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LIFE AFTER DEATH DAY
BOOK TWO

SURVIVING
IN THE SHADOW
OF DEATH

Surviving in the Shadow of Death

LIFE AFTER DEATH DAY

DONNA AUGUSTINE

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Chapter One

THEY SAY the only constant in life is change, but even “they” couldn’t have expected this kind of shift in our realities. It had been five months and six days since Death Day, when ninety percent of the human population had died. I ran my hand over the printed calendar, which had an added bonus January. Considering there were no more printed calendars, it had turned out to be a bigger bonus than anyone had expected.

A year ago, picking up a new calendar would’ve been a quick chore, an afterthought. A year ago, I’d still had a mother, albeit a sick one.

A year ago, the majority of the world was still churning along the way it had for hundreds of years, with a somewhat predictable future. Yes, there had been years of unrest, war, and sickness, but nothing like this. I wasn’t sure how long it would take to wake up and not feel the shock at our new reality.

I snuggled deeper under the covers for a few more minutes before accepting that it would only get colder if I didn’t drag myself out of bed. The stove needed more wood or my toes would freeze and break off.

Shoving my feet in boots, I grabbed the blanket and headed for the porch.

There were three logs left on the porch. Last night there had been a stack of wood piled five high, and it wasn’t because I’d turned the cottage into a sauna. I liked it chillier at night, and ever since Charlie had been changed, even though he was too young to shift, he was a little furnace. He barely noticed the cold, and I was forever chasing after him with a jacket that he’d shed as soon as he was out of sight. If I loaded up the wood stove too much, he’d accuse me of trying to bake him.

I scanned the street in the historic village where the pack lived. If I

squinted hard enough, I could almost make out the center of town where everyone liked to gather for the nightly roast. Groza's henchmen were around here somewhere, probably lying in wait to get their giggles when I came out to find the lack of firewood.

If they thought I was going to collapse onto one of the porch rockers and cry, they were amateurs. A couple of chilly nights weren't going to take me down. Neither would the missing food, the clogged chimney that had smoked up the inside of the cottage, or any of the other little nasties that popped up in the last couple of months.

As fast as they caused me problems, someone else from the pack would offer up some tasty treats or notice the lack of wood and bring over some more. Not to mention there was a forest right beyond this wall with plenty of fallen logs. I didn't even have to chop, just gather.

I did one last scan for the goons, the two she liked to use most often, and spotted some new faces. Duncan's pack had been showing up every week in groups of anywhere from five to twenty. This community was going to start bursting at the seams, not that I cared. The more people here, the easier it was to blend in and ignore people.

Another few new faces passed in the distance, although these looked vaguely familiar. Had I seen them before, or was I beginning to imagine things? They moved out of sight before I could place them, only to reveal one of the faces I'd been trying to dodge.

Grabbing the last of the logs, I hurried inside before Duncan made his way down the road. These days, my mission in life was to avoid Duncan and Groza. It was up there on my list, right after keeping Charlie and myself alive.

Considering Charlie and I were both still breathing, I gave myself an A-plus in that category. As far as avoidance was concerned, I had been doing a job that was fair to middling.

For the most part I'd been able to avoid them without being obvious. I'd only had to turn and do a one-eighty a handful of times.

It got a little trickier when Duncan was coming down this way to visit the guys who lived next to me. Still, I'd spot him and make myself scarce before he got close enough that it would prompt a need for a nod or acknowledgement of some sort.

I longed for crowds so thick I didn't have to see him at all, because it felt like someone gutted me when I did.

I was inside, kneeling in front of the stove, assuming it was safe, when the front door opened and shut. I looked over my shoulder to find Duncan walking into the cottage. I shot straight to my feet, trying to get on equal footing as he strode in.

“What are you doing here?” I backed farther into the kitchen, putting some more distance between us. I knocked into the broom but grabbed it before it fell.

His gaze fell to my grip on the broom. “Plan on attacking someone with that?”

I glanced down, realizing I was white-knuckling the handle.

“Obviously not.” I leaned it against the wood stove.

“That’s wood and straw.” He raised a brow.

I yanked it off the edge of the stove and leaned it against the wall, hating how utterly unhinged I appeared.

