long she's been suspicious of Willow Creek. She mentioned suspecting my true heritage before I found out. How long has she been putting on a show for our parents?

It puts the last couple of years into perspective. While I was always unable to hide my true nature away, unable to hide my expressions and distaste for something, she carried on. She pretended. She wore the clothes and acted the part, but apparently behind her wide eyes and warm smile was a snake waiting to strike. Dee is a much better actress than me, and I'm

incredibly proud of her.

And relieved.

Relieved that we're on the same side.

Relieved that I don't have to go to war with my sister.

Phoenix is checking on all of the resistors with Kaz, and Dee is speaking to one of the pilots. I bring my knees up to my chest as we pull away from the gate, staring out of the window from my seat. It's been a fucking *day*. I keep waiting for Zade's death to hit me, but it hasn't yet. Maybe it never will. Or maybe any semblance of friendship between us died the day he used his size—*his alpha position*—to physically hurt me. To threaten me. But now... now he's gone.

It's all in the past. No point in dwelling. I'm here now, and though the future is up in the air, at least I have my mate.

A minute later, Phoenix sits down in the seat next to me, lifts the armrest, and tugs me into his side. He's already sent the medic over, and my shoulder is newly disinfected, stitched, and bandaged up. Fifteen dissolvable stitches. Supposedly, the bullet grazed my skin, and I'm lucky it didn't hit anything important. I'll always have a scar, but I'm not in any immediate danger of bleeding out.

I inhale deeply, and my wolf immediately flops onto her back, tonight's events forgotten. *Gods, I missed his smell.* Like the forest after a rain. Like *home*.

"I'm sorry—"

He places a finger on my lips, and his copper eyes bore into mine. Just being able to touch him, to *see* him, to feel him next to me... I didn't realize how calm I felt in his presence. Like he was a balm to my chaotic soul.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Midnight."

"But I—"

"Stop berating yourself," he commands, his voice gentle. "We won. We got you and Deirdre out. We're going home."

I nod once. "But we also started a war."

Phoenix pulls me closer, and I rest my cheek against the T-shirt he must've recently thrown on. He's also wearing pull-on Vans. I love seeing him dressed casually.

"I'd start a war with the entire world for you, little wolf. Quite frankly, I don't care." His nose brushes my temple, and my eyes snap shut. "I should've come sooner. If I'd known... I had no idea that he hurt you."

I open my eyes to look into his. “He’s dead now,” I say simply.

Phoenix runs a finger down my arm, just under the bullet wound. “Good.” His eyes continue to inspect my body before coming back up to my face. “Have they been starving you?”

His words are well meaning, but I hear the violence behind them. The fury.

I shake my head. “No. Somehow, being in enemy territory gave me almost no appetite.”

His jaw rolls and his eyes darken with anger. “No one said anything?”

“Dee noticed, but I think she chalked it up to wedding nerves.”

His hand comes up to my neck. “And this? Did anyone say anything about this?”

I nod. “Dee. She... wanted to kill him.”

Phoenix presses his full lips together. “I do not take death lightly, Adrienne. You must know that. I am not the kind of alpha who will kill just to kill. But this—” His voice breaks. “You are my *mate*,” he growls, eyes flashing. “He hurt you. There is no reality in which I would have let him live for that.”

My eyes prick with tears at his protective tone. After everything, after nearly four months of upheaval, *he* has my back. *My husband*. He will protect me. And I will do everything in my power to protect him.

“I’m sure I’ll mourn my friend one day,” I say slowly, looking down at my painted nails. “But I will not mourn the monster he turned into.”

Phoenix sighs as he kisses the top of my head. My whole body heats under his touch, leaving a fiery trail as his lips come behind my ear and down to my neck.

“It happens sometimes. The magic gets corrupted. If a shifter ascends to alpha and they’re not getting their needs met emotionally, it taints the magic, and eventually, it taints them. The power can be addictive. It can pull people under completely. In Shadow territory, an alpha spends days getting used to the magic after becoming the alpha. We lock ourselves away, similar to the house you used for your heat. It allows us to adjust to the power, to be around our friends, to talk things through before the weight of the pack descends.”

“And Zade didn’t get any of that,” I say softly. “When I left, it triggered his shift into alpha.”

“Jealousy is a very potent motivator.” Guilt washes over me, and Phoenix pulls away as he registers the look on my face. “Don’t feel bad, little wolf.”

He didn't have the support he needed. It was likely seen as barbaric or weak to ask for help."

"If I hadn't left, he would still be my best friend." The words are barely audible, but Phoenix stiffens next to me as I utter them.

"If you hadn't left, I wouldn't have fallen in love with you."

I nod, swallowing. "No, I know. I think I'm just processing everything. And Dee—she is this super-secret badass motherfucker, unbeknownst to me," I add with a laugh.

Phoenix chuckles. "She is. The Pierce sisters are forces to be reckoned with."

I smile and lean into him. "What happens now? We got ourselves out. We got the resistors out. Zeek will declare war. But what happens when we get back?"

Phoenix sighs, clasping his hands around me. "We sleep. Eat. Catch up." His eyes are light again as they find mine, twinkling with something that burns through me, starting slowly in my core. "I'd also love to fuck my wife."

My wolf purrs as I close my eyes. His lips find mine, hands coming to my hair and massaging my scalp. Moaning, I break away and smirk at him.

"You better knock it off or I'm going to drag you into that bathroom with me."

"I don't see an issue with that," he growls, nipping down and licking the spot between my neck and ear.

I'm just about to retort when I hear someone clear their throat from next to me.

I swing around to face Dee, who is giving me a shy smile.

"Sorry to interrupt," she says, wringing her hands. "Um, apparently the air traffic controllers have been commanded not to let us fly out. Alpha," she adds, addressing Phoenix.

My mouth drops open. I've never heard her address either Godric or Zade by alpha. However, I realize with a start, as a defector, she is now technically a Shadow wolf by choice. Meaning Phoenix is her alpha.

Phoenix sighs and releases me from his grip. I glance out of the window, noticing we're on the runway.

"Zeek?" I ask him, trying to mask the worry in my voice.

"Yeah. I'll take care of it." He bends down and kisses the top of my head before stalking toward the cockpit.

Dee sits down in his place. She smirks as she sips from a bottle of water. “Your husband is very handsome,” she says slowly. “All the Shadow wolves are.”

I let out a nervous giggle. “Dee...”

“I’m just saying. I don’t blame you for locking him down and marrying him.”

Smiling, I lean back and buckle my seat belt as Dee does the same, handing me a bottle of water from the back pocket of her jeans.

I look down at the bottle and grin. “Always making sure I have water. Remember the snacks you packed me before I ran away to Shadow territory?”

Dee snorts. “Yes. I was so worried. And angry at Mom and Dad. Still am, to be honest.”

“Me too.” I hear the engines fire up. “Looks like Phoenix persuaded them to let us take off.” I look out of the window before reaching for Dee’s hand. “Are you okay?”

She’s quiet for a minute, her blue eyes focused on the seat in front of her. Finally, she nods. “Yes. I’m excited to see what life has in store for me that *doesn’t* involve fancy suburbs and misogynistic alpha males.”

I touch my plastic bottle of water to hers. “Touché.” My smile falters. “You know I wouldn’t fault you if you wanted to come back, right?”

Dee laughs. “I promise you, that will never happen.” She looks at me. “I’d rather be with my sister.”

“I know, but...” I don’t say what I’m sure we’re both thinking.

“Adri, it doesn’t matter to me that we’re not blood related. You are my sister. My first memory is of you and me playing with our Barbies. My whole life, you’ve been there. An unwavering constant when we had formal dinners. Sneaking off and stealing chocolates at the Crawford house. Staying up late and playing with walkie-talkies in our room. Remember when we shared a room? The nights we spent at home watching movies. When you shifted for the first time—how scared you were. And how you were there for me a year later when I shifted.”

She swallows, a single tear falling down her cheek. I swipe at my own wet cheeks with my free hand before speaking.

“I know. This doesn’t change anything. You’ll always be my baby sister.”

She leans over and hugs me just as the plane turns a corner, and then we push forward, the engines getting louder as we accumulate speed. A minute

later, we take off.

“You were right. He must’ve convinced them to fly us out.”

Willow Creek disappears below us, the sunset lighting up the shoreline of Northern California.

“Will you miss it?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Parts of it, maybe. Not enough to stay.”

“I think you’re going to like Shadow territory,” I tell her, a smile spreading slowly on my lips. I notice Kaz watching us from a few aisles away, his eyes dragging over Dee for a second too long to be casual. “I think you’re going to like it a lot.”

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CHAPTER 20

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DON'T FUCKING CARE

PHOENIX

I'M SETTING the parameters for the autopilot when someone knocks on the door of the cockpit.

"Come in," I growl, sighing heavily as I hear a low chuckle from behind me.

"Are they dead?" Kaz asks, looking at the two unconscious pilots.

I clench my jaw and lock the settings before turning to face my enforcer.

"No. Just knocked them out."

Kaz smiles and leans against the door, crossing his arms. "That's one way to go against air traffic controller commands."

I frown. "They weren't willing to defy orders. It made the most sense that I pilot the plane. I refuse to allow another Crawford pup to interfere." I glance at the unconscious pilots. "They'll be okay. And I asked for forgiveness *after* the fact, once we were in the air. No one's going to shoot us down or anything."

"I see. So, how long until we reach Vancouver?"

I shrug. "A little over two hours."

"Do you need anything?" I scowl at the sky before us as we lift up even higher.

"Just my wife."

Kaz smirks, giving me a knowing smile. "I'll go get her. Stay here. Wouldn't want you to get distracted and crash the plane."

I huff a laugh. “I can assure you, having her in here will be much more of a distraction for me.”

“TMI, friend. TMI.” He looks at the pilots. “I should... move them.”

Kaz hoists them up one at a time, removing them from the cockpit and dragging them into the cabin. When he’s done moving the second one, he winks at me.

“Wouldn’t want them to be unintended voyeurs.”

He turns to go, and a minute later, I hear a soft knock at the door before Adri walks in. Her eyes widen at the sight of me holding the throttle.

“Did you fly the plane?” I lean back and smile, grateful for the sense of calm her presence brings me. “Wait. Before you answer that, I should forewarn you. If you’re about to tell me that you know how to fly a commercial jet, you should know that I have a thing for pilots,” she purrs.

I cock my head. “The other pilots weren’t cooperating, despite paying them an exorbitant amount of money to fly us all out of here. I had to knock them out and fly the plane myself. They’re somewhere in the cabin. Kaz just moved them out of here so we could have some privacy.”

She moans, placing her face in her hands. “Gods, Phoenix.”

I spread my legs and lean forward, letting one of my arms dangle between them. “So, you have a pilot fantasy? Why don’t you show me what this fantasy entails.”

Her head snaps up, and her mouth drops open. Even in the dark cockpit, I can see the way her pupils blow out with lust. She reaches back and locks the cockpit door, her hands behind her back as she looks at me.

“Please, alpha,” she moans, her bottom lip rolling between her teeth.

Two words.

Two words is all it takes for me to snap.

I jump up from my seat and press my body against hers, everything inside me craving to be *inside* her. I angle my head down to kiss her, brushing my lips against hers slowly, but her small, insistent hands pull my face ever closer.

“I want you *now*. I waited long enough.”

Chuckling, I pull away from her as I run my hands down her bare arms, being careful not to touch her bandage. The glittering instruments of the cockpit light up Adrienne’s face, and *fuck*, she’s so fucking beautiful. I can tell by the way she’s bucking against me that she’s letting her instincts take over, finally alone with her mate after weeks apart. I don’t blame her. My

wolf is yapping to claim hers, and my body is lit up from the inside completely, waiting to fill and knot her.

“Adrienne, maybe we should wait—”

She pushes me back a couple of inches before she drops to her knees. “I’ve waited long enough, Phoenix.”

I groan as she pulls my shorts down. Rubbing my face, I glance behind me at the cockpit. There are no warnings flashing. Our altitude is stable. I’ve set all the parameters for the flight, so I quickly engage the autopilot.

“Fuck,” I hiss, my head snapping back to look down at her as her soft hand grips my throbbing cock.

She runs her fingers over my taut skin, stopping at the base, where my knot normally expands. Purring, she licks the tip of my cock, which is already wet with precum.

I let out a frustrated groan. As much as I want her here, on her knees, I need to be inside her pussy. I pull away and hoist her up by her good arm.

“What are you—”

I reach down and lift her dress up, smirking as her head drops back against the door of the cockpit.

“I haven’t seen you for weeks. Do you really think I’m going to let you suck my cock after everything you’ve been through?”

She moans as my fingers graze over the wet center of her panties. “Phoenix...”

“Let me fuck my wife,” I growl, pulling her underwear down. She kicks her shoes off and steps out of her white lacy thong. I groan, my eyes flying back to hers. “Did you wear white for me or for him?” I ask, my voice hoarse. My hands trail up her legs, and I can feel how slick she is just by being in close proximity to her mate.

“For you,” she breathes, arching her back as my fingers push through her wet as sin folds. “Matching bra, too. I figured you’d want to unwrap me later. A belated wedding gift.”

I groan as I buck my cock against her hip. “What a good fucking girl,” I purr.

She whimpers as I push one finger inside her. Her eyes roll to the back of her head, and her hot heat grips me firmly. Arching my finger, I massage her inner wall as her body shudders in my grip.

“Fuck,” she whispers. “That feels...”

I pull my finger out, showing her how wet it is before slowly placing it in

my mouth. Hollowing my cheeks, I suck her arousal off my middle finger.

Adrienne's eyes flutter closed for a second, her body shaking. "Please, Phoenix."

"Do you want me to fuck you?" I ask, bending down and trailing my tongue along her neck. "Here? Now?"

She nods vigorously. "Yes, please Gods, yes. Knowing you defied orders—that you flew the plane, that you're still flying the plane, that you *know* how to fly a fucking plane..."

I chuckle as I bite down gently on her neck. "Had I known getting my pilot license would be such a turn on for you, I would've told you sooner."

My teeth scrape against her skin. My time for marking her again will come. Not right now, but soon.

She pants. "It does turn me on. So much."

I grip her hips and then pull away slightly as I lift the fabric over her hips. Gripping her bare ass, I hoist her up and push her against the door. Her legs wrap around my hips instinctively, and I press my cock against her slippery, silky folds, a bolt of electricity sliding down my spine as I line my cock up, ready to push myself inside her.

"You're mine, little wolf," I grit out, staring into her eyes intently. "I would've gotten you out tonight, with or without those results. Nothing... nothing else matters. *You are mine*," I growl, pushing into her. She throws her head back against the door and gasps as I slide into her tight heat.

"I'm yours," she whispers. "Only yours."

I groan with satisfaction, slowly working my way deeper. *Gods, I'd forgotten how fucking perfect she felt*. She's gripping me tightly, and something inside me snaps, breaking apart as I pull out and thrust back in roughly. *I need her. All of her. Every inch*. She cries out when I pull her close to my chest. *Mine*.

"Phoenix," she whimpers. "Yes."

Supple. Soft. *Made for me*. She's perfect. Every fucking thing about her is perfect.

"I've missed you so fucking much. You're perfect, Midnight," I hiss, the telltale sign of my knot expanding beginning to tingle in my spine.

Adrienne groans, moving her hips against me to get more friction. "Yes, alpha. Harder, please."

I grin as I pull out and slam back into her. "Are you ready for my knot, little wolf?" Growling, I do it again, and again. "Tell me you're ready."

She shudders and arches her back. “Yes, yes, yes, yes,” she begs, her voice barely audible.

“You were made for me,” I growl, gripping her hips and holding her still as my knot expands. “Your cunt”—my fingers dig into her flesh—“was *made* for me, Adrienne. You take my cock and my knot so well,” I tell her.

She instantly clamps down around me at the praise, whimpering as she shakes against me. I keep going, slowing down my movement so that I can watch her come undone slowly.

“I’ve missed this cunt,” I groan. “The taste—like cantaloupe dipped in honey. The feel—Gods, you feel perfect. My own personal aphrodisiac.”

“Stop talking and *fuck me*,” she growls, moving against me.

I chuckle. “There’s my little brat.” I slam into her. *Hard*. She groans as her eyes slide into the back of her head. “I’d forgotten how much you talk back.” I reach out to grip her jaw in one hand. The other hand holds her hips in place as I impale her. “It seems your time away has made you forget that I am the one in charge, little wolf,” I mutter, staring into her eyes. “I will give you the pleasure you so crave. You can trust me. I will take care of you forever. Do”—*thrust*—“you”—*thrust*—“understand?” *Thrust*.

“Yes,” she whimpers.

My balls tighten as my climax draws closer. I can tell she’s close too. The way her cunt is feathering against my rock-hard shaft is... pure fucking bliss.

“I am your alpha. Your husband. Your moon-fucking-fated mate,” I growl, and she mewls as her pussy contracts around me.

“Yes, yes, oh Gods. Please, alpha.”

She shatters in my arms, squeezing me as she comes around my cock. I place a hand over her mouth as she screams, as the plane hits a patch of turbulence, as someone knocks on the door.

But I don’t fucking care.

I don’t fucking care about any of it, because right now, my mate is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

The plane shakes as I expand inside her, as my impending orgasm draws my balls tighter, turns my cock harder, presses against her inner walls to lock her in. I remove my hand from her mouth.

Adrienne gasps and moans. “Yes,” she says, squeezing me tightly with her legs.

“Yes, what?” I demand, holding her still.

“Yes, alpha. Please give me your knot.”

I roar as I come inside her, pleasure surging through me hot and quick as my seed shoots up against her cervix. She moans and shakes, coming with me a second time, gripping my knot even tighter as we both ride the wave of our orgasms. My knot locks me inside her as it pulses the last of my seed into her.

“Gods...” Adrienne whispers, panting.

“Say it,” I grit out, holding her close. “Say you’re mine.”

She smirks, arching a brow. “I thought that was obvious, Phoenix.”

I swallow as my nails grip her flesh tighter. “Humor me, Midnight.”

Her eyes flash with emotion as she nods. “I’m yours. Forever. I love you.”

Her words are a balm to my soul, and I press my forehead against hers as we catch our breath, still locked together.

How the fuck did I survive all those weeks without her?

“I love you too,” I murmur. It’s only then that I realize we’re still dealing with slight turbulence, and that someone’s been knocking on the cockpit door since before I came. “One second,” I growl, and the knocking stops.

I press a kiss to Adrienne’s cheek, then pull away and look at her. My knot softens, releasing her, and I quickly clean us both up before I take a seat in one of the pilot’s chairs. “I should probably fly this damn plane so we don’t crash.”

Adri smiles shyly, coming to sit in the other chair. “Can I watch?”

I grin. “Of course you can. You can do whatever you want, little wolf. You have me wrapped around your little finger. I don’t think you even realize how much I am at your mercy.”

Her cheeks turn rosy as she beams with a self-satisfied expression written all over her pretty face.

CHAPTER 21

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OFFERED YOU THE WORLD

ADRI

I NEVER CONSIDERED myself particularly interested in pilots, per se, but watching Phoenix adjust the instruments in the cockpit has me feeling hot all over. I press my already slick thighs together. It doesn't hurt that he's holding the throttle with his muscled, corded arms, a look of cool determination on his face as he plays around with the settings.

I've missed him while being away in Willow Creek. In a way, he'd become an idea. After a few days back in my hometown, I'd begun to question if what we had was real—despite our constant communication via our minds. I thought I'd imagined the scorching chemistry, the physical aspects I'd grown to adore, but now that I'm back, I know for sure how very real it is.

I swallow and rub my chest when I think of how *lucky* we were to find each other.

We didn't exactly have a choice the night we mated, but I'm so glad I let him in all those months ago when I turned up in Shadow territory. I'm grateful I unconsciously sought him out. And I'm proud of myself for letting him into my heart.

As his golden eyes scan the instruments, speaking into the headset I didn't see him put on, I suddenly feel so grateful for *him*, for the man who loves me so fiercely. I've never thought of myself as a damsel in distress, but I couldn't have done what we just did without him. He protected me. He saw

a threat and he eliminated it without a second thought.

Protective... capable... and so goddamn handsome to boot...

My core swoops low when he turns to lock eyes with me.

Our chemistry alone is enough to spark an entire war, apparently.

Removing the headset, he turns to face me. "You okay?"

Whatever he did with the buttons has leveled us out a bit. The plane is no longer shaking, and the way the lights glow on his skin is... otherworldly.

I smile when I realize how much of a lovesick fool I am around him. Add in the pilot aspect, and it's like I'm nearly ready to spontaneously combust.

"I'm just thinking about how lucky I am to have you."

His expression softens as he reaches for my hands and tugs me onto his lap. "I'm luckier."

I wrap a hand around his neck and pull closer for a kiss.

A knock sounds, and Phoenix groans before he stands to open the locked door.

My cheeks heat at the sight of Kaz braced in the doorway, looking at us with irritation.

"Oh good. You're finished." His nostrils flare as he clears his throat. "I've managed to connect to the plane's Wi-Fi. Apparently, Zeek is an hour behind us, headed for Vancouver."

Cold dread settles low in my stomach. "What?"

Phoenix rubs his mouth with his hand, sighing. "Okay. Tell our controllers to let him land."

"*What?*" I screech, looking at Phoenix like he's deranged. "Why would you willingly let him onto Shadow land?"

Phoenix levels me with a look I'm sure he uses often as the alpha of the Shadow pack. Calculated, emotionless, determined.

"I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't. We've just come from Willow Creek. At this point, I think both packs can agree that the treaty is moot."

"But it's all we have left to protect us," I tell him. "If the treaty is moot, what's to stop him from taking over our land? He wants Dee back. What if he tries to hurt her?"

"He can try," Kaz growls. "But he'll have to get through me first."

My lips twitch with a smile at his protectiveness toward my sister. Before I can comment on it, Phoenix continues speaking.

"I am the alpha of this pack. I won't let them in with full access right off the bat. In fact, we can meet him on his plane once they land. He won't even

set foot in Shadow territory.”

I ignore the pang of disappointment that works through me. I’d been looking forward to going *home*. Now we’ll be delayed. Still, maybe we can all agree to disagree and move on. Maybe we won’t be starting a war, after all. I don’t know Zeek well. It’s possible he’s more reasonable than Zade, despite being in the throes of grief at losing his brother.

Or he might possibly be set on murdering us all for what we did.

“Ready the guards,” Phoenix orders. “Zeek is not permitted out of the airport. Start reaching out to the other packs to see if they’ll ally with us after receiving the emails Nora sent this morning. If so, we can use that when we negotiate with Zeek. If not, we will know where we stand.” Kaz nods and walks out of the cockpit. Phoenix closes the door before immediately turning to face me. “And then we’ll go home, little wolf.”

“How did you know?” I ask, then smirk.

“I am your mate, Adrienne. Remember, I can feel what you feel. I know you want to go home. And we will. Let’s just clear the air a bit so we can relax once we get there. I did just kill Zade. I’m sure they have questions.”

I nod and swallow. My wolf whimpers in protest, but she and I understand the predicament that we’re in.

“I’m worried it’s a trap. I’m worried he’ll hurt you,” I tell him honestly.

“I have Kaz. I’ll be fine.”

I chew on my lower lip as I stare out the window, gazing into the night sky. “He’s unhinged. He was talking about Dee in ways that made my skin crawl.”

“Midnight,” Phoenix purrs, kneeling in front of me and taking my hand. “Kaz won’t let anything happen to her.”

I nod, swallowing the nerves choking up my throat. “I just want it over. I want Dee and Kaz home safe with us in Alaska. I want Zeek to mind his own business. I want everyone to stop fighting.” My lip wobbles. “This is all my fault. I should’ve gone public when we mated. I should’ve *done* something to prove to the public that I chose you, not Zade. Now they’re all going to think you killed my fiancé and stole me away.” I scowl down at the floor. “You know Zeek will make damn sure everyone knows you killed Zade. What if there are repercussions for that?”

“Adrienne.” My name on his lips instantly calms me down. I look up into his eyes as he continues, squeezing my hands. “All packs have clauses for moon-fated mates. Sometimes it means shifters act out of character or do

something stupid, such as killing someone for hurting their mate. But it won't be seen as illegal. No one will fault me for protecting my fated mate. Kaz has evidence of Zade firing a gun at you," he murmurs, his eyes grazing over my shoulder.

"Zeek isn't here because of Dee, or because I killed Zade. He's here because he doesn't understand what we have, Midnight. It might take a little convincing, but we can show the other packs that we're happy. That our relationship is one that entails mutual respect and adoration. That you were taken back to Willow Creek against your will. That you *chose* to be here with me. With us. Your heritage will only back that claim up if push comes to shove. There are ways to argue this, little wolf. I meant what I said earlier," he says slowly, his voice a low purr. "I will take care of you forever."

My throat constricts and I swallow audibly. I can hear Zeek's sneering voice in my head. "*You're engaged to Zade. Surely, you can see how much of a downgrade it would be to tether yourself to this mutt.*" He hates Phoenix and he was determined to make me kneel to his brother. "*Seems like she needs a refresher course on behaving like an omega.*" Will he be like his brother as an alpha?

"What if it's not enough? *I know* how the other packs view you. How they see this pack. What if they still declare war?"

He shrugs. "Then I go to war for the woman I love."

His words squeeze my heart, sending a deep ache to my chest. "No."

His eyebrows quirk up, and his lips twitch with a smile. "No?"

I shake my head. "No. I won't let my pack go to war over a misunderstanding." Swallowing, I sit up straighter. "You said there's a way to prove to them that this relationship is consensual," I say slowly.

Phoenix's irises expand as realization hits him. "Adrienne..."

I place both hands on either side of his face. "It's the only sure way to avoid war."

"It might be, yes, but you're barely an adult."

I shrug. "I've seen some shit these last few months, Phoenix. My life changed irrevocably when you first rejected me." I smile when I see the horror-struck expression on his face. "Finding out my past was a complete lie, that I wasn't a Willow Creek wolf? Such betrayal from my parents shaped me. Tore at my heart. Not to mention my soul when I was almost raped by a bunch of psycho shifters... *until you found me.*"

My thumb grazes his stubble, and he leans his head into my touch. "My

first heat was pure agony until you gave me what I needed physically. Then gave me your heart too,” I say softly. “All these moments changed me, showed me more about the world. About myself. About love.”

I don’t want to even think about the last six weeks I’ve endured. Being torn from my mate. Being attacked by the boy who was once my world. Paraded as his...

“And then today...” I sigh. “I’m not making a huge sacrifice by doing this, Phoenix. I’ve always wanted children.”

He presses his lips together. “But we haven’t discussed it.”

Panic flashes through me. “You do want kids eventually, don’t you?”

He nods. “Of course.” He turns his head and kisses my wrist, running his hand down my arm. “I just hoped that you would’ve had more time to, I don’t know...”

I smile. “I know I’m young. But you’re not. I can’t chance my baby daddy needing a walker by the time we get around to having a baby.”

Phoenix laughs, and all the tension on his face eases. “Brat,” he mutters. When he looks back at me, his eyes are wide and... scared.

Phoenix Adair is scared.

“Adrienne, this is a big commitment. Pregnancy and birth and raising a child.”

I place a finger on his lips. “Well, then it’s a good thing I have such a big support network here, isn’t it?” I ask, looking at the door of the cockpit.

“But earlier, when I brought it up...”

“I was surprised. That’s all.”

“You really want to do this?” he asks, brow furrowed.

“I get to avoid a war for everyone I love. *And* I get to start a family with the man I love. There’s no losing in this scenario. The timeline is just sped up a little bit.”

Phoenix’s chest rumbles with a low, growling sound. “I should warn you, an alpha with a pregnant omega mate is... *extremely* territorial,” he murmurs. “You think I’m bad now? Just wait until I knock you up.”

My blood heats at his words. “Good,” I answer.

“Fuck, Adrienne. I’m already hard again.”

Laughing, I bend forward to kiss him. “I want this. I want *you*. I want everyone to know how much I fucking want you.”

I feel his eyes flutter closed as he kisses me softly. Just as his tongue parts my lips, we hit a wind shear, and the plane shakes.

I pull away from him and look out of the window with wide eyes.

“I should probably fly this plane instead of fucking you against the door again, right?” Phoenix asks, standing.

His erection is tenting his shorts, and I burst out laughing as we hit another patch of turbulence.

“Yes. You most definitely should fly this plane.”

With a lopsided grin, he seats himself in the other pilot’s chair, adjusting himself before looking over at me with a mix of worry and mirthfulness.

“I’m not going to change my mind,” I tell him, running a finger over my swollen lips. “So stop looking at me like that.”

He smirks. “Like what?”

I turn to face him, studying the way the lit-up instruments reflect in his glassy eyes.

“Like I just offered you the world.”

He’s quiet for a minute, and I assume he’s not going to respond. But then he clears his throat and speaks.

“Because you did, Midnight. You did give me the world. And now you’re offering me a future I very much want to see come to fruition.”

And it’s now exactly what I want more than anything.

CHAPTER 22

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AT WAR WITH US

DEIRDRE

I'M NOT PREPARED for what I see when we land in Vancouver. I knew the work Kaz and I were doing, in tandem with Phoenix's other inner circle members, was important. I knew it was significant. That there were likely hundreds of parents awaiting to be reunited with their children. But as we pull up to a private hangar, I don't expect the group of people. The older couples, a few kids, all huddled together in thick coats, waiting for us.

Once Phoenix parks the plane, he and Kaz get all of the resisters off. I watch from the window as everyone gets matched up. It doesn't take long. Even from my vantage point, I can see the happy tears, the hugs, the motherly touches of a woman reunited with her child. I even see Shayla sobbing into an older couple's arms.

I swipe at my cheeks and stand before walking over to the cockpit. I find Adri curled up in one of the pilot's seats, looking out the window contentedly. For the first time in weeks, she appears peaceful.

"Hey." I sit down in the other pilot's seat.

She turns to face me, a dopey smile on her face. "You doing okay?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'm just glad to be here."

Just as Adri opens her mouth, Kaz knocks on the doorframe.

I spin around. "Everything good?"

"Yep. They're all on their way to the shelter. A few of them chose to leave with their parents, but a lot of them still need some time to adjust. Not

everyone on this plane was matched with their birth parents,” he says softly, looking at me.

My chest aches. I assumed there might be a few young shifters who wouldn't get the answers they were searching for. A few parents who will be waiting for their missing children—the few who didn't want to get on the plane tonight, for whatever reason. My heart stutters when I think of my *own* parents. As horrible as they were, they were still my parents, and I might not ever see them again.

I have to look away from Kaz, because it feels as though he's watching all of these emotions play out across my features.

Kaz clears his throat. “Phoenix said we'll meet Eva and Niven Ashwood soon, Adrienne.”

“I know. I'm... excited to meet them.”

I turn to face her, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. “Good. And Zeek?” I ask, looking at Kaz.

I don't miss the way Kaz's features tighten with anger. “He just landed.” Looking at Adri, he rubs his mouth. “I've asked a few of my guys to guard the plane. You two can stay here.”

“Absolutely not,” Adri hisses, sitting up. “I'm not letting you and Phoenix walk onto that plane without us.”

“I think it would be best if you stayed here, Adrienne.”

She juts her jaw out, and I swear I feel an inkling of alpha power radiating off her.

“No. We're coming with you.”

I'm stunned as I watch Adri defy him, and the subsequent way Kaz nods once. “Very well. Let's go, then.”

He walks out of the plane, and we follow him down the stairs. It's much colder here than in Willow Creek, and my flimsy jacket is doing nothing to keep the cold at bay.

I lean in close to Adri. “Did you just order him around?” I ask with a smirk.

Adri grins. “It helps to be the alpha's mate. I'm also... a hybrid.”

I stop walking. “A what?”

She cocks her head. “A hybrid. Omega and alpha. My wolf is submissive, but my human is...” Wrinkling her nose, she shrugs. “Apparently, it's pretty common for shifters in this territory.”

“So you can order people around like an alpha?”

“Sometimes. Every once in a while, I can feel the alpha power. When I’m around Phoenix, though, my wolf and human enjoy being an omega. I think it has something to do with being mated to him. But with other alphas... and betas... I can utilize that power. Sometimes,” she adds. “I have to be in a good place, mentally. It didn’t... it didn’t work with Zade. Until the very end, when he was talking about hurting Phoenix.”

I walk with her to the other plane. “I thought it was a myth. I didn’t think it was possible.”

Adri constantly surprises me. I’m in awe of my older sister, holding back her alpha tendencies her entire life. I knew she was special growing up. She was *different* than me. The way she always stood up for herself and others. The ways she defied our parents on multiple occasions. I now see she was repressed in that place.

I can’t wait to see her thrive in the place she truly belongs.

Hopefully, I won’t be too far behind in finding myself here, too.

We’re quiet as we approach the other set of stairs. Phoenix and Kaz are waiting at the bottom. Dread coils in my gut. The last person I want to see right now is Zeek. But... it has to be dealt with. Preferably now, so that no other packs get involved in whatever feud we’re fighting.

“I’ve heard back from the Manitoba pack, the Brightwood pack, and the Ontario pack. They’ve all agreed to ally with us.”

“That’s good, right?” Adri asks, her voice hopeful.

Phoenix sighs. “The Nunavut pack has also written back that they would like to meet with us. They are remaining neutral until we do.”

Adri nods. “Okay, we can do that. What about the other two?”

Growing up, we weren’t taught much about the other wolf territories. In fact, aside from a basic knowledge of the packs in North America, I know almost nothing about the other packs. I know there are over fifteen territories in North America, with eight main ones being the largest. The others are smaller, and mostly located on the east coast and Mexico.

“The Penrith pack and the Meridian pack have also written back. They are standing by Willow Creek,” Kaz says slowly.

“Fuck,” Adri mutters.