“Why are you here? You need to knock next time. You don’t live here anymore.”

He leaned a shoulder on the doorway of the kitchen. “If I knocked, you would’ve climbed out the window,” he said, looking too comfortable in here.

He didn’t have the right to look *at home* when this wasn’t his home anymore.

“Knock anyway.” I didn’t deny the possibility I might do exactly as he’d said, and considering our past, I had every right to shimmy out a window or two. He’d toyed with my emotions and then moved on like I’d meant nothing. “Now, why are you here?”

“We need to talk.”

“About what?” There was nothing left to say between the two of us as far as I was concerned.

We hadn’t really spoken in months, not since we’d both moved on in our new roles. He’d become Groza’s mate, and I’d become the spiritual guide. A handful of hellos and goodbyes, and only those when there were people watching and it would be awkward to say nothing at all. Even standing in the cottage alone with him made my senses heighten, all too aware of the long list of things we *wouldn’t* discuss at all. The things that truly mattered. Like how he had moved on as Groza’s mate as if it were the easiest thing in the world, and yet all I did was mourn what could’ve been?

His gaze met mine and then lowered for a minute, as if he was thinking the same thought but could not bring himself to mention it either.

A heavy silence hung in the air for a few seconds before he said, “There are going to be some other alphas coming to visit, and I wanted you to have a heads-up before they got here.”

“What does this have to do with me? I’m assuming they’re coming to visit you and Groza.” Even speaking her name made my throat feel raw, like I needed to go gargle with salt water to kill off a virus. I leaned a hip on the counter and shrugged, trying to look as relaxed as he did. I might have been too aggressive trying to appear at ease and given myself a crick in my neck.

I reached up, trying to ease the shooting pain out of it while he watched with a frown. “I slept on it wrong.”

He nodded, not looking convinced.

I cleared my throat, waiting for him to continue.

He seemed to take the hint, because he said, “They’re going to be here for a little while, taking up residence nearby with some of their packs while we sort out what’s next.”

“What’s next?” I’d thought we *were* doing what was next, rebuilding some sort of life in the middle of a historic community. What else was there to do? This was life now. There was no longer a grid, an internet, or an advanced society, at least not anytime in the near future, from the looks of it.

“Yes. What’s next. We still don’t know why everyone died on Death Day, or what was behind it, but I guarantee you it wasn’t an accident. It was planned. Someone or something will be stepping into the power vacuum it created, and we need to be prepared for that.”

We? He might’ve grown up in a pack, and maybe I was now considered part of that pack, but that didn’t mean I was going to be lock, stock, and barrel with whatever he and Groza decided. This place wasn’t run like a democracy but a monarchy. I wasn’t looking to swear fealty to anyone, and right now I was more concerned about getting him out of my cottage.

“Okay, well, thanks for the warning about the company, but I have a lot to do today.”

He didn’t budge. “These alphas might want to talk to you, considering your position in the pack.”

Position in the pack? I wasn’t only a member now, but I was one who warranted a talk with the alphas of other packs?

“Why would they want to speak to me?” Were they going to ask me questions I couldn’t answer? If they asked anything about what I was, what I was doing, what I could do, I was going to start babbling like a brook

overflowing. The pack might've viewed me as an esteemed member now, but I was still trying to figure out why.

"Not every pack has a spiritual guide. In most cases, they don't. Jaysa was at the heart of it, the guide for the entire East Coast. There is a chance they might try to see if you're open to moving."

The more he spoke, the stiffer he looked. I loved every second of it. I wanted him so stiff and uncomfortable that he made me look like a pile of Silly Putty.

"I didn't know moving to a new pack was an option." I hadn't meant to say it, and definitely not with the touch of glee in my voice.

But I had options? I wasn't sure how I could leave this place for so many reasons, starting with Charlie most of all. He'd lost both parents, and then I'd dragged him across the country. He'd had to watch a woman he'd come to think of as a surrogate grandmother die during the journey. He'd just gotten settled in here, and I was going to jerk him around again?

But what I'd give to not have to see Duncan every day. Time heals all wounds, but I couldn't get this hurt to scab over because he was everywhere. I couldn't go to the nightly roast because he might be there. I didn't want to walk down the street because I might see him and Groza.