I cross my arms and look at Kaz. “Why are they still siding with Willow Creek?”

Kaz’s jaw rolls. “I’m not sure. But I’m going to get to the bottom of this. Until then, we will have our three neighboring packs at war with us.”

My blood cools as I realize what I have to do, what I have to offer. “Okay. Let’s go talk to Zeek, then.”

Kaz’s blue eyes bore into mine as if that’s the very last thing he wants to do.

Phoenix and Adri board first, holding hands. Kaz enters next, giving me a perfunctory once-over before I follow him inside of Zeek’s private jet. Once I’m on the plane, I see Zeek sitting by himself in one of the seats, legs crossed. His eyes snap to mine immediately.

“Alpha Zeek,” Phoenix growls.

Zeek pales slightly before clearing his throat and standing up. “Listen, *Phoenix*,” he grits out, intentionally not using the word alpha in front of his name. “I’m not here to fight or cause any issues.” He looks at Adri. “I am aware of the rarity of finding your moon-fated mate, so in a show of good fortune, I’ve granted you permanent access to both Shadow territory and Willow Creek, should you wish to visit your parents.” His blue eyes slide to Phoenix. “I am sure you are aware of the loops I had to jump through in order to secure that pardon.”

Phoenix nods. “Thank you, alpha.”

He’s so much more polite than I would’ve expected him to be, given the circumstances. It makes me like him even more, and wonder how the *hell* he has such a bad reputation.

Zeek’s eyes twinkle and he looks at me. My stomach drops. “In exchange for the *underage* shifters you kidnapped and brought here,” he growls, clenching his jaw, “I’m sure we can come to some sort of compromise.”

“I’m listening,” Phoenix says, his tone hard and firm.

Zeek smiles, and it feels like my skin is crawling with ice as he looks right at me again.

“In exchange for them, I ask that you release Deirdre back to me.”

Fuck.

“Absolutely not,” Adri hisses.

Kaz, who is next to me, is trembling with rage. “We do not agree to those terms,” Kaz says, his voice a deathly purr.

I only just left. There’s no way. Glancing quickly at Adri, I see her turn to look at Phoenix. Her face is pinched with anger, and she’s looking at him like she can’t believe we’re here again.

I can’t believe it, either.

When I look at Zeek, he seems... triumphant. It makes me ill to think of

going back to that place with *him*.

And yet...

In exchange for the underage shifters you kidnapped and brought here, I'm sure we can come to some sort of compromise.

I got them out. The other shifters. And I got Adri back to her mate. I'd find a way to get back here, but if I could prevent an all-out war, it would be stupid to decline his offer.

I haven't known Phoenix and Kaz that long, but they'd figure out a way to get me back. They're capable shifters. Phoenix is the alpha and my sister's mate, and Kaz is his enforcer.

Plus, everyone else is safe. Zeek is willing to overlook *all* of the other shifters we brought over. That bargaining power is huge.

I need to go back.

"I'll go." The two words slip from my mouth before anyone can protest.

"No." Adri's brown eyes are wide as she looks between Zeek and me. "We *do not* agree to those terms, Zeek."

I sigh, taking a step forward. "Adri, it makes the most sense. If my going back can stop a war—"

"No." Kaz's voice is loud, authoritative, and glittering with power. I swear I feel the plane shake with rage. I turn to look at Kaz, and the muscles in his arm are twitching. It's only then that I see the way he's tightly clenching his fists. "*We do not agree to those terms,*" he says deeply, full of wrath. He glances over at me. "You will not be going back. His brother played the same exact cards weeks ago." Looking back at Zeek with disgust, he continues. "Declare war, if you must. She is not going back with you."

Zeek and Kaz stare at each other.

"I'm with Kaz," Adri mutters. "Dee's emancipation has been approved. She is here willingly, which I know is something both you and your brother couldn't possibly understand."

Zeek's lips curl. "She is betrothed to *me*."

Adri crosses her arms. "Not anymore."

"Very well. Then I will have no choice but to officially declare war on the Shadow pack." His nostrils flare as he looks at me. "You're making a big mistake, Deirdre."

Kaz growls next to me, silent.

"Very well," Phoenix says, his voice rough. "We will prepare."

"You are aware that Penrith and Meridian will take my side, aren't you?"

Zeek asks, and smiles cruelly. “That’s three packs against one.”

“We have allies too,” Kaz retorts.

Zeek nods once. “You’re making a mistake,” he repeats. “I won’t be kind, and I will show zero mercy.” His blue eyes cut to Phoenix. “I will exact vengeance for what you did to my brother.”

Phoenix stands taller and nods once. “I’m sure you’ll try.” He turns and ushers us all out of the plane.

Once we’re on the ground, Zeek’s plane begins to move away. I wring my hands in front of me, suddenly feeling the scale of what’s about to happen.

“Adri.”

She turns to face me. “The answer is no, Dee. I will not entertain the idea of you going back there. Especially since you’re betrothed to that monster.”

I press my lips together. “He’s right. We’re making a big mistake. All of this can be avoided if I just go back.”

“I agree with Adrienne.” Phoenix looks at me, alpha power rippling off him. I immediately look at the ground, as my beta wolf recognizes him as her alpha now. “You are my mate’s sister. You are now a Shadow wolf. I fight for my people, Deirdre. You are one of my people.”

His words cause my lips to tremble with emotion. “Okay.” When I look up, Adri and Phoenix are walking toward a small, private jet. Kaz is still standing next to me. His blue eyes bore into mine before he turns and walks in the direction of the jet, fists still clenched at his side.

CHAPTER 23

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IT'S BIOLOGY

ADRI

THE TWO-HOUR FLIGHT TO GREENWOOD, the town closest to Phoenix's house, is tense. Kaz and Phoenix spend the entire flight in discussion, most of which Dee and I are privy to. But the words they're throwing around—militia, ammunition, borders, export restrictions—mean nothing to me. I know they're talking strategy, but I'm too tired to care. By the time we land, I'm utterly exhausted. Dee is too. I can see the way her heavy eyelids are threatening her with sleep. Once we're off the plane, I'm nearly assaulted by Nora, who hugs me for no less than five minutes.

She hugs Dee for just as long, and my emotions get the best of me when Dee's eyes spark with gratefulness.

I was in your shoes once, too. People can be warm and welcoming, despite what the environment we grew up in taught us.

We all drive back to Phoenix's house in silence. Dee is asleep by the time we get there, and Kaz carries her into the stone mansion I've missed more than I can articulate. Nora stays behind in the van, talking to the heads of the shelters, ensuring all of the Willow Creek shifters got to Shadow territory safely. She squeezes my hand as I exit the car, and Phoenix takes my hand as we walk to the front door.

"Can I..." He smirks, reaching for me and pulling me into his arms. With one arm under my knees and the other supporting my back, he grins down at me.

I smile. “What are you doing?”

“I haven’t gotten a chance to carry you over the threshold.”

“Who knew you were such a romantic?”

His gold eyes pierce into mine with such intensity that I nearly gasp. My stomach bottoms out, and my skin begins to tingle.

“You have no idea, little wolf.”

Once inside, he sets me down, and I look around the familiar setting. My chest aches as I take in the foyer, the familiar dining room, the kitchen at the back of the house, the staircase...

It smells like spices. Something with curry—and perhaps something else that was baked recently. A cake? I smile when I think of Phoenix baking to temper his nerves. I also smell fresh laundry and linen, and the lingering scents of my family. Nora, Iris, and Valen.

Home.

My wolf recognizes this place as *home*.

“There were days I was certain I’d never get to come back here,” I tell Phoenix.

He reaches out and brushes a piece of hair out of my eyes before pulling me in close so that our bodies are flush.

“What have I been telling you, Midnight? In every scenario of the last few weeks, none of them included leaving you there. Even if it meant killing everyone in my way.”

I chuckle. “You really are ruthless, aren’t you?”

He shrugs, smirking. “It’s biology. You,” he growls, pulling me tight against him, “are my mate.”

My skin pebbles as his arms trail to the back of my head, pulling the elastic out of my hair and letting it fall down my back. He inhales, and his pupils blow out as he runs his fingers through the strands before moving to the base of my skull and gripping it tightly. “This is your home. It always will be. I will fight for you until my dying breath.”

I whimper, turning to putty in his arms. My wolf is purring so loudly that I can nearly feel the vibrations in my body.

“Take me to bed,” I tell him breathlessly.

The corners of his lips lift almost imperceptibly. “You aren’t too tired?”

I shake my head. “I’ve suddenly had an influx of adrenaline,” I tell him, pressing my thighs together. “It must be the... biology,” I add with a smirk.

He huffs a laugh. “Mouthy brat. Very well.”

Before I have a chance to move, he picks me up and carries me up the stairs to his bedroom. I barely have time to take in the familiar setting before he kicks his bedroom door closed and sets me down on his large bed. I prop myself up on my elbows and watch him as he pulls his shirt off. Just as I wait for him to climb on top of me, he drops to his knees and pulls me to the edge of the bed, where he works my dress up over my hips and throws my legs over his shoulder.

“What are you—”

“Can’t let a hungry man starve, Adrienne,” he murmurs, running a hand along my inner thigh. His eyes are black, and his hair is all mussed up from running his hands through it all night. I bask in the sight of him—my husband. My core clenches and my clit pulses as he cocks his head. “Now, be quiet and let me feast.”

Before I can protest, his tongue slides up my wet slit, lapping my wetness and sucking on my swollen nub.

“Fuck,” I hiss, bucking my hips.

Phoenix holds my hips down with his rough hands, keeping me still as he works his tongue through my folds, devouring me.

I arch my back, and he presses my hips down harder. He works his tongue against me, alternating between long, firm movements that make my eyes roll and light flicks. My hands fly to his head, and I run them through his soft hair as I buck against his mouth.

“Gods, yes, Phoenix,” I mewl.

He smirks against me, then pulls back slightly. “I’ve been waiting weeks to taste you. I’m fucking *famished*,” he growls, diving back in.

My hands drop to my sides, fisting the sheets. “Fuck,” I gasp, watching as his head dips and moves between my legs.

He inserts one finger inside me, and I contract around him as he groans. “So fucking tight,” he says against my skin. His finger curves slightly, hitting the spot I can never reach myself. I convulse and his free hand holds me down.

“Oh, Gods,” I whimper.

“You taste even better than I remember,” he says, inserting a second finger. “Your greedy cunt is ready to take my knot again.”

I moan as his fingers work at the same tempo as his tongue. I slowly begin to slide into my climax, but then he pulls his fingers out and removes his tongue. I can feel my cunt pulsing around nothing, and I groan as he

stands.

“What...? But I was so close.”

“Patience, Midnight. I want to be looking at you when you come around my knot.”

I buck my hips as he says it, waiting for him to climb on top of me. He cocks his head, slowly pulling his shorts down and fisting his hard cock.

He gives me a smug smile. “Like what you see?”

“You know exactly what you do to me,” I admonish. Sitting up, I feel my wetness leak onto his bed as he reaches over and drags my dress over my head.

I hear him take a shaky breath as he stares at me, and I suddenly remember how the collar of the dress hid the bruises from Zade so well.

Phoenix’s eyes go from dark brown to black with rage. Panting, he drops my dress to the floor and stares at my neck.

“He’s dead,” I tell him gently, removing my bra. “He’s gone.” My words seem to appease him somewhat, but he also looks like he’s on the verge of shifting. “Come here.”

He steps forward, and I begin to stroke him without breaking eye contact. Something heavy passes between us. He almost looks sad. Running one hand over his bare ass, I keep my eyes on his as I lower myself to the floor, kneeling in front of him. I pull the head of his cock into my mouth. He begins to shake as I lick the precum off the tip, swirling my tongue around the thick head of his shaft. Hissing, he runs a hand through my hair and pulls my head away.

“As much as I want you to suck me dry, little wolf, I’d rather fuck you.”

Pushing me back onto the bed, he flips me so that I’m facedown. I feel him pull my hips up, suddenly bare to him. I want to feel embarrassed, but I don’t. I never have—not with him.

The tip of his cock presses against my entrance. Words catch in my throat as my entire body shivers, feeling alive and so *whole* at the prospect of having him inside me again.

The plane sex was an appetizer.

This is the meal.

He presses into me a couple of inches, and I clench around him. He grunts from behind me, running a hand down my spine. I can feel him tensing—feel him holding back. I’m sure seeing my bruises won’t help my cause, either. Still, I beg him to unleash himself.

“Please, alpha. Don’t hold back.”

“Midnight—”

“Please. You’re not the only one who missed their mate.”

With one hard thrust, Phoenix slams into me, filling me to the hilt. I cry out, groaning and arching my back.

“Yes,” I hiss. “Yes, like that. Harder.”

His hand comes up to my hair, and he fists it roughly, pulling my neck back. He stills, and I whine as I move my hips up and down his shaft. I don’t want him to control himself. I *want* him to fuck me properly. Just as I find a rhythm fucking him, he mutters something under his breath and slams into me again, taking control once more.

I scream.

“Adrienne,” he says hoarsely. “Stop doing that. You’re going to make me —”

“Fill me with your cum,” I purr. “I want every last drop.”

“Fuck.” His voice stutters as he pulls out slowly and slams back in. He grips my hair tighter, which heightens every sensation. My muscles coil, ready and waiting to spring. I feel myself starting to feather around his thick length as it hits just the right spot, over and over and over.

“Alpha, I’m going to come,” I cry out, biting my lower lip and squeezing my eyes shut.

He pulls out and flips me onto my back. Within half a second, he impales me again, and the look on his face—his dark eyes...

I close my eyes, but then he grips my jaw.

“Eyes open, little wolf,” he growls. “I want to see your face when I knot you.”

He slams into me once—*hard*.

My eyes snap open just as the dam breaks inside me. I see white for a second, unable to move, and then I’m convulsing wildly. He holds me still with two hands on my hips as wave after wave of pleasure works through me. My core clenches around him tightly, feeling him expand, feeling his knot grow and lock himself inside me. I watch him the entire time, watch as his eyes flutter just as he begins to break apart, as his breaths turn erratic. He roars, and his cock begins to throb with his own release.

“Fuck,” he cries out, his voice breaking.

After a minute, his body stills, but his cock continues to bob inside me. He’s still knotted, locking us together as he peppers kisses along my jaw, my

neck, behind my ear...

“So perfect,” he murmurs, and only then do I let my eyelids close. “So beautiful. *Mine.*”

I hum with pleasure as he continues kissing me. Since we have nowhere to be, I let my body relax fully, aftershocks of my orgasm rocketing through me every time his cock bobs.

“Yours,” I tell him sleepily. “Always... yours.”

“Sleep now, little wolf. It’s been a long day.”

I think I nod, but I can feel my consciousness slipping away with every second that passes. Phoenix trails a finger over my neck, brushing lightly over the bruises as the world begins to fade away.

“I’m going to take care of you,” he mutters so quietly I hardly hear him. “Forever. I’ll take care of you forever, Adrienne.”

I fall asleep to Phoenix still knotted inside me, muttering sweet nothings as his fingers roam over my bare skin.

CHAPTER 24

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SCARED SHITLESS

KAZ

I'M SITTING by the fireplace with my computer when Phoenix meanders into the room, a glass of water in his hands as he sighs and sits down in one of the armchairs opposite me.

I quirk an eyebrow at his ruffled appearance, but I don't say anything as he stares at the flames. I assume he and Adrienne are making up for lost time, as is normal for separated mates.

"Deirdre all settled?" he asks.

I nod. "If by settled you mean passed out like a starfish in one of the guest bedrooms, then yes."

Phoenix nods once, then gulps down half the glass. "Good. I think we should all stay here for the time being. I've already texted Nora and Iris. They're packing their things. Valen will be here soon."

"It's not like you don't have the space," I mutter, smirking as I continue checking the security feeds. "And I agree. It's best to keep everyone together. Especially since we don't know what Zeek's next move is going to be."

Phoenix stays quiet, so I reiterate what we talked about on the plane.

"The forces are in place. I've set up cameras and barriers around this property and another set of barriers with our best shifter militia around Greenwood. Since we've mobilized them, they've begun watching over Red's house, as well as the Ashwood's. We have our bases covered. The airports are all now being monitored—all planes to and from any airport in

Shadow territory.”

“I know,” Phoenix says, his eyes dark as he continues to stare at the flames. “I know you have it covered. I’m just... worried.” His face is drawn, and he looks exhausted.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” I ask, watching as he rubs his eyes.

“There’s too much to do,” he says slowly, sounding resigned. “Willow Creek will declare war soon. The two neighboring packs will side with Zeek. We’re outnumbered and surrounded. I’m not quite sure what I expected. I thought the evidence would be enough, but I guess not. We still need to send an alert to all of the shifters in our territory. The press conference. And of course, making sure Adrienne is okay.”

I nod. “Nora, Valen, and I are on top of everything. The press conference is already scheduled for eleven tomorrow.” Phoenix nods and mutters something unintelligible as he rubs at his face again. A wave of pity washes through me. “You should get some rest. We don’t need you to be sleep deprived tomorrow if shit hits the fan. No one is going to do anything in the middle of the night.”

“I know. I should sleep. I just can’t....” He sighs. “I can’t stop thinking about Zade. I worry Adri is going to hate me one day for killing him.”

I close my computer and set it on the coffee table. “Why would she hate you for that?”

“They used to be best friends. And I killed him without a second thought.”

I smile and take a sip of my wine. “It doesn’t seem like she’s too concerned about it,” I retort, taking in his messy hair and wrinkled shorts. “Listen, I don’t know her history as well as you do. However, when I saw her last week, the night of her bachelorette party, she seemed tormented. Almost lost. Like she was missing something vital. And then when I saw her again today...” I stare at the flames in the fireplace. “Adrienne is strong. She put on a mask while there. I saw it. To everyone else, she was handling it. But to us? To you and me? Dee? She was a second away from collapse. People can only take so much, Phoenix. You intervened. You took care of a problem. He *hurt* your mate,” I tell him with conviction. “Even the international courts will see it that way.”

“I don’t care about the courts. I’ll gladly go to jail. He’s dead and I’m fucking glad he is. But she... she’s just so...” He rubs his face, sighing between his fingers. “She’s been through so much, and I made it worse.”

I shake my head. “No. You made it better. You saw the beast he’d turned into. Something wasn’t right. He’d manifested some dark shit and he wasn’t himself.”

Phoenix’s head drops and he stares at the floor. “Yeah, but what if we could’ve brought him back?”

“You really think Adrienne, your wife and *mate*, would want him in her life after what he did to her?”

Phoenix sighs again. “I don’t know. I want her to be happy.”

I huff a laugh, and Phoenix snaps his head to look at me. I shake my head and smile, leaning back in the chair and stretching.

“She *is* happy. With you. It’s like night and day. You didn’t see her... before.”

“Yeah, well, that’s another thing I regret,” he growls. “I just *left* her there, and Zade put his fucking hands around her neck,” he grits out.

“Listen,” I tell him, my voice a bit more resolute now. “What’s done is done. She was there, but now she’s here, and Zade is dead. Good riddance, too. Tomorrow, three packs could very well start a war with us, and I’m not quite sure what that would look like.”

Phoenix nods, leaning back in his chair. “I have no idea what war actually means. I grew up learning about the treaty with Willow Creek, but it never occurred to me to think about what would happen if that treaty suddenly became nonexistent. The last war between our territories was the *reason* for the treaty. I’m their alpha. I am supposed to be their leader, but I’m scared shitless.”

I blow out a long breath, closing my eyes to negate the stinging. I need to go to sleep—and so does he. “I’m scared too. We’re all scared.”

“Kaz...” Phoenix gives me a resigned look. “If I need to fight, if it comes to that—”

“Then we’ll all be by your side.”

“Even Adrienne,” he adds. “Whether or not I want her to.” I snort, and he laughs. “She’d castrate me if I kept her here.”

“She’d probably lead the group into battle. With Dee.”

He chuckles. “They have bigger balls than us.”

I huff another laugh. “They certainly do.” As I stand, I hold my hand out for him. He takes it, and I pull him to a standing position. “Tomorrow,” I tell him.

“Tomorrow,” he sighs, heading up the stairs slowly.

I'm not far behind, and when I get to Deirdre's door, I pause, cracking it. She's still asleep in the exact same position. I suppose it's tiring to lead an entire resistance movement.

Smiling, I shut her door as unexpected warmth fills my chest.

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CHAPTER 25

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THIS IS FOR US

ADRI

I WAKE up feeling sore between my legs but comfortable everywhere else. Groaning, I roll over and find another body. Snapping my eyes open, I see Phoenix lying on his back, fully clothed, one arm behind his head. I exhale slowly, smiling as I remember where I am. For a second, I thought I was back in Willow Creek, but instead, I'm exactly where I need to be. Reaching over, I trail my finger over Phoenix's corded forearm, watching his dark hair stand up on end. He doesn't stir, so I run my finger higher, to his bicep, tracing the outline of his muscles. Lifting his T-shirt sleeve, I circle the skin on his shoulder, and he groans in his sleep.

A fiery warmth spreads throughout me—something I've come to recognize as the mating bond. Most couples get weeks to lounge in bed and make love after they mate. But we hardly got any time at all, and apparently, now my body is responding to this uninterrupted time with him. Even though I'm sore, I squeeze my thighs together when I see Phoenix's cock tent his shorts. I run a hand down to his hips, then slowly pull his waistband down. His shaft pops up onto his stomach, fully erect. He lets out another low moan, and I sit up quickly, grinning as I remove my pajamas.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," I murmur into his ears. Slowly lowering myself and settling my slick core over his hips, he stirs slightly but still doesn't seem awake, despite his twitching cock. "Husband," I purr, my voice husky. "Wake up so I can ride you."

He stirs again, and his lips twitch as a slow smile breaks across his lips. I study his face because his eyes are still closed. My eyes trail down to his chiseled jaw, adorned with scruff and the hint of silver hair beginning to grow below his bottom lip. They skirt lower, to his dimpled chin, and then back up to the scar dissecting his right eyebrow. He is inhumanly handsome. A god in his own right. Even his body, stretching his clothes in an almost indecent way, makes my mouth water.

And he is *mine*.

I lift my hips up and pull his hard shaft flush with my entrance, and just as I begin to lower myself over him, just as the head of his cock presses into me, Phoenix's eyes snap open. His arms shoot forward, grabbing my hips, and he shoves me down onto his cock.

I cry out as he impales me, and his eyes go from gold to dark brown in a matter of seconds. His jaw drops open with a heady groan. I sit there unmoving for several seconds, ignoring the soreness from last night. He starts to move beneath me, but I place my hands on his, shaking my head. He growls as his nails dig into my hips, but he doesn't attempt to move again. I grind myself against him, and his tongue sweeps over his lower lip as he hisses.

"Fuck, Midnight," he says, his voice still gritty and hoarse from just waking up. He clenches his jaw to keep from moving.

"I feel a bit bad for waking you up," I tell him, lifting up before bringing myself back down onto his cock and pulling my hips back at the same time, making circular movements. "But I can't help myself. I feel... insatiable. Like I can't get enough." I snap my hips forward on the last word, and Phoenix makes a low rumbling sound that emanates from his chest. His fingers nearly pierce my flesh, he's gripping me so hard.

"Don't ever fucking feel bad for waking me up for *this*," he says, and I slide up, moving forward slightly just before sliding down. "Fuck, never ever fucking feel bad for doing whatever it is that you're doing with your hips," he breathes. His head drops back, and his eyes flutter closed.

I move his hands from my hips and place them on my breasts. He squeezes them as I ride him, and I begin to pant as I move.

"Phoenix," I whimper, feeling the base of my spine begin to tingle. A stream of sunlight is breaking through the thin curtains, and it's illuminating his skin, turning it gold. *Beautiful. So beautiful.*

"Adrienne," he murmurs. "Today is..." He trails off when I snap my hips

forward again. His mouth drops open.

“Don’t talk about today,” I beg him. “This is only for us. This...” I take one of his hands and place it against my beating heart. “This is for *us*.”

“Fuck,” he groans, his brown eyes on mine. “Keep doing that thing with your hips.”

I smile as I snap them forward again, and he hisses through his teeth. I feel myself gripping him tightly, feel his knot start to expand inside me. At some point, he takes my hands and threads his fingers with mine as I move on top of him. I don’t look away as my orgasm nears, as his hard cock presses against the perfect spot inside me, as the friction rubs my clit, sending a maelstrom of pleasure skittering down my spine.

He begins to shake.

Having all of the control, making him come underneath me... I throw back my head and moan as I feather around him, my hips stuttering.

“Oh, gods,” I cry out.

“Don’t you dare fucking stop, little wolf,” Phoenix growls, gripping my hands tightly in his. “Fuck, that’s it. Come for me, baby.”

My orgasm rips through me. His mouth drops open, face going slack with pleasure, just as his cock stiffens, as his knot expands, and he begins to pour into me. I don’t stop moving, don’t stop staring, as we both ride our climaxes out, pleasure racking both of our bodies. Watching Phoenix come, as we came *together* and he reveled in me, in us... I will never get enough of it. Everything warms as we come down from it together.

He pulls me flush with his chest as we both take a few steadying breaths. I can’t move, so he just runs his fingers along my spine as we quell our panting.

“Does it ever get... less intense?” I ask quietly a minute later.

I feel the rumble of his laugh in his chest before I hear it. “With us? Probably not. It’s one of the benefits of moon-fated mates. Amazing sex forever.”

I groan. “I’m never going to want to do anything else.”

He takes his other hand and runs it through my hair, and my eyes flutter closed. “I don’t see a problem with that.”

“I mean, I hadn’t *forgotten*, per se. I was only gone for a few weeks. But on the plane, I thought it was just because it was reunion sex. And last night, the same. But this...”

“We could have this all the time. Whenever you want. On a plane. On a

train. In the bed. On the floor. I'll gladly make love to you whenever and wherever you want."

My cheeks flush. "And my next heat..." I trail off, relaxing against his chest. His heart is still beating fast, and I curl my arms underneath me so that I can feel it beating beneath my palms.

"I won't leave your side during your next heat," he says, his voice low. "Last time, I tried to fight my wolf's nature. It... it could've really hurt you, had I not lost the battle with myself and helped you." He pauses. "I'm sorry. I was trying to be respectful. You were still so skeptical of me, and I didn't want to scare you."

"But you did help me," I argue.

Phoenix stiffens underneath me. "It pains me to hear you say that, Midnight. Because when an alpha is with an omega—his omega *mate*—he worships the floor she stands on. He is there for her and only for her. For days. His pleasure is an attractive benefit, but it's not what drives an alpha male." He sighs. "It's hard to explain."

"Try?" I ask him, pulling back as I look into his eyes. They're back to their normal gold color now. It's quickly becoming my favorite color.

"An alpha is there to tend to everything. We cook for you, cuddle you, feed you, fuck you, bathe you, rub your shoulders, rub your feet, keep you cool, keep you happy. I just... left you alone, to suffer all by yourself when the one thing an omega in heat *needs* is an alpha to care for her."

"Well, I *did* try to convince you to come in that night."

"And it took *everything* in my power not to stay," he says, his eyes growing slightly darker as he remembers. "And then I *heard* you." He closes his eyes. "But I left you. Afterward. I just walked out."

Oh. I'd nearly forgotten about that.

"Yes, but next time will be different."

He nods. "Next time will be *entirely* different."

I smirk. "In more than one way."

His eyes snap to mine. "What do you..." I chew on my lower lip, staring into his eyes and waiting for him to connect the dots. And when he does, he looks almost... worried. "Adrienne," he sighs, placing his hands on my face.

"I'm going to call a doctor this week and have them remove my IUD."

My words stun him. "You—wait, hold on."

"When is my next heat? In five or six weeks? These appointments book out really far in advance. I just want to make sure we're fully prepared *if* we

decide to go that route.” I study his face and the way he pulls his head back slightly to look at me in awe. “I assume I’m only fertile during my heat, right? So if we change our minds, we can just use protection when the time comes. Until we’re ready, I mean,” I add, suddenly feeling like I’m talking too much.

Phoenix’s face crumples for a second, and he closes his eyes. “Little wolf, there is nothing I want more than to spend an entire week filling you with my seed and watching your stomach swell with our child in the months afterward,” he growls. “The primal, basic part of me *delights* in watching you mother our children, because I know, without a doubt, you will make the world’s best mother.”

My eyes prick with tears, and I nod once. “But...”

He sighs. “But, you’re eighteen. There will be a war soon—a war that could very well go on for years. It was a big thing for me to ask. A huge undertaking. Parenting is, perhaps, the *biggest* undertaking we’ll ever embark on. I never should’ve said anything,” he mutters. When my face falls, he continues. “Don’t get me wrong. I want this. So fucking much, you have no idea. But I also want *you* to be ready. Fully. Completely. After I show you the world. After we have an official wedding. After things settle down. You told me yourself that you wanted to wait. With Zade—you made him promise to wait until you finished college.”

I grimace, ignoring the hurt I’m starting to feel at what seems like a rejection. “Yes, but that was because it was Zade,” I tell Phoenix slowly. “With you... becoming a mother doesn’t scare me. Even if it were to happen soon.”

I feel his knot release me, and he lifts me up and sets me down next to him so that we’re lying face-to-face.

“Then let me pose a question to you, little wolf,” he purrs, running a finger down the sensitive skin of my stomach. “If you *didn’t* know about accepting the mating bond by becoming pregnant, would you still want to have a baby right now?”

I press my lips together. “I wouldn’t *not* want it,” I tell him honestly. “Yes, I may have waited a couple of years for the reasons you just gave. But I also wouldn’t be mad or sad if it happened. I think...” I scrunch my nose up as I imagine being pregnant, having a baby, watching Phoenix become a dad... “I think I’d be really excited.”

Phoenix leans closer and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I’d be excited,

too.”

I wait a few heartbeats to pose a question of my own. “Okay, let me ask you a question,” I say with a smirk. “Why wait?”

“Adrienne.”

I sit up straighter so that I’m leaning over him. “No, seriously. We *don’t* know how long this war will last. We might never feel ready. You’re going to be forty soon,” I add, twisting my lips into a conspiratorial smile.

“That,” he growls, moving and pinning me to the bed, “is a very rude thing to say.” He bends down to my lips and pecks them with his own. “I still have eight years until I’m forty.”

I laugh as he knocks my knees apart, my breath catching when I look between us and see that he’s fully hard again. *Biology, indeed.*

“I’m serious, Phoenix. If my doing this can save lives, if it can shorten the war to only a few months... why wait? Why wait until I’m older?” He opens and closes his mouth in protest, but I reach up and place my hand over his mouth. His pupils blow out as he nudges my legs further apart. “Everything I want to do, I can do as a mom. My future with you has always involved children. I’ve always wanted them. I still want to go to university. I still want to see the world. But... how do you feel about me doing all of that with a little baby carrier in tow?”

Phoenix groans as he slowly nudges himself inside me, hissing as he jerks. “You’re not going to drop this, are you?” he asks, sliding into me until he’s balls deep.

I moan, shaking my head at the same time. “Probably not,” I whisper, grinning. “If you insist on being such a gentleman about everything, I’m just going to fight harder.”

He growls, pulling out of me slowly before slamming back in. I gasp, and he smirks down at me. A piece of hair falls over his forehead, and right now... *Gods.* I’m insatiable around him.

“Such a brat,” he mumbles, reaching down and holding my hips as he repeats his movements.

Every time he slams into me, my back arches, and I see stars. “Your brat,” I rasp.

“Yes. You are. *Mine*, Adrienne Adair,” he mutters, looking into my eyes.

“Fuck yes,” I hiss, throwing my head back. “Say it again,” I beg, my voice a tight whimper.

“Mrs. Adair,” he growls, hitching my legs higher. “My wife, who has

perfect tits, and a perfect, tight pussy,” he adds, a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“My husband,” I mutter, my voice breaking as he begins to pound into me—pulling all the way out and moving in quickly. Expertly. “Who could make women weep with how beautiful his cock is.”

Phoenix laughs, and then he bends down to kiss me. “Beautiful?” he asks against my lips. “Try again, Midnight.”

I moan as my nerves light up, sliding across my skin. I can feel all of my muscles tense at my impending orgasm, and my eyes flutter closed as he takes a thumb and works my clit.

“My husband, with a cock so big, it’s a wonder it fits,” I try, panting.

“My wife, the only woman who can make me break down doors to rut her during her heat,” he adds, and I moan.

“Gods, Phoenix, yes,” I tell him, my nails tracking down his muscular back hard enough to leave scratches. “I’m so close.”

He moves harder, gripping my legs as I shatter around his cock. Screaming his name, I come again, and he follows right behind me, hips stuttering into me as we both ride wave after wave, until my limbs are shaking and I’m gasping for air. Having an orgasm at the same time as Phoenix is akin to what I imagine being electrocuted is like—uncontrollable, powerful, with electricity shooting through your veins as you convulse. I laugh when the image comes to me, and Phoenix kisses me gently, hands cradling my face.

This is my favorite version of him: immediately post-sex, when he’s still locked inside me. He’s so... adoring. Devoted. In awe—of *me*.

“I love you,” he says, breath mixing with mine. “Whatever you want to do... I will support you.”

“I know,” I tell him, my hands running through his hair at the back of his neck. “I love you too.”

I’m just about to kiss him again when there’s a knock on the door. Phoenix’s low growl vibrates throughout my body, but I don’t even have time to ask who it is before they’re speaking.

“Whenever you guys are... done...” *Nora*. She clears her throat. “We, um... have a situation that needs immediate attention.”

CHAPTER 26

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A MIRACLE

DEIRDRE

MY EYES SNAP open and I jump out of bed, trying to orient myself. I stumble over the corner of a rug and yelp as I tumble onto the floor just as the bedroom door opens. Groaning, I sit up and find Kaz leaning against the doorframe with a mischievous smirk on his lips.