"You look as if you'd consider it." The tendons in his neck looked strung so tight that he could've used them as a slingshot. His shoulders rose and fell as he tried to control his breathing along with his temper.

"And you're looking as if it would be a betrayal. I don't see it that way. At. All." I might've once, but those days were long gone, and he'd best understand it.

"You're saying it isn't?" His voice grew deeper, as if he couldn't keep his feelings on the matter buried.

The way I saw it, there was only one thing that would make it a betrayal, and that was if we were together. The fact he now lived with Groza made that the farthest thing from being together. This was the closest we'd ever gotten to approaching the subject of his moving out of my and Charlie's cabin and in with the blonde bane of my existence.

"No, as I just said, I don't see how it would be."

Buddie had tried to plant the seed that maybe he was with Groza just for me. That he'd bartered himself to save Charlie. Initially, it had held some water, softened my feelings toward him. Then the days had passed, things had kept happening, like the wood, and he'd continually turned a blind eye. I

might not have complained to anyone, but the guys were noticing. I was sure they'd said things, and still it continued on. He'd clearly picked a side, and that was Groza's, and now he had the nerve to wonder why I'd want to leave?

He shook his head. "It must be nice to live in your world, where everything is so crisp, all black and white. Not a shade of gray to be found."

"Yes, actually, it is. Going forward, perhaps you should have Buddie deliver your messages. I think things would go smoother that way." I nodded toward the front door.

"That's where we're at? We can't have a civil conversation?" His eyes burned into me.

"Yes, that's where we're at." He'd made his bed. He could go lie in it with her.

Chapter Two

GILLIAN WAS STANDING ABOUT fifty feet away from my cottage, holding a jar and glancing my way when she thought I wasn't paying attention. Her hair was blowing wildly, and it was too cold out for the thin sweater she was wearing. It wasn't clear why she went through this ritual every time she wanted to talk to me, but she'd work her way over here eventually.

I turned to Buddie, who was rocking in the chair next to me on the porch.

"She can't wait to give me more stuff, can she?" I asked. It wasn't that these gifts didn't help me get through, but it was more difficult than I'd imagined to be perpetually on the receiving end.

A cup of morning coffee in his hand, he had no hesitation as he stared at her. "Yep. She's definitely bringing you another offering." He went back to sipping his coffee.

"I'm not comfortable taking all these gifts." I'd tried to re-gift some of them back into the pack. Sort of recycling, so I didn't feel like such a taker. After getting caught re-gifting a few times, and a few awkward questions, it turned out that was the wrong way to handle things.

Buddie was looking at me, frowning. "You're the *spiritual guide*, the bringer of good will and balance and all things right. It makes them feel good to bring you things." He shrugged.

"But am I?" I kept getting things because that was what everyone believed I was. In reality, I didn't feel an iota different. I was still the same ole Piper, taking things day by day and hoping to survive until next week.

"Yes. You are." He dragged his rocker a little closer and whispered, "I'm

not sure Jaysa did anything either.”

I should’ve been gasping in alarm, or shock—or something. But knowing Jaysa, it would’ve been more surprising if she had helped anyone.

“Even if she was a user and a fraud, I don’t want to be.” That would not be my legacy.

“Of course not, but you can only do so much.” He went back to sipping and rocking. Not a care in the world because he didn’t have to worry about going down in history as the great faker.

“*Do so much?* I’m not doing anything. I wake up afraid my muscles are going to atrophy from lack of use.” Well, that wasn’t completely accurate. I did have to go gather wood and other items that were stolen or destroyed. Still, it felt like an easy gig compared to right after Death Day. Back then I was dodging punches and biking miles every day trying to find scraps of food and medicine.

“Your muscles weren’t that impressive to begin with.” Buddie laughed at his joke.

“How have I ended up with you as one of my main friends? There has to be better choices around here, even with the reduction in population. I must not be trying hard enough.” Actually, that wasn’t true. If I steered clear of the people who looked at me like I was a god, or the few who thought I was a plague on their existence, he was it. Yeah, he was one of my best options.