“Everything okay, kid?” he asks, his eyebrows rising as he watches me stumble into a standing position.

“I *really* hate when you call me that,” I growl, rubbing my knee where I fell. “What do you want?” I sit back down on the bed and drop my head into my hands to negate the throbbing headache beginning to pound behind my eyes.

“Not a morning person, then?” he asks, taking a step inside.

I shake my head. “No. I’m a grouch for about an hour every day until my coffee kicks in.”

“Well, once you’ve had your coffee, there’s something I want to show you.”

He takes a step closer, and I look up at him with contempt. “Did you bring me coffee, or are you just taunting me?”

He barks a laugh, and the edges of my lips twist upward. “No coffee from me, but I’ll remember to bring it tomorrow.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “It’s downstairs. Get dressed. We’re leaving in ten.”

I groan. “Fine.”

As he shuts the door, I lie back down on the bed and sigh loudly. I'm still wearing the dress from last night, and the zipper is digging into my back.

"Kaz?" I ask tentatively.

He opens the door a few seconds later. "Yeah?"

I sit up and walk over to him before turning around. "I can't get my dress unzipped. Can you please help me?" The instant the words leave my mouth, I regret them. My mouth drops open in shocked horror at the same time I feel, and hear, him stiffen. I realize now how it sounds—how it could be misconstrued. I can't deny the small sparks between us, but I know Kaz well enough now to know that he won't cross that boundary until I'm of age.

And I just fucking asked him to *undress* me.

"I just mean..." I reach back and try to grab the zipper. "I just need you to unzip a few inches."

His hand comes to my back, and his skin is hot against mine as it trails lower. My eyes close by themselves as my skin pebbles at his touch, and he lowers the zipper just enough for me to reach back and pull it the rest of the way down. My fingers brush his, and I swear I hear him inhale as he takes a step back.

"Anything else?"

His voice is low, gritty. I turn around and shake my head. "No. See you in ten."

He arches a brow, and *shit*, watching him do that is really... beguiling. "Eight now. Hurry up. We can't be late."

He closes the door and I'm left looking down at the way the hair on my arms is still standing on end.

I take the world's quickest shower, throwing my long blonde hair into a low bun and pulling on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt that I tucked into my backpack yesterday. I pull on socks and slip-on sneakers, and by the time I'm done, it's been eleven minutes. *Shit*. I rush down the stairs, barely having time to take in the tasteful decorations and warm environment before Kaz appears out of nowhere, linking his arm with me and leading me back upstairs.

"Where are we—"

"Change of plans," he growls. "The city is in lockdown as of three minutes ago. No one can leave or enter Greenwood or the surrounding areas. Zeek pulled all the stops, and there are thousands of Willow Creek troops waiting in boats just off the shore."

My heart sinks. “Shit.”

Thousands of troops?

Fucking Zeek. Leave it to him to do something drastic. What the hell is he doing? And what does this mean for us here? I suppose if he’s not on the land, he’s not breaching the treaty, but still, I don’t trust him. Unease slithers down my spine when I think of what this all means—war, and ships, and troops...

I am in way over my head.

And I *definitely* need caffeine.

My eyes rove down to the mug of coffee. “Is that for me?” I ask tentatively.

He shoves the mug toward me, letting my arm go as I take a sip of the life-giving liquid. Once upstairs, he pulls me into what looks like a small office. There are several screens, and it takes me a few seconds to realize it’s the security footage.

“Milk, no sugar. Adrienne told me how you take it.”

I smirk. “Well, thank you. I should be more pleasant in approximately... fifty-nine minutes.”

That gets him to laugh, and his eyes crinkle a bit as he turns his head to look at me. “Fifty-eight now.”

I hold up my mug and take another long sip. “So, the psychopath is nearby?”

Kaz nods, typing something into one of the computers. I like watching him as he types—his long, deft fingers, and the way the screen makes his eyes seem so much brighter.

“We’re estimating just over 1200 troops. Five large ships. Assuming the worst, they could invade as soon as, well, now.”

“Invade?” My eyebrows shoot up as I glimpse a camera feed of the ocean—and five large ships waiting about a mile offshore. “When you said war, I didn’t think... invade? Just because I won’t go back with him?” My mind is spinning. “No one *invades* territories anymore.”

“Actually, they do,” Kaz growls. “And for shifters, it’s perfectly legal. All Zeek has to do is challenge Phoenix to a fight.”

I snort. “That’s absurd. Why all the men and the ships, then?”

“He’s making a point,” Kaz adds. “The other enforcers in Shadow territory will no doubt be asking questions. And since we never went public about Adrienne...”

“The other enforcers? How do you know they’re asking questions?”

His jaw feathers as he switches to another angle. This time, it’s the entrance to what I presume is the house we’re currently inside of.

“Because I am the head enforcer, Deirdre. I am in charge of them, and they are asking questions.”

“So tell them what happened,” I offer, looking at him like this must be war basics 101.

He sighs. “It’s... it’s a little more complicated than that. They don’t want to hear from me. They want to hear from their alpha.”

“Okay, so have Phoenix tell them what happened.”

“He will. Later this morning, in fact. But they think we withheld information. Their trust has been broken. Since this happened over the summer, they feel like they weren’t privy to it all. The last thing we need is our own people doubting us. We need them behind us, to realize the risk, to trust their alpha to protect them. Let’s just say, the five large ships, with even larger guns, are making a *lot* of people doubt what Phoenix has to say. Our last alpha did shit like that, and Phoenix has worked for twelve years to gain their trust.”

I’m quiet for a minute as I take in all of the information he’s telling me. Guilt works through me, making me shift in my seat.

“I’m still willing to go back to prevent all of this, Kaz,” I say slowly.

Kaz spins around to face me, face pinched with fury. His knuckles turn white as he grips the armrests of his chair. “Fuck no.”

I swallow, playing with a loose thread of my sweatshirt. “Well, then we have to hope Phoenix and Adri can instill some confidence in our people.”

“*Our* people?”

“Well, since I guess I’m never going back to that shithole, yeah, *our* people,” I mutter, gripping my mug with both hands and giving him a wry smile.

Kaz’s eyes narrow ever so slightly, and then he flicks his irises up and down my body slowly. “You truly *are* getting perkier with each sip of your coffee. It’s almost a miracle.”

I laugh as he turns back around to the computer screen, and I ignore the sensation of swooping butterflies in my abdomen at his perusal.

“What were you going to show me?” I ask tentatively. “Before we went into lockdown.”

He looks over at me and smiles. Hitting a few keys on his keyboard, the

feed changes to a large, auditorium-type place. There are hundreds of cots lining the floor, but in the corner... a group of people. From the clear video feed, I see several people hugging. An elderly couple, and a few smaller kids...

“What am I looking at?”

“Katie and Kyla Hatfield. Twins. Seventeen. They were both taken from a small town near Victoria when they were seven months old.” I swallow as more people come rushing in. Kaz continues speaking. “Their birth parents were there last night, in Vancouver. But today, they are meeting their grandparents, and their aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings. They have four birth sisters.”

My throat catches as my hands enclose around the mug tightly. “Wow,” I whisper, watching as the large group of people laugh with one another.

“I wanted to show you what *you* did. By sneaking into Zade’s office, by meeting with me to hand over the records, *you* reunited this family. And hundreds of others.”

I sniff and try to dispel the emotions clanging through me. “It was a group effort.”

Kaz smirks, and he taps back to a feed of the ocean. “You’ll probably go down in shifter history books. Think about that.”

I stare at the remnants of my coffee until it goes cold, letting his words sink in and fighting the faint smile playing at my lips.

At the time, helping Kaz with the resistors gave me something to do. Somewhere to funnel all the anger at Adri’s situation. I never did any of it for recognition. I did it to help others. To ensure that the other Shadow wolves in Willow Creek were safe from Zade and Zeek. All the days I spent pouring over the documents, trying to get into Zade’s files, communicating with the resistors on my burner phone... it was all because it was the *right thing to do*.

It never occurred to me that I’d make an actual impact, nor one as big as Kaz is suggesting.

A few minutes later, I sigh and lean back in my chair. “Can I ask you a question that’s been bothering me?”

“You’re going to ask me anyway,” Kaz drawls, and he smirks.

“Why did you have a key to the warehouse in Willow Creek?”

Kaz huffs a laugh. “Of all the questions you could’ve asked, and you want to know the answer to that one?”

I smile. “It’s just so random.”

Kaz shrugs. “Phoenix bought the entire industrial park after he mated with Adrienne.”

I stiffen. “Really?”

“Yeah. He was going to buy other properties in Willow Creek as well, but then Adri turned up here and he got distracted.”

“Why would he do that? Didn’t it go against the treaty?”

Kaz rolls his tongue around his cheek and lets out a long breath. “I think he wanted to make sure he stayed connected to her in some way. Even though she rejected him, he needed to feel like he would always have a reason to come back. The owner had no idea it was him buying the buildings.”

“So... Phoenix is rich.”

Kaz chuckles. “He’s smart with his money. He invests in things he sees as profitable.”

I narrow my eyes. “And how, exactly, were you getting into Willow Creek every week?”

Kaz’s eyes twinkle. “Medical evacuation aircraft. They’re the only types of aircraft allowed to cross shifter territories without having to declare place of origin. They’d pick me up in Vancouver and drop me just over the border. It took hours and three plane changes to get there every week.”

My breath hitches. “So why bother?”

His eyes bore into mine as his expression turns serious. “Because my alpha asked me to. And you were already doing the work in Willow Creek. I’d been keeping tabs on you, and it made sense to combine our efforts.” His lips twitch into a smile. “I think we make pretty great co-conspirators, don’t you?”

CHAPTER 27

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BRATTY, LITTLE MOUTH

ADRI

AFTER ANOTHER FIVE-MINUTE long hug with Nora, I give her a quick recap of my five weeks in hell. We hardly had any time to talk last night, so we catch up while she helps me get camera ready. Whenever I ask about Iris, she changes the subject, but I don't push it.

I've never done anything like the upcoming press conference, and I want to make a good impression. Nora picks out a green shift dress, tan wedges, and a dark blue cardigan. We decide to keep my hair pulled back in a braid, and she swipes on minimal makeup—only enough to fully cover the lingering yellow spots from Zade's fingers on my neck.

The very *last* thing we need is for people to assume Phoenix is the one who gave me those marks.

Once we head downstairs, I see Valen pouring himself a mug of coffee in the kitchen. Warmth seeps through me at the fact that they all make themselves at home here. Despite Phoenix being the only one who lives here, it serves as the headquarters and home base for everyone in his inner circle. He turns around just as I run into his arms, and he hugs me tightly for a few seconds. I didn't get a chance to see him last night, and I've missed him so much.

"Well, well, well," he drawls as he pulls back, assessing me. "Look what the big, ugly wolf dragged in last night."

"Fuck you," Phoenix jokes from behind me. He's smiling broadly. For

the first time since we met, he's wearing a suit. He's also managed to tame his hair and shave his normal days-old scruff.

It's *highly* distracting.

"There's already been enough fucking in this house to last the week," Nora murmurs, grabbing a mug for herself. Arching a brow, she looks right at me and smiles. "Happy to be back?"

"More than you know," I tell her, releasing a long sigh. Phoenix's arms come around my shoulder as Valen speaks.

"So, did they forget to feed you over th—"

Nora nudges his ribs roughly, shaking her head once.

I snort. "No, they fed me. I just... A lot happened."

Phoenix squeezes my shoulders, being mindful of my bandage. One of his hands trails to the base of my neck.

"So, how are the resistors doing?" he asks Valen, changing the subject.

I remove myself from his hold and walk over to the island, where there's a spread of eggs, bacon, and croissants. After piling my plate high, I begin to eat my food, and Nora grins at me. As Phoenix and Valen discuss the shelter and moving the newly appointed Shadow wolves to someplace more permanent, she leans down and arches a brow.

"So, I have news," she says slowly. "I wanted to wait to tell you, but I've been bursting at the seams to spill the beans."

I stand up straighter and stop chewing.

"Iris is pregnant," she says.

"What?" I cup my mouth as she nods, tears filling both of our eyes. "Oh my gods, congratulations!"

I pull her in for a hug as we both laugh and jump up and down. I knew they had been trying for a while, knew that it was a lot harder for two females to get pregnant than two males, or a male and female. Not impossible, as Valen had explained to me all those weeks ago, but still hard. When we pull apart, Nora swipes underneath her eyes.

"It's still very early, but Iris is sick as a dog, so we're hoping that means the hormones are working their magic."

I nod once, grinning. "Please tell her congratulations for me. Is there anything I can do? To help with the sickness?"

"No, she'll be okay. She's mainly been sleeping and reading for six weeks." Nora chuckles. "But maybe she'd like to see you sometime soon?"

I nod. "Of course. I'd love that."

My eyes catch on Phoenix, who is watching me from the other side of the kitchen. He's sipping coffee, but his expression is... hungry. Yearning. Hopeful. My insides twist as I give him a little smirk.

"You two should head out," Nora says, texting on her phone before pushing the plate closer to me. "Eat quickly, Adri. You don't want to make a bad impression by being late."

I Hoover the eggs and bacon as quickly as I can, and then I wrap the croissant up to eat in the car.

Phoenix and I say goodbye to Valen and Nora as we pull on our jackets. As we're walking out of the front door, croissant tucked inside my purse like a heathen, I turn to my mate.

"Is Dee still sleeping?"

Phoenix gives me a small smile and shakes his head. "No. Kaz offered to take her on a run with him, and she was too proud to turn him down."

I bark a laugh. "Dee? Running? I don't think I've ever seen her run a day in her life."

He shrugs as he unlocks his car—a dark green Audi SUV with camel-colored seats. I walk over to the passenger side, but he beats me to it, opening my door for me without saying anything. Smirking, he walks back to his door, and I climb inside his car. When we shut the doors, he turns to face me.

"Adrienne, we don't have to do this."

"I'll be fine, Phoenix." Taking his hand, I bring it to my lips. "And yes, we do. Because maybe we can get either Penrith or Meridian to ally with us. Even just one of them might make Zeek second-guess himself."

Phoenix nods. "I know. But it's asking a lot of you."

I laugh. "You're under the impression that I'm breakable. That I can't handle one bad day where the shifter press might try to tear me down or falsely accuse you of manipulating me. That somehow, even after secretly marrying you and professing my love to you in a *multitude* of ways, that I'm going to change my mind." I look at him and smile softly. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll stand by your side, on *this* side of the border, always. Even if we go to war. Even if we have to fight on a battlefield. Even if my parents disown me or people heckle me. I am *here*, and I am *yours*."

Phoenix swallows as his gold eyes lock onto mine. Some emotion swims behind his irises, but all he does is take my hand and kiss it softly before setting it down.

"Okay then. Let's go prove it to them."

“I’m sorry,” I tell him as we pull out of his driveway. I know Kaz has already cleared the drive to Greenwood. Since we’re locked down, he had to do his due diligence. Zeek’s ships are still on the water. His troops haven’t attempted to come onto the land. *Yet*. “I’m sorry we have to *prove* our love.”

Phoenix sighs. “I don’t mind proving it. I’ll shout it from the rooftop every day for the rest of my life. I’m just sorry people will doubt what we have. Our mating hasn’t been linear, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“You mean the lounging around for weeks, having lots of sex, and only breaking to eat?”

He chuckles. “Yeah. That. But also, the courting. The dates. Traveling. Getting to know each other. Our story isn’t the norm. I can’t give you the romance you deserve. Instead of a lazy morning, we’re driving to a press conference at ten thirty in the morning to make a case for our relationship. As if it’s the most natural thing in the world.” His words hang in the air for a few seconds.

“Yeah, but nothing about this has been normal. So I wouldn’t know what I’m even missing out on.”

Phoenix frowns, and he grips the wheel tighter. “That’s what pisses me off. You *don’t* know how good this can be.”

I swallow. “But it *is* good, despite it all. I still have you. I’m not—we’re not...” The words get lodged in my throat, and I take a steadying breath.

“Fuck, little wolf,” Phoenix says, reaching for my hand again as he drives down the road. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. Of course it’s good. I’m so fucking glad you’re back. I just meant that I wish I could take the worry, the pain, and the suffering away.” He looks at me for a second, his eyes trailing to my neck. “I regretted killing Zade last night, but now I know I did the right thing. What kind of mate would allow someone to hurt his *wife*?”

Phoenix’s breathing gets even more ragged as he continues. “If I’d known, I would’ve been on the first flight to Willow Creek. Fuck the treaty. Fuck everything. But I was here, and you were there, and instead of *being* with you, I... left you.”

“Phoenix,” I warn, leaning closer to him. “Breathe.”

“It’s not okay, Adrienne. Fuck, you’ve been through so much.”

“Pull the car over,” I tell him, watching as his chest rises and falls.

He turns his blinker on and pulls off, and once we come to a stop, he groans and leans his head against the steering wheel. I unbuckle myself and get out of the car before coming around to his side. Once I open the door,

he's watching me with a half-terrified, half-reverent expression.

"Growing up, I couldn't show any emotions," he starts, swallowing as he sits up and climbs out of the car. Threading his fingers with mine, he pushes me against the side of the car, leaning down to brush his nose against mine.

It's freezing out, and even with my jacket, I begin to shiver.

"I learned to hold it in," he continues. "Everyone at the orphanage looked up to me. Nora tried to get me to open up when we were kids, but then when everything happened after West's death, and I shut everything down. Alphas, especially alphas of an entire pack, aren't supposed to be weak. They're supposed to be strong, to look out for their fellow shifters, to lead and guide."

I shake my head against his, and his arms come to my waist. He nestles a thigh between my legs. I ignore the heat pulsing through me at his intimate touch.

"No one could possibly expect you to—"

"I know," he says gently. "I learned. With you, I learned to open myself up. I let myself *feel* things I'd never felt before. This is... intense."

I huff a laugh as his lips brush my ear. "Tell me about it," I whisper.

"I know I played our mating off as no big deal, but it was single-handedly the most important moment of my life. I'm an idiot. I should've claimed you that night."

"But the treaty."

"*Fuck* the treaty," Phoenix growls, and we both look over at the ocean to our left. We're not that close to shore, but with Phoenix's house being on top of a hill, I can see the turquoise water between two peaks. And, of course, Zeek's ships are sitting idly. "Obviously, it never mattered to them. Not really."

"Phoenix—"

"Let me finish," he whispers. "Please."

I nod and wrap my arms around him, feeling comfortable and warm, despite the cold weather.

"Those three weeks were interesting. I was in such denial. I thought you deserved to live a life with that monster. But then one day you were *here*. And I knew I'd never be able to stay away after that. I could smell you, see you, *feel* how you reacted to the barest of touches." His lips brush mine as I whimper. "Those weeks were the best weeks of my life, Adrienne. I felt so alive. I had something to fight for, something to look forward to. It was like I was functioning half-empty, and then you came and filled me up."

My eyes prick with tears as my hands come up to his face, as I feel the clean-shaven jaw and the sharp lines of his cheekbones.

“And then you were taken from me. And I knew, no matter what, that I’d get you back. But those five weeks... they weren’t pretty.”

My chest aches. “It was hard for me too,” I tell him.

“I know. Mates shouldn’t be separated so soon after they...”

“Secretly get married?” I offer, smiling against his mouth.

“Yes, that. But also, do you remember how I told you about how an alpha coming into power can be affected by their mental state?”

I stiffen, thinking of Zade. “Yes,” I whisper. My stomach drops.

“I was so fucking worried that our separation would affect our mating,” he growls, pushing me against his car harder, moving his thigh higher so that my core is against the material of his dress pants. I moan, feeling my nerves flash with electricity.

“And did it?” I ask, my voice husky.

“No. I think it had to do with our mental bond.” He moves his thigh, and my core clenches around nothing. “My point is, none of this is normal, and for that I am sorry. It was a shitty five weeks, but I hope...” He runs his finger down my cheek. “I hope you’ll let me make it up to you. However I can. For weeks. Months. Years. Hopefully the rest of our lives.”

I whimper as that same finger brushes the outline of my collarbone, and I move against his thigh without thinking.

“That sounds nice,” I gasp, suddenly unable to think. “And *I* hope you know that none of this was your fault.”

He presses into me even harder. “It *is*, though. I am your alpha. You are *my* omega. The entire power dynamic rests on my ability to take care of you.”

I laugh against his lips, pulling his head closer and kissing him deeply. I rock myself on his thigh, the friction not quite enough to get me off, but still... it feels amazing. When I pull away, we’re both panting.

“Nothing about us is normal. I’m not even fully omega, remember?”

He chuckles. “Trust me. You remind me every day with that bratty little mouth of yours.”

I laugh. “You love it.”

“I do,” he says, suddenly serious. “Now, let’s get going. As much as I’d love to see you ride my thigh until you’re screaming my name, we have a press conference to get to.” He kisses me on the forehead as he pulls away. “I also have a surprise for you when we get back.”

I raise my eyebrows and pull the bottom of my dress down. “Oh?”
He narrows his eyes as he walks around to my door and opens it for me.
“Patience, little wolf.”

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CHAPTER 28

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ALWAYS BE AN EQUAL

KAZ

MY LUNGS BURN as we crest the top of the small hill. Normally I'd push myself up and down at least three times, but by the look on Deirdre's face, once is more than enough for her. Instead of enjoying the view of the lakes, she's hunched over and gasping for air, a hand on her throat as she makes a half-sobbing, half-wheezing sound. I try not to laugh as she stands up, red face glaring at me. Her blue knit headband—something I insisted she wear, due to it being below freezing out—brings out the color of her eyes. She's wearing a light down jogging jacket she's borrowing from Iris and dark blue leggings that do nothing to hide her long, elegant legs. I am grateful for the length of the coat, as it hides her—

Fuck.

I run a hand through my damp hair and look away.

"It gets easier," I offer her. "This was *your* idea. I just want you to remember that, kid."

"*Stop. Calling. Me. Kid,*" she gasps out, nearly hissing like a snake.

She *is* like a viper, ready to pounce. Angsty, grumpy, and yet... vulnerable somehow. The juxtaposition is wholly alluring. Except, I can't go *there*. For one, she's underage. Our age difference should be enough to deter me. However, she's unlike any other woman I've met. She's fiercely protective of Adrienne. There's a dark cloud over her at all times, so she errs on the side of bad tempered. There's also a soft side. A side I doubt she lets

many people see. A side I've only seen a few times, when I say something that makes her smile.

"And why is that?" I taunt.

Dangerous waters.

My wolf is interested in hers, that much is obvious. He's wagging his tail, unsure of what move to make, like he can sense my hesitation. Because me, the *man*, knows he has to stay away. For one, I'm an alpha-beta hybrid. She's fully beta, like her parents. The power dynamic isn't fair, as both betas and omegas are programmed to submit to alphas. She's incredibly vulnerable right now. Two, the age difference. And three, she's Adrienne's sister. Adrienne trusts me, as does Phoenix.

On top of all of that, I could never endanger her to my psychotic mafialike family. Though I keep a good relationship with them, the idea of Deirdre going anywhere near my birth family has my claws nearly punching out of my fingertips. They'd eat her alive just for being a Willow Creek wolf.

"Because I'm not a kid. I'll be eighteen in a few months. Please, just stop calling me that."

"You are, though. To me, you are a kid."

The instant the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Because she lets her hardened mask falter, and I see the hurt written all over her features. Because of *me*. Because of *my* words. I know I shouldn't get involved with her for various reasons, but that doesn't mean I should be cruel.

"Good to know," she says quietly, turning around and crossing her arms as she stares out over the lake and mountains.

Even now, just a few seconds later, I can see the way she's holding herself. Like she's unsure, embarrassed.

"Deidre."

"Just stop, Kaz. I don't need you to explain. I get it. We're never talking about this again." And just like that, she shuts me down.

"We should head back soon," I say a minute later. Taking a swig of water from the bottle I brought for us, I walk over to where she's standing and offer it to her.

She scoffs. "For the record, I wasn't telling you to stop calling me *kid* because I like you."

I smirk and raise my eyebrows. "Oh?"

She turns to face me, and the way the light hits her golden skin, her blue eyes, the flush of her cheeks and the pink tip of her nose—*fuck*. Why do her

words disappoint me?

“I just want you to take me seriously. As an adult. Like how you respect Adri and the others.” She looks down at her feet as she wraps her arms around herself. Now that we’re not jogging anymore, the air feels cooler, and I can see her shivering beneath her coat. “I just want you to see me as an equal.”

I take a step closer. *Don’t do it.* Another step. *Fuck me.*

“You think I don’t see you as an equal, Deirdre?”

She shuffles her feet and looks back up at me, shrugging. “When you call me kid, it makes me feel small. In every way.”

Oh.

I’m an idiot.

I take another step closer so that we’re nearly touching. She begins to shake slightly, and I’m not sure if it’s from the cold or something else, but I’m transfixed. Somehow, every reason I had for staying away feels silly.

“You do realize that none of this would be possible without you, don’t you?” Her eyes bore into mine with such intensity that I nearly rock back on my heels. I continue. “The whole resistance movement, the shifters that are getting the chance to reunite with their families, is because of *you*. Because you convinced them to come here, to find the truth. Your story, your *love* for Adrienne convinced them. They needed to be convinced, and you were the person who convinced them. They felt displaced, and you gave them a home. They were searching for something, and you showed them the way. You *saved* them, Deirdre.”

It takes me a second to see the way her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. Without thinking, I lift one of my hands and brush it across her lower lid, swiping away a tear that’s threatening to escape. Resting my other fingers under her jaw, I tilt her head to look up at me.

“You will always be an equal here. I’m sorry if I made you feel otherwise.”

She blinks up at me, and *fuck*, the urge to kiss her is strong. I pull away immediately, dropping my hand and taking a step back before I do something stupid. Something *illegal*.

“Thank you,” she whispers, putting her hands in her pockets. “For saying that.”

I nod once. “Of course.”

“Let’s get back. I could cut glass with my nipples right now,” she adds

with a smirk.

I nearly groan. I really do not need to be envisioning that right now. “Let’s go. I’ll race you?”

She barks a laugh, the smile making her entire face light up. “You’ll win.”

I wink at her, and I swear, I see the hint of a blush on her cheeks when I do. “Exactly.”

Before she can protest, I turn around and jog away.

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CHAPTER 29

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MY FUCKING QUEEN

PHOENIX

ADRIENNE and I arrive at Greenwood town hall a few minutes before we're supposed to begin our press conference. Though the shifters don't normally integrate with humans when it comes to the press, the mayor is a shifter himself—one of the reasons I chose to make this place my home. Greenwood is about seventy-five percent shifter, and it made sense to settle down in a place that had more people like me. We're utilizing the media room and closing it off to the humans. Only higher-ranking people on my team are present, along with a pre-approved list of shifter media outlets. There aren't many, but I know that Nora and Valen have invited people from other packs. From my understanding, Zeek considers them neutral and has allowed them to come and go. After all, he needs their support just as much as I need it.

My eyes rove over the two journalists from the Penrith pack. Their long, silvery hair and pale skin, as well as the leather clothes they're wearing, indicate their pack. I give them a tentative smile. Next to them are three journalists from the Meridian pack. Tall, with darker skin and light eyes, they're all wearing suits. My eyes skate over the others—all from packs across North America. Adrienne grips my hand tightly as we make our way to the podium.

I give her a small smile as I begin.

“Thank you for being here today.” I stand up straighter. “Most of you don't know me personally, though I'm sure all of you have heard the

rumors,” I add, inciting a few chuckles. I give them all a self-deprecating smile. “I know you’re all very busy doing important work for your packs, so I’ll keep our story brief.”

“The night I arrived in Willow Creek this past summer, I didn’t expect to meet my moon-fated mate. I’m sure Adrienne will agree, it was a shock to both of us. Shifters rarely mate outside of their pack. And, Adrienne was betrothed to Zade Crawford.”

More murmurs, probably sparked by news of his death last night.

“I rejected the bond. I felt it was for the best at the time. I have since come to regret that decision.” I look at my mate. “Shortly after, Adrienne discovered her true parentage. She is a Shadow wolf. Nora Storm, one of my betas, sent around emails yesterday morning corroborating the DNA evidence. Adrienne then left, on foot, to seek refuge. I am grateful every day that I found her,” I say, my voice going lower when I think of the situation she was in.

“Over the course of her time in Shadow territory, we got to know each other. She went into her first heat. I helped her through it—*with* her permission. After that, well... we fell in love. I asked her to marry me, and she did. The next day, Zade Crawford came into *my* territory to claim *my* wife and fated mate. He used lies and manipulation, and because my wife is selfless, she went back to Willow Creek with him. Once I had enough evidence, I went to Willow Creek to bring her home. Zade fired a gun at her, so I did what any mate would do in that same position.”

A few people whisper to one another.

“I don’t take death or murder lightly. But if anyone threatens her or intentionally puts her in harm’s way, it’s only instinct to protect her. Thank you.”

Adrienne gives me an encouraging smile before she takes the stand. A few people chuckle when she has to lower the microphone by over a foot.

Adrienne begins to speak her part, describing how she felt when I rejected her, how she learned she was a Shadow wolf, and her time here before Zade demanded she come back.

Then, to my horror, she sets her notes down and places both hands on the stand.

“You know what? I wasn’t going to bring this up, but I feel like it can only help our case.”

“Adrienne—”

She holds a hand up to me, and a few people gasp.

“Zade Crawford was my best friend. Was. Past tense. A year ago, I would’ve done anything for him. But when he took the place of alpha, something changed inside him. He threatened me with rape and coercion. He strangled me—twice. I’m wearing makeup to cover the bruises.”

A few people’s eyes snap up to her face and neck, as if they want to verify what she’s saying.

“Zade Crawford did this,” she says softly, lowering the shoulder of her cardigan to show off the bandage. “My mate *saved* me. I don’t doubt that Zade would’ve killed me had he still been alive. He got close twice. It was only a matter of time before he finished what he started.”

My throat stings at her words—at the thought of that *monster* hurting her, or worse.

She continues for another minute, talking about last night. About how happy she was to see me. I’m mesmerized. The way she easily talks to these people—the way she laughs at just the right time, her face getting hard when she’s talking about something serious... Her voice is clear and resolute the entire time. When I look out at the crowd, I can tell they’re all thinking the same thing. A few of them even laugh when she does. I swell with pride as I watch my capable mate.

She’s not just my mate and my wife. She’s a *Queen* in her own right.

She could lead these people.

And just like I promised her all those weeks ago, she *will* lead these people at my side. As my equal.

When she’s finished, a few people clap. This was the easy part. Telling them all what happened is effortless. Nora decided this morning that the best course of action would be honesty. Stating the facts. Relaying what happened. In the end, we did nothing wrong.

But as the mayor calls for questions, more than a dozen of the people in the crowd raise their hands. *This* is the hard part. This is where we will have to answer their questions but tread lightly. Most of my people love me—there’s no doubt about that. Aside from a small percentage of them who would turn against me, and a few skeptical enforcers who are worried about Zeek, I’m not concerned that my people will turn on me.

I’m worried about the other packs.

Godric Crawford made damn sure everyone thought I was a brute. To what end, I may never know. Still, the rumors spread like wildfire.

Brute.

Murderer.

Ruthless.

I swallow as the first journalist asks her question. It's a woman with short, curly black hair. She's wearing a colorful dress. Possibly Nunavit pack, which lies to the east of the Meridian pack. Her light brown eyes study me suspiciously.

"Hello, Alpha Phoenix. My name is Marisol Fernandez, and I am a journalist for *Shifter Reports Weekly*. Given your speech, I am curious about why you chose to leave out the fact that you once murdered your mate. If Adrienne is your mate, like you both claim, how did that happen? We all know that shifters only have one mate in their lifetime."

She sits down, and I feel Adrienne tense next to me. I squeeze her hand to tell her that I'll answer.

"Thank you for the question, Marisol." I clear my throat. "Jacinda Arnold was never my mate. She used pheromone perfume to trick me into thinking she was. She endangered my enforcer, and while I admit I lost my cool by murdering her, something I acknowledge was short-sighted, I do not regret it. I consider Kaz Yearwood my brother. I was protecting him."

"You killed Alpha Zade," someone in the crowd shouts. "Even if it was because he threatened your mate, you should still be held responsible for his death."

I take a breath to respond, but Adrienne clears her throat.

"If I may, Phoenix." She looks at me, determination on her face. I gesture for her to continue, and she stares at the man who shouted about Zade. "He *did* kill Alpha Zade. And I'd like to give a little bit of context so that you all know the kind of man Phoenix Adair is."

I swallow and look down at my feet as she continues.

"We've told you the story of how we became mates. You know that I am a Shadow wolf and that I grew up in Willow Creek." She stands up straighter and looks out at the crowd. "But what you don't know is how everything Phoenix has done, every single thing he's accused of doing, was for someone he loved. This man, while he can seem intimidating, has the kindest heart I've ever seen. When I went through my first heat, he provided a house stocked full of chocolate and romantic movies. When I was taken from him—as his *mate and wife*, mind you—he stood by and asked what I'd like to do. He gave me a *choice*. And when I was back in Willow Creek, he was there, in

my mind, the entire time. He kept me sane. He kept me grounded when I thought I'd go crazy being back in that place. I am not excusing the fact that he murdered people for me and for Kaz. But I am begging you to give him a chance. To give *us* a chance. Because I will stand by his side until my dying breath."

A few people murmur, and when I look over at her, she nods once.

"I'd also like to point out, again, that Zade Crawford tried to kill me. Three different times. Phoenix could've killed him when Zade came back for me—when he demanded I go with him. But he didn't. You're all here because of what Zeek Crawford told you. He is *lying*. I mated and married Phoenix of my own accord. I've accepted this blessed bond. I am here, standing beside him—not behind him, like Zade Crawford once made me do, but at his side. All we want is to live our lives in peace. We don't want a war. Those military ships on the ocean... we would like for them to go home. We're not the enemy."