“Look, you should consider yourself more like a therapist, okay?” he said once his laughter died off. He took another sip of coffee. “They like coming and getting things off their chest. You’re providing them a service.”

“Except I have no idea how to do therapy. I could make people feel worse just as easy as feel better.” I was twenty and not delusional enough to think I had that much to offer. It was bad enough worrying if I was messing up Charlie on a daily basis.

“Okay, what about the placebo effect? Your being here makes them feel more at ease. That’s worth something.” His eyebrows were climbing up his forehead as he tried to see if something would catch.

It didn’t. “I don’t want to be a fake drug.”

“Well, I’d get used to it, because the pack is growing and there are going to be even more members looking for their hit of feel-good.” He smiled, knowing exactly how that would make me feel.

I looked past Gillian, to the ever-growing, crowded streets.

“Can we fit in everyone who’s showing up?”

He stared at all the new faces with me, shaking his head. “Not all. We’re going to have to build or do something. We’ll have to work it out either way, because Duncan wants more of our numbers here. It evens out the balance of power with Groza.”

“Why is that an issue?” I asked, knowing my tone gave away my skepticism of their relationship.

“We all know they’re a rocky match-up. What she likes is the idea of him. She’s one of those who has to drive the nicest car on the block, have the biggest and best. Duncan is the male equivalent of a Maserati in her garage. We all have to find our own paths, though.”

Buddie stood, handing me his mug and stretching before he turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” I tried to swallow back the panic of being left alone with one of my spiritual followers, but it surely leaked out anyway.

He tilted his head toward Gillian. “She’s gearing up for her final approach, and she’s going to want to talk to you alone. Plus I took the last cup of coffee, so it’s time to move on. I hope that’s the same blend in that container. Tell her to keep it coming.”

He smiled as he left, depriving me of a couple more minutes of peace.

Gillian swooped in the second Buddie departed.

“Piper? Do you have a minute?” She hesitated at the bottom of the stoop.

“Sure, Gillian, of course I do.” I strained a grin. I did every week she came. Still, she smiled as if she were surprised.

Chapter Three

“THAT DOESN’T SMELL SO GOOD,” Charlie said, his nose crinkled.

I hadn’t even taken off the lid and he’d smelled it. They told me he wouldn’t shift until he hit puberty, but something was changing. I just wish it wasn’t his smell. He was sitting at the kitchen table, fear in his eyes that he’d have to eat whatever was emitting that stench.

I lifted the lid of the Dutch oven sitting on the wood stove, only to replace it fast. The ingredients I’d used didn’t seem to have worked the way they were supposed to, even before I burned them.

“It’ll taste better than it smells.” I had my doubts, even without his sense of smell.

“You said that about yesterday’s dinner too.” He wasn’t trying to be mean. There was a panicked look on his face, as if I were going to force this inedible thing on him.

Well, I might’ve been considering it...

“Yesterday was a mistake. This one I followed the instructions very carefully.” I thought I had. Catarina had written down the recipe and steps for me in painstaking detail, right before she kicked me out of her office. She was the one who gave everyone assignments around here, which had been my reason for seeing her. She’d declined me a job but offered me a recipe. Looked like neither situation was working out.

Somewhere or other I’d heard that kids needed stability, like family meals and stuff like that. Damned if I wouldn’t make this work. If I didn’t have Charlie, I would’ve been ripping open a protein bar for breakfast, lunch, and

dinner.

Buddie walked into the cottage, his nose twitching as he looked at the pot on the stove. “I saw you were low on wood again. I brought you some of ours.”

“Thanks. It was really cold last night. I burned a lot.”

“*Sure* you did.” He rolled his eyes.

We all knew it was a lie, but it was easier to keep on lying than deal with the truth. Buddie had his own problems. I wasn’t dumping more of mine on him. He wasn’t the one who could fix the issue anyway.

I glanced over at Charlie, who was staring at me as if even he was catching on to things being out of sorts. He had too many worries at his age. He didn’t need to be concerned about the daily issues or people not wanting us here, or at least me.

Buddie glanced at Charlie and then me. “Plus I know Rastin keeps borrowing wood from you ’cause he’s lazy.”

Charlie seemed to latch on to those words, and the frown on his face softened.