There are more murmurs. One of the women at the back, with long brown hair and a black pantsuit, clears her throat as she stands.

"Thank you, Adrienne. But I think we're all wondering how true your bond is. You are young, and Phoenix is fourteen years older than you." She lowers her voice as she begins to speak more softly. "As a fellow female shifter, I worry that you are being coerced by yet another powerful alpha." Her eyes travel down to my abdomen briefly. *Only when an omega accepts the bond fully will she fall pregnant during her heat.* "Zeek and Godric Crawford certainly think that's the case, as do your parents. All of them are well-respected shifters in our community. Phoenix Adair, as *kind* as he may be," she says, her tone turning sarcastic on the word *kind*, "has the opposite reputation. I'm sure you can understand our hesitation."

Adrienne's brow furrows ever so slightly as she nods once. "Of course I understand your hesitation," she answers. "Until I got to know him, I assumed the same thing you all do. My father, as well as Godric Crawford, are masterminds of manipulation. They have resources that most packs do not. Money. Power. Wealth. They can *sway* other packs with a flick of their diamond-encrusted cufflinks. I know this because I grew up there. I grew up hating this pack. The stories, the nightmares..." She sighs. Standing upright, she doesn't falter as she continues. "Even the first time I met Phoenix, I believed the rumors. Despite our bond, I was *terrified* of him."

I grind my jaw as I listen to her story. I assumed, but we never really

talked about it. Guilt washes over me at the memory of her begging me. *I can't betray my family. I could never mate a Shadow wolf.* I close my eyes briefly and shake my head. We're past that now. I've proven myself to her, and she's proven herself to me. Now we just have to prove it all over again to everyone else.

"But, after months of knowing this man, I have yet to witness one *single* incident where he lives up to this so-called reputation." She stares hard at the women in the back, and I can feel the alpha power radiating from her. Everyone seems to—there are more murmurs and confused looks as they study my mate. "Have any of you personally witnessed him acting like the brute he's painted to be?"

Everyone goes silent, considering her words as their eyes flick over to me. I reach around and place my arm around her waist, silently thanking her. She's breathing heavily as she continues, passionate about defending me. *I fucking love this woman. Her ferocity. Her defense of me.* I swallow the emotion clawing up my throat at her conviction.

"Let me answer that for you. You haven't." She looks at all of the journalists, one by one, radiating that alpha power of hers. "My sister, Deirdre, would happily be a character witness should you need a second opinion. And before I stop defending my mate, something I'll never stop doing, by the way, I want to paint another picture. Please humor me for a second."

I take a deep breath, wondering what she's going to say. My lips tilt up into a small smile as I watch her grip the podium.

"Imagine Phoenix really *is* the brute you all think he is." A few people look at her questioningly. "He stole me away. He coerced me. He physically hurt me because I wouldn't submit and give him a pup." The place is quiet as she continues.

"He came to my home and demanded I come back with him to a place I didn't want to go. While there, he controlled me and monitored my phone calls. Eventually, he made me move into his home with him, and when I resisted, he hurt me. He told me I would never see Zade again, never go back to *that* place. He threatened to bind our souls using old magic—against my will, and only after he brutally murdered Zade. He told me I would eventually submit to him. That my defiance would wither away once we were married."

A few people look around uncomfortably, but Adrienne doesn't balk or stop. Instead, she hardens her jaw and continues to paint a picture that

horrifies me to hear.

“Horrible, right? How about if I told you that he strangled me? Threw me against a wall and threatened to mark me even though I begged him not to?” She swallows. “He made me promise he would never let me out of his sight again. He told me he couldn’t trust me. That I was to take his enforcer everywhere I went.” She closes her eyes briefly before she continues. “That I would *lie down on my back and let him erase every single piece of Zade Crawford* by force, on our wedding night.”

Everyone gasps, and Adri nods. “Yes. It’s unthinkable. Now, I’d like for you all to ruminate on what I just told you.”

A few people talk amongst themselves. I don’t dare look out into the crowd. Dropping my hand from her waist, I look up at her, and my chest aches at her expression, at the way her eyes are watering. At the way she’s acting *so fucking strong* by telling her story, all for *me*.

I love you so fucking much, I tell her through our bond.

She takes a deep breath and gives me a warm smile before she continues speaking to the crowd.

“Now, let’s flip the narrative around. Before, when I said let’s pretend Phoenix did and said all of that—it was actually Zade Crawford. Word for word.”

Everyone goes still, except the woman at the back with the silver hair. Her hand is over her mouth.

“I don’t think I need to repeat the atrocities that were done to me—to us,” she finishes, taking a step back from the podium as she gestures between us. “But I hope it’s enough to convince you all that I am here of my own accord, that I am wholeheartedly in love with this man beside me, and that he has done *nothing* wrong.”

A few people clap, and for the rest of the Q&A, I am in a dreamlike trance. The other questions aren’t as intrusive, and once we finish, Adrienne drags me off the stage with her, smiling warmly at everyone we pass.

My fucking Queen.

CHAPTER 30

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ALL THIS TIME

ADRI

“Do you think they’ll believe us now?” I ask Phoenix, who leads us away from the car, fingers interlaced with mine. It’s freezing out, so cold that my breath hitches in my chest. “Where are we going?”

He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses it once. “I’m not sure if they’ll believe us, but I think we did everything in our power to persuade them. And I told you earlier, I have a surprise for you.”

I perk up. “What is it?”

He chuckles and pulls me onto the main street of downtown Greenwood. It’s quaint as fuck, and it reminds me of an old English village—stone houses, independent cafés, a couple of bookshops.

“You said Valen lives in Greenwood?”

Phoenix nods as we stroll down the street, adorned with round bistro bulbs that weave from lamppost to lamppost.

“He does. A tiny, little apartment right over there.” He points to an old gray-stoned building. “No idea why he loves it so much, but he does. I think it’s because he likes to prowl the local bars for dates.”

I bark a laugh. “Sweet Valen, our resident slut.”

Phoenix laughs, his face relaxing completely as we continue to walk down the main road.

“He’d probably agree with you.”

I look around and narrow my eyes. “Okay, but seriously, *where* are you

taking me? My nose is starting to go numb.”

It also doesn't help that I'm only wearing a dress underneath my coat...

“Just this café over here,” he muses. Once we arrive, and I glance up at the sign that says *Latte on the Rocks*, taking in the adorable name, Phoenix pulls me to a stop, placing his hands on my face. “I hope this is okay,” he says softly, his gold eyes locked on mine. “If it’s too much, please just tell me and we can leave.”

“Adrienne?”

I turn to face the entrance at the sound of my name, and suddenly, a roaring sound fills my ears as Eva Ashwood’s face crumples. She cups her mouth with both hands, and Phoenix ushers me toward her. I open and close my mouth as I grin and take everything in. She has long, dark hair the same coarse texture as mine, with a few silvery strands framing her face. I study her shorter stature, round hips, full lips, and brown eyes. My chest cleaves in half as I let out a garbled sob.

She rushes forward and envelops me in a tight hug, and I find myself clutching at the sides of her coat. Her smell... I *know* her smell, somehow. Tears stream down my face, soaking the shoulder of her coat as we hold each other and cry. A million questions run through my mind. *Did you miss me? Do I look like you? Are you a hybrid wolf, too? Do I have any siblings?* But I can’t think to ask them verbally.

My throat aches as I cry harder, suddenly feeling like whatever void I had in my chest—from the betrayal of being lied to my entire life—is filling slowly. My mother, my *adoptive* mother, never hugged me like this, and I guess I never realized how much I needed this kind of hug.

How much I needed to feel and smell *her* like this.

My birth mother.

The one who carried and birthed me.

The one who looked for me for years.

I cry harder at that last thought, at the lost time. Eighteen years of being separated. And yet, as she pulls away with a tearstained face, her hands on either side of my arms... it feels right. It feels like I’m looking at myself, only twenty-five years older. She gasps when she sees the locket around my neck. The one I never take off. The one my adoptive parents were kind enough to let me keep.

“Oh my gods,” she whispers, her fingers grazing the gold. “This was inside your stroller the day you disappeared. I’d been wearing it that day.

You were just learning how to grab onto things, and you accidentally pulled it off. We were about to go on a walk, and I had you in your stroller. I remember setting it down by your feet when I went back inside for a blanket, and then you were gone.” A tear falls down her cheek as she shakes her head. “And you had it, all this time.”

I swipe at my cheeks with shaking hands, and then I look back at Phoenix, mouthing *thank you* to him as Eva leads me inside the restaurant.

I don’t expect what I see, and once it hits me, I nearly pass out.

Niven, my father, is sitting at a table with a girl who looks a couple of years younger than Deirdre. Niven stands and begins to blubber, walking over to me and pulling me into a hug. Even though he’s crying, I can feel the alpha power emanating from him, and I realize Eva must be an omega, which means I got my abilities from both of them.

Somehow, that makes me cry even harder.

I’m one of them. My whole being—the entirety of my shifter abilities, my hybridness, every missing puzzle piece—came from them.

Niven just holds me as I cry, as I realize I never recognized *anything* about myself in George and Anita Pierce. I never felt connected to them like this, and growing up, I assumed it was because I was defective. I didn’t like dresses or boys. I didn’t look like them—I wasn’t tall and blonde. I spoke out when it wasn’t my turn, and I utilized my alpha power without even realizing it by training behind my parents’ back, just to *feel* connected to the alpha part of me.

But here? It’s like I fit right in. Like I’m the missing zipper on a large piece of tapestry, and all it takes is a quick zip to tie me together with them. It’s effortless, and I realize that by some power of our shifter magic, my wolf must recognize them. She’s *uncharacteristically* comfortable. I can practically hear her barking, *These are your people. They are your family—your true pack.* Wolves are not solitary animals. They crave being a part of a group. I’ve been so grateful for Phoenix’s help with integrating me into his family, but this is just as important.

Because Eva and Niven Ashwood are my *parents*.

I give the young girl, Astrid, a small hug as well. Though she looks a little like me and Eva, her hair is a bit lighter, like Niven’s. She’s quiet, mostly observing as she studies me from next to her father. She’s also lankier, again, like Niven, who is nearly as tall as Phoenix but a lot thinner. With short brown hair and dark brown eyes, his skin is golden, and his face

reminds me of Iris's—sharp cheekbones and a rounder face.

My *parents*.

I'm still in shock. I can't stop staring at them, and Eva can't seem to get enough either, because she sits across from me and holds my hands as she blubbers unintelligible things. We laugh, cry some more, and Phoenix orders us all coffees and scones.

"Oat milk for me and my husband," Eva tells the barista, who was kind enough to take our order at the table, seeing as we're all a mess here. "I'm lactose intolerant," she explains.

My lips twitch. "Me too."

"Me three," Astrid tells the barista.

"Me four," Phoenix admits, smiling at me sheepishly.

I lean back and settle in next to Phoenix. Eva eyes us with a warm smile as she picks at her scone.

"So, the two of you are fated mates?" she asks, giving Phoenix a look I can't quite decipher.

I nod. "Yes. And we're... married."

Eva's eyes widen. "Oh! How wonderful. Niven and I are fated mates as well, you know."

I nearly choke on my scone. "Really?"

She nods. "Yep. We mated when we were twenty-two. At a bar in Vancouver."

Niven is smiling dreamily at Eva. "The best night of my life," he mutters with a grin. His shirt is full of crumbs, and I smile when Eva reaches over to brush them off.

"You could've mentioned that she was your mate," Eva tells Phoenix.

I look between them, and Phoenix barks a laugh. "You're right. I probably should've said something that day we met. But things were still up in the air. I suppose they still are," he adds, looking in the direction of the ocean.

"I understand. I was only teasing," Eva mumbles and grins at me. "You're just... so grown up. My gods, I've missed your entire life," she adds, her voice breaking on the last word.

"I don't think that's true," I tell her, shaking my head. I'm fighting my own desire to cry. "I'm only eighteen. We have *decades* to get to know each other."

"I suppose you're right," she says softly. "Fucking Alpha Thaler," she

adds, her golden eyes nearly glowing with anger.

I bark a laugh. “Well, now I know where my dirty mouth came from.”

Everyone chuckles at that, and Phoenix’s hand lands on my thigh. I reach down and grip it tightly, hoping he knows how much this means to me.

“And your parents,” Eva says carefully. “They... they cared for you?”

I nod. “They did, in their own way. I was never wanting for anything. They took care of me when I was sick. Read me books. Kept me fed and happy. My childhood was great. I felt like a normal kid.”

Eva nods and gives me a soft smile. “Though I’m sad you were taken from us, I’m so glad you were cared for. That’s all any mother wants.” I ask her to tell me more about their lives, learn more about Astrid, and probably for the first time in my life, feel like I’ve found my footing. My place. These people *are* my people.

After nearly two hours, even though I don’t want our time to end, I know we need to get back and see if anything has resulted from the press conference.

After we finish our coffees, we all agree to meet up tomorrow. The Ashwoods are staying in a house just down the road for a few days, thanks to Phoenix. After I hug all of them again, they walk away. Eva looks at me over her shoulder and smiles, and then Niven wraps an arm around her, his large frame swallowing her up. As they turn a corner, I twist around and slam my body into Phoenix’s, the dam of tears bursting again as I wrap my arms around him and sob.

“Thank you,” I tell him a minute later, wiping my wet cheeks and eyes. “Thank you for finding them. Thank you for knowing that I would want to see them as soon as I could. Just... thank you.”

I swallow and look up at him. His expression is open and warm, and *gods*, he looks so incredible in that suit. Lacing his fingers with mine, he pulls me back toward his car.

“I didn’t do anything, little wolf. They were eager to meet you, and this was easy enough to plan.”

I nod. “I know. It just means so much. A part of me feels so... full.”

“I’m glad, Adrienne.” He bends down and kisses the top of my head as we walk.

It hits me then that he’ll never get this experience. Because he was an orphan. Because his birth parents are dead. I stop walking.

“I realize now that it must’ve been hard for you,” I tell him, taking his

other hand. “Because of your birth parents. I’m sorry.”

He looks down at the ground for a few seconds, and when he looks back up at me, there’s a glint in his eyes.

“I appreciate your empathy, but it wasn’t hard for me. I’ve had years to mourn the loss of just the idea of them. I never knew them, and it’s terrible, but I don’t lose sleep about it. Besides, I have a feeling that the Ashwoods are going to treat me like their long-lost son.”

I giggle. “You think?”

“Eva already texts me nearly every day. She’s been eager to set up this meeting since she found out your DNA was a match. In the process of doing so, I’ve also gotten multiple packages of baked goods sent anonymously, all from Vancouver, where they live. Nora has received a couple mysterious care packages since we met them as well. So yes, I may be a little sad about never meeting my birth parents, but I am so glad to have met yours. I think you won the lottery, Midnight. And I’m so fucking happy that you did.”

“Dammit, I’m crying again,” I blubber as he pulls me in for another hug.

Once we get back to the car, he turns to face me. “I’m really fucking glad you’re home, little wolf.”

I’m smiling the whole drive home, that one word echoing in my mind, over and over.

Home, home, home.

CHAPTER 31

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AT PEACE

DEIRDRE

THE NEXT FEW days pass similarly. I wake up and drink my coffee with Kaz as we keep an eye on Zeek's ships. So far, he's made no moves to invade or come onto the land, therefore he hasn't officially broken the treaty, something Kaz and Phoenix are waiting to happen before they use force to push him back. And on most days, after my coffee kicks in, I go for a run with Kaz. After that, I usually spend the rest of the day with Adri—if she's not tucked away with Phoenix—or Nora, helping to reinforce our borders and ensure we're ready if Zeek does decide to break the treaty.

Five days after the ships arrived, they disappear. Adri wakes me up in the middle of the night one night, and all of us—me, Adri, Phoenix, Kaz, Nora, Iris, and Valen—watch as the ships slowly get smaller and smaller. Zeek's troops never once attempted communication with us, though we did send Adri and Phoenix's recorded press conference around, so maybe they got the hint. As we all mumble dazedly, we retreat back to our bedrooms for the rest of the night. I hear Adri ask Phoenix if it's because the other packs are going to ally with us, but as far as I can tell, no decisions have been made on that front.

We don't hear a word from Zeek.

I don't trust him. Alpha Phoenix and Kaz definitely don't trust his action as a peaceful conclusion, so for now, we'll stay wary but attempt some level of normalcy—whatever that now looks like for me. I've had frequent text

messages from my mom, and even some from my friends. *None* have been friendly. No one understands who Zeek really is.

I can't believe I was just as blind once upon a time.

Two weeks after arriving in Shadow territory, I help Adri prepare for her *real* wedding. It's going to be small, just the seven of us plus the Ashwoods, so Adri insists on doing her own hair and makeup. The ceremony is at sunset, right after six, so we spend the day talking in her bedroom and reminiscing. At half past five, I help her into the dress. It's Eva's wedding dress—long lace sleeves and a fitted bodice, with a wide ribbon sash that pulls in at her narrow waist. It's *stunning*, and it fits Adri like a glove.