“Well, as long as he returns the favor, no harm.” I smiled at Buddie, who nodded.

Buddie lifted the cover of the pot and closed it up even faster. “The guys were afraid something died in here. I’ll let them know you were just cooking again. Want me to take Charlie with me to the roast?”

He didn’t really have to ask. He took Charlie to the roast every single night.

“Yep. That sounds like a good idea.”

“They’ll feed you too, you know.” Buddie was eyeing the pot as if he thought I’d try to eat it after he left. He didn’t know I had a stash of rolls and honey just in case. “It might be good for you to come every now and then too. Socialize a little in a more casual type of way.” He leaned a hip on the table, watching me.

“Can you come? Please?” Charlie asked, coming to stand beside him, both of them giving me the *come on* face.

I wasn’t strong enough to say no with the two of them staring at me like that.

“You might like going.” Buddie shrugged, as if refusing to actually commit to that statement fully.

“Please, please, please,” Charlie said, launching into a fresh round of

begging.

It was like they could smell my weakness. Considering that they were shifters, maybe they could.

They didn't understand what the roasts were like for me. They all stared—not like they hated me, the way they used to. But at least back then, they hadn't tried to talk to me, touch me, gawk at me. I'd also have Groza's goons watching me, not blatantly enough for anyone else to notice, but the whole situation got my back up.

As if that wasn't bad enough, *they'd* be there. Groza and Duncan, getting all cozy, acting all coupled up. I'd done my best to avoid them, but it seemed as if I couldn't leave the cottage without running into one of them.

"The guys are all there," Buddie said, as if to reassure me I'd have at least a few people who'd be acting normal if I needed to buffer myself.

"Okay, but give me a few seconds to straighten up."

If I was going to make an appearance, I wasn't going like this, with stained jeans and my blond hair sticking out in every direction. I went into the back bedroom, the one Duncan had used that I'd moved into after he left.

I flipped through three pairs of jeans and four sweaters, determined to get myself to a store soon. I choose the least-worn options. I dragged a brush through honey-blond hair and it immediately rebelled, frizzing to twice its normal size. My last hair band had snapped yesterday. I'd add that to my shopping list if I had paper here. Instead, I made use of the pencil, shoving it through a quick bun.

"Let's go," I said as I walked back into the kitchen.

Buddie eyed me up and down. "I thought you wanted to..."

I raised my eyebrows, daring him to finish.

He rubbed his jaw. "You look great."

"Thank you."

Who was I looking to impress, anyway? The pack had hated me before they became mesmerized by me. Nothing I ever tried to do made a whit of difference anyway.

Was I really going to try to prance around, prettying myself up because Duncan had kissed me and then mated with some other woman? Nope. I wasn't going to be *that* person.

We headed out the door just as the guys were piling out of their cabin. Birdie, who didn't say much, gave me a nod. Trevor gave me a wide smile, and I hoped he didn't speak to me. He wasn't exactly *off*, but he sure wasn't

fully on, either. The first time I'd seen him, he'd been ambushing the ambushers alone just for giggles.

Rastin headed right to my side, shaking his head. "We're going to have to schedule some time together."

"I'm not waxing your back anymore." As much as I enjoyed his girlish screams, there was way too much hair to get through in one afternoon. Maybe if he could find someone to trim it down first or something.

"Oh, I'm not talking about my grooming needs." He waved both of his hands at me. "I get it. It's the end of the world, and then, to make matters worse, you got dumped and now you're depressed. And maybe even before all of that, your standards weren't that good. Doesn't matter. You gotta do something about this. I am not getting stuck with that *woman* as my alpha, so you need to break this shit up, and it's not happening with the way you've been walking around. You look like you barely brush your hair anymore."

I let the grooming remarks go because I had a mirror in the cottage. It was hard to deny the obvious. Was I depressed? I wasn't sure I could debate that one well either, because this didn't feel like happiness.

I hung my hat on the only thing left. "She's co-alpha, I thought."

"That's fifty percent. One percent would be too much. She's *intolerable*."

Birdie shot Rastin a look and then nodded toward the gathering we were approaching.

"It's not like it's a secret," Rastin said, staring ahead at Birdie.