"You look beautiful," I tell her, helping her with the buttons at her back.

Seeing her smile at herself in the mirror, looking so *at peace*... it's so different from how she looked two weeks ago, a day away from marrying Zade. In fact, her whole aura is calmer now. She's constantly smiling, especially now that Zeek is supposedly out of the picture. Her face is fuller, and she's regained most of the weight she lost while in Willow Creek. I have a feeling Phoenix has been stuffing her full of ice cream pints and cheeseburgers, but I digress.

Her hair is long, flowing down the back of her dress in loose waves. Though she insisted on doing her own makeup, of which there is hardly any, she did ask for help picking out her lipstick shade. We opted for a light peach, which brings out the gold flecks in her eyes. As she steps into her all-white Converse, she grins up at me, and I try not to cry.

"Adri, you..." I swallow a couple of times. "You're glowing. You look like the most radiant bride in the world. This is how I always envisioned your wedding. With you smiling, wearing a dress that suits you while also rebelling against tradition." I glance at her shoes. "I'm so happy for you."

"I feel happy," she tells me softly. "Like this is all a dream. Like it's too good to be true."

I shake my head. "Don't say that. You guys deserve this day." I glance at the clock. "We should head downstairs. You don't want to be late."

Just as I stand, Eva knocks on the door and gasps when she sees Adri. I leave the room as they hug each other tightly, a knot forming in my throat. Massaging it away, I quickly walk to my room to slip into my dress.

I've gotten to know Eva, Niven, and Astrid well over the last couple of weeks. They come over most nights for dinner, and Eva, despite not being my birth mother, has taken me under her wing. She treats me like family, and

even so much as told me one night, after a few glasses of wine, that she would always consider me her third daughter. It was certainly something I hadn't expected and also hadn't known I needed, if I was honest.

But I want to give Adri a moment with her own mom on her wedding day.

Sadness pecks at my subconscious when I think of my own mother, of my own wedding day. Despite us not speaking, she's still my mother. I can't say my mom and I were ever super close—it's hard to be close to someone who has lied about my sister's whole life—but there are things I've wanted to share with Mom. Good things about the Shadow territory. But how can I reconcile the woman I call Mom with the woman who did something so despicable? Rubbing my throat, I dispel all thoughts of her and my father.

Not today.

My hair and makeup are done, so all I need to do is slip into my dress and shoes. Just as I pull on my light blue dress, there's a knock at my door.

"Come in," I say absentmindedly, thinking it must be Adri. I'm struggling to find the zipper at the back of my dress.

Kaz steps into the room, and his eyes go wide as he takes me in. My pulse quickens as I take *him* in—all six foot four of him, dressed in a slim-line suit that looks like it was molded to fit his muscular yet trim body. His hair is gelled back, and as he reaches an arm up to rest it against the frame, I see the glint of a silver wolf-shaped cufflink.

Swoon.

"Um, sorry, can you help me?" I ask, turning around quickly before I get caught staring.

Kaz and I have gotten pretty close over the last couple of weeks. As *friends*. He stopped calling me *kid* for the most part, but we've formed a camaraderie that makes me happy. Every once in a while, though, I'll catch him looking at me, a hungry expression on his face. And I can't help the blush that's forming on my cheeks as his long fingers deftly zip me up, lingering on my skin for a second too long.

My stomach twists when I turn around—when I see his darkened eyes as they land on mine.

"You are gorgeous," he says, his eyes roving over my body quickly.

I smirk. "You don't look terrible yourself, Kaz."

"I'm here to escort you down to the ceremony." He holds his arm out.

After I slip on my shoes, we walk down the stairs arm in arm. Nora is

standing by the back door, which leads out into the garden. Iris is next to her, looking a bit green from the morning sickness, yet content. I give them each a warm smile, glancing outside at the twinkling fairy lights hanging over a small gondola. Beyond that, I take in the view of the lake and the mountains beyond. It's... breathtaking.

Greenwood is the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

Phoenix is already standing at the altar, wearing a full suit. He winks at me as he flicks a piece of dust off his collar, looking both nervous and excited. Kaz and I take our seats, as do Nora and Iris. Valen is off to the side, controlling the music.

It's simple, and perfect, and elegant.

It's everything Adri embodies.

Eva comes to sit on my other side, Astrid close behind her. Eva grabs my hand as the music starts.

This is the wedding my sister deserves.

Kaz's knee bumps mine as we turn to watch Niven and Adri walk down the aisle. I look at him briefly, recognizing the expression on his face, because it probably mirrors my own.

It was all worth it. The risks, the hardships...

Hopefully, someday soon, we'll all truly be at peace.

CHAPTER 32

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UNTIL DEATH DO US PART

PHOENIX

MY HEART STOPS as Adrienne walks through the back door, wearing a white dress I can't wait to slowly take off her later tonight. Everything about today feels *right*—the last-minute decision to have a small ceremony, the music, the people. It's everything I ever wanted. And as my mate beams at me, it's everything I know *she* ever wanted. And my gods, she's the most beautiful bride I've ever laid eyes on.

And then I smell it—the small, sweet embers of her heat beginning... soon.

Fucking hell, Midnight. You're trying to kill me with that dress, I tell her through our bond. My cock is already hard.

Her smile widens. You can't die before I marry the shit out of you.

We're already married. Or did you forget? I tease.

You never let me forget it, Phoenix. Not for one day.

Damn straight. You're mine. Seeing you in a wedding dress makes me want to rut you here in front of everyone. Bend you over and fuck you senseless.

Calm yourself, alpha, she admonishes. We're in public.

I grin. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Adrienne. I think my heart might actually stop.

I could say the same.

As she drifts closer, Niven gives her a kiss on her forehead, and then

she's right in front of me. I hardly hear the lines Valen is reciting—all I can pay attention to is the way Adrienne's lips are trembling, how her hands are shaking in mine, how her eyes are twinkling with happiness. I am bewitched. My chest aches as she squeezes my hand, reciting her vows.

"I, Adrienne Adair, take you, Phoenix Adair, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part."

She quirks her lips as Valen clears his throat, indicating that it's my turn.

I let out a nervous laugh. "I, Phoenix Adair, take you, Adrienne Adair, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part."

Adrienne takes my hand—we're skipping the ring part, seeing as we already have them—and Valen recites some other lines I can't hear past the roaring in my ears.

She's grinning at me and then people are cheering, and before I realize what I'm doing, I dip her and press my lips against hers, feeling her smile against my teeth, feeling her body pressed against my chest. When I pull away, I realize we've both been crying.

Then we walk down the aisle as husband and wife—officially and legally—as everyone claps and cheers for us. My family. Adrienne's family. I can't help the grin that breaks out on my face.

I vaguely hear Kaz and Valen directing everyone to the lawn on the other side of my property. I know Nora has lights, tables, and heaters set up for everyone. It looks gorgeous. Despite being on the cusp of winter, Adrienne wanted an outdoor wedding so that we could all get a view of the lake and mountains.

Adrienne moves with the crowd, but I pull her back toward the house.

"Where are we—"

"Upstairs," I grunt.

I pick up my bride and carry her over the threshold, again, and up the stairs to our bedroom. It took me the ceremony to realize that the delightful smell coming from her, the reason I was dizzy with lust and longing and admiration, is because she's going into heat soon.

Hopefully people will know to leave us alone, because right now, all I want to do is make love to my *wife*.

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CHAPTER 33

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MARK ME

ADRI

I'M SO HOT. So hot, and so... needy...

"My heat is going to start soon," I tell him as he sets me down on the bed, stunned. The realization hits me like a bag of bricks. I hardly notice the rose petals scattered around the room, the champagne, the chocolate. Rubbing the back of my neck, I look at him nervously. "Not tonight, but soon."

"I know." His nostrils flare as he walks closer, removing his tie. "I could smell the pheromones at the ceremony."

My stomach twists with excitement. "And? Have you given any more thought to my proposal?"

He smirks, threading his tie through his collar before snaking it through his hands. He stalks closer, and my breathing hitches.

"You mean the proposal that led you to march yourself to the doctor's office this morning and get your IUD removed so that I can knock up my wife?"

I sit up straighter. "Yes. That plan."

"I have. I still think we should wait, but I'm going to let nature take over for this one," he adds, and I feel myself grinning at his words.

"Really?"

He nods once, knocking my knees apart as he pushes my back down onto the mattress. I feel him loop his tie around my hands, securing me to the bedpost. My heart slams against my ribs as he gives me a lopsided smile.

“Really. I have no fight left. And I’ll most definitely have zero control when your heat starts. I’m going to rut you senseless, little wolf. It’s *biology*.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling my cunt begin to pulse. “Aren’t you going to take my dress off?” I ask, pulling against his tie.

He takes a step back and unbuckles his belt. My mouth fills with saliva as he unzips his pants.

“I think I’d rather like to *fuck* you in that dress first.”

Before I can protest, he pushes the skirt of said dress up to my hips, and then his eyes go nearly black when he sees my little surprise for him.

A white lace thong with one word stitched onto the front of them: *Yours*.

When he looks back up at me, his expression shifts into something feral.

“I don’t think I can be gentle now, Midnight.” He drops to his knees. “This will be my claiming.”

I whimper as he dips his head, pulls my underwear to the side, and laves his tongue up and down my slit slowly. I arch my back and pull against his tie, but it’s holding up and keeping me restricted. Then his teeth graze the skin on my inner thigh, and I nearly buckle off the bed with pleasure.

“Do it,” I beg him. “Mark me.”

He continues flicking his tongue against my clit, inserting two fingers to massage my G-spot.

“Gods, Phoenix,” I yell, arching my back into his mouth, begging for more.

“My good fucking girl,” he purrs. I want to run my fingers through his soft hair, but instead I’m tied up. Moaning, I shift my hips and work myself against his tongue. “That’s it. Fuck my face with your pretty little cunt, Midnight. I want to taste your cum, and then I want to fuck you senseless.”

I groan as my core shutters around his curved fingers as they pump in and out of me, rubbing my inner walls with even more intensity. I nearly combust with the sensation of exploding nerves.

Before I realize what he’s doing, he’s inserting one of his fingers into my mouth. The salty, sweet taste of his precum makes my eyes roll to the back of my head.

“Look at you, my gorgeous wife, tasting her mate’s precum like it’s a goddamn fucking dessert. *You* did that. *You* are making me leak all over my goddamn floor.”

I moan and nod, the taste of him on my lips sending a skittering of

fireworks through me. My core tenses, and my cunt grabs onto his fingers.

“Yes, Adrienne. Come for me.”

I cry out, arching my back as my climax rips through me. I see stars as his teeth find my inner thigh again, and when his canines puncture the delicate skin there, I come on his fingers again and again, soaking his hand and contracting around them as I whimper and writhe against his face. It’s as if the marking extends my orgasm, because it feels like it never stops—my toes curl, and my eyes are so far back in my head that all I see is black. My body convulses as wave after wave hits me, and only when he removes his teeth does it stop.

“Gods,” I whisper, gasping for air. “That was—”

I don’t have time to finish my sentence, because soon Phoenix is on top of me, spreading my legs as he gazes down at me.

“I’m leaving the panties on, too. As a reminder.”

He strokes his cock a couple of times before he leans forward and presses his thumb into my mouth again.

“You taste amazing,” I tell him, my voice husky. I want more. I *need* more.

He places the head of his cock at my entrance, and both of his hands come to my hips to hold me down. Then, he sheathes himself inside me quickly. I scream, curling my tied-up hands and throwing my head back. He drives into me relentlessly, with so much force that it sounds like he’s going to break his bed.

“You. Are. Mine,” he growls, his teeth coming to my neck.

This time, he doesn’t bother with making me come—his canines snap out, and he’s marking me within seconds.

I scream louder, feeling my cunt milk him as I shatter quicker than I ever have. Pulsing around him, he groans, biting harder. I feel the trickle of blood as stars cloud my vision, my whole body shaking and trembling as I come and come and come. He releases my neck, and only then do I realize, half-dazed, that marking me gives me an orgasm. *Interesting.*

“Fuck,” I rasp.

One of his hands moves from his hips, coming up to my hands. In a second, he’s untying me, and my hands come to his face once I can move them.

“Phoenix,” I whimper.

He flips us over, pulling me on top of him even though he’s still deep

inside me. My dress is rucked up to my waist, and he's still fully clothed, too. I work my hips against him as he unbuttons his shirt.

"Mark me, Midnight."

I still at his words. White-hot heat slams through me. "What?"

"Mark me. Bite my neck. Claim me. I'm yours just as much as you are mine."

"I can do that?"

He nods as he bucks his hips up and into me, slamming his cock against my cervix. My mouth drops open as pleasure skitters up my spine.

"Please, Adrienne."

His words cause something inside me to snap. Bending down, I feel the claws punch out of my fingers and my canines slide down my incisors as I get closer. I lick his neck, my eyes fluttering closed at the potent scent of *my mate*.

Mine.

Always.

Opening my mouth, I bite, and just as I break the skin, his cock hardens and pulses inside me. I moan as I come around his thickening knot, as our bodies shake and quiver with the intensity. His claws dig into my hips as he holds me still, his body trembling, and then he lets out a roar as his seed fills me completely. I stay that way for over a minute, and he growls and moans through his release—the release that continues on and on and on. His seed spills out of me, and when I release him and straighten, I see the copious amounts of come all over my thighs and his stomach.

"Fuck," Phoenix says, his hands shaking as he rubs his face.

I look down at him and smile, realizing that his eyes are pure black. There's no gold left. What we just did—it was not a human claiming. It was a *wolf* claiming.

"That was..." I trail off, and his hands come back to my hips as he smiles lazily up at me.

"Incredible? Mind-blowing? Overwhelming?"

"All of those things." I laugh, lying down on top of him while he's still locked inside me. "I love you," I tell him sleepily.

"Don't even think about going to sleep, little wolf. I have other plans for tonight that involve a bath and perhaps some whipped cream. Among other things."

I perk up. "Oh?"

“It’s our wedding night,” he murmurs, his arms coming around my back as he pulls me tightly against him. “We only get one. Let me unbutton this dress. Let me see you naked in those *sinful* panties. Let me relish in having you here, with me.”

I nod against his neck. “I’d like that. More than you know.”

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CHAPTER 34

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CHEERS

ADRI

I WAKE up in Phoenix's arms just as the sun is beginning to crest over the horizon. He's breathing slowly, his heart a slow, steady balm to my soul. Smiling, I untangle myself from his arms and walk over to his window, watching as white birds fly over the turquoise water, as the sky goes from dark purple to pink to light orange. At some point in the night, the mountains beyond the lake got a fresh dusting of snow. Wrapping my arms around myself, I inhale deeply, taking in the heady scent of *us* in the room.

I'm not even sorry we missed out on our wedding reception, because last night was... perfect in every way. I know I'll be going into heat soon, and that perhaps, if nature dictates, I will be pregnant with our first child shortly after. And something about that, despite the hardships we've faced and my young age, feels wonderful. It feels *right*. Like a fresh start.

I'm still smiling when I walk back to bed.

I'm just about to brush Phoenix's hair out of his face when someone pounds on our bedroom door.

Phoenix flies out of bed, looking around as his wild eyes find mine. My heart is galloping inside my chest, and once he realizes it's not me, he reaches down for a pair of shorts.

"Who was that?" I ask, my mouth suddenly dry. Everyone was staying offsite tonight—camping out at Nora's house to give Phoenix and I privacy.

Phoenix throws me a shirt. I cover myself quickly as Phoenix throws the

door open.

“Nora,” I breathe, relief washing through me.

The reprieve is short-lived, though, because Nora’s large brown eyes are wide with fear. My eyes take in Iris and Valen behind her.

Phoenix is breathing heavily as his nostrils flare. “What is it?”

His voice is radiating alpha power. To interrupt us on our wedding night, something must be seriously wrong.

I glance over her shoulder again.

“Where’s Deirdre?” I ask, panic rising up my throat.

Nora holds up a piece of paper in her right hand. “I found this on my kitchen counter.”

Grabbing it from her, I sway on my feet as I take in the words.

*You took my brother, so I have taken someone
important of both of you.*

*Deirdre is mine, and she will have to watch the
inept mutt you thought was an enforcer die
slowly as her punishment for betraying her pack,
but I will not harm her.*

Unless you decide to foolishly come after them.

*You’d be idiots to underestimate me again,
Alpha Zeek Crawford*

Thank you so much for reading Shadow Bride! Shadow Queen, the final book in the Shadow Pack series, releases later this summer.

[Preorder Shadow Queen here](#)

Don’t forget to sign up for my mailing list! This is where I share news before

anywhere else! It's the best place to keep in touch with me.

Mailing List

Lastly, while writing this book, I decided that Dee and Kaz need their own spin-off story... so keep an eye out for that in 2024! ;)

Thank you so much for reading!!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kory (K.) Easton is the paranormal romance pen name for Amazon bestselling author, Amanda Richardson. She gravitates toward dark tales of otherworldly creatures and beasts. She currently resides in Yorkshire, England, with her husband and two kids.

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