Birdie shook his head and continued to walk.

"I'm sorry you don't like her, but there's nothing I can do about it," I said.

"Oh, but there is. You're going to seduce him and get him tossed out of this mating," Rastin said.

Charlie turned around, looking at Rastin. "What's seduce mean?"

I glared at Rastin.

"I meant deuce him. It's a card game." Rastin smiled at him.

"It doesn't matter, because I don't like Rastin's games and I'm not playing them."

The crowd was nearly upon us, finally forcing Rastin to shut up, if they hadn't heard what he was saying already anyway. Shifters had incredibly good hearing.

It wasn't like his words could make things more awkward. That was impossible. As we neared the gathering, they all began to stare, the way they

did whenever I was spotted out and about. One would turn to another and whisper, and they'd turn to the next until the whole pack was staring at me. Joke was on them, though. As much as everyone thought I was so special now, I was the same old Piper they loved to hate. They'd just gotten confused with the new title and some mumblings about my feeling weird or something.

"There's Paz and Minks!" Charlie took off toward his friends.

"Don't get lost and make sure you eat," I yelled after him, knowing I'd probably have to put out a search party for him later.

His friends were smiling as he ran over, and Minks handed him one of the two burgers he had piled on his plate. As much as I felt like a sore thumb in this place, he was already one of them. He'd grow up with the pack as if he'd been born into it. If nothing else gave me a sense of comfort, watching him laugh with his friends helped me get to sleep at night. It wasn't enough to keep me asleep *all night*, but it was something.

The guys all seemed to form a buffer around me, as if they'd had this planned. It kept most of the curious and crazy away, but it was still like being on a stage.

I was trying to get through a leg of meat with as much dignity as possible when I sensed the change in the atmosphere. The second Duncan and Groza entered the gathering, I knew. It wasn't because Jaysa's powers were overwhelming me, or some other impressive sixth sense was filling my body with magic. It was because every person there turned my way, then looked at them, then back at me. As if every soul here knew there was some underlying tension between Duncan and me. If they hadn't, Rastin's talk on the way over had certainly enlightened them.

I sidled up to Buddie. "Thanks. Soooo glad I came."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, playing dumb, but I could see him trying to fight laughter.

I would've elbowed him, but not with all these big eyes watching. It was as if they were all hanging on every word and dissecting every movement.

"You know."

He tilted his head and tried to look bashful.

I focused on my food, trying to ignore the looks, the people leaning in closer and whispering to each other.

It wasn't until a few minutes later, when Buddie was sighing and Trevor looked like his ears were perking up, that it was clear trouble was coming.

I should've handed off my plate and gotten out of there, but I didn't. I

scanned the crowd in the direction of the stares, even when I knew I shouldn't. Duncan was there and heading toward me. This was exactly why I'd told myself not to look, but of course I'd done it anyway. The only good thing it had accomplished was giving me a minute or so to hightail it out of there, instead of having to fake some sort of civility while he was standing right in front of me.

Dammit. This was exactly why I hadn't wanted to come. How many times was he going to seek me out?

"Here," I said, handing Buddie my plate. "And walk Charlie home. He's playing. I don't want to drag him out of here, but it's time for me to leave."

I didn't wait for him to speak or agree. There was no time.

I tried to dodge and weave my way out of the crowd, but it was as if everyone kept blocking my way on purpose. By the time I broke free from the pack, I thought I'd lost him. But somehow he popped up in front of me mere yards from my cottage.

"What do you want?" I sounded like I was about to pull my hair out, and that was exactly how I felt. All I wanted to do was avoid Duncan and this situation. The last couple days, it felt like I couldn't shake him.

It wasn't as if I was afraid to speak to him. I didn't *want* to speak to him. The first time I ever met Duncan, my instinct had been to run. Well, I was finally listening to my own advice, and if fate would cooperate, things might get better.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize we needed to talk, *again*, and so soon. What did you need?" My tone was calm, collected, and definitely cool. So cool he should be getting frostbite about now.

He stood there, both of us in the middle of the road like we were having some awkward showdown. "I'm not asking for anything but to be civil. I didn't like how we left things. I wanted to see if you're doing all right."

He wanted to check on me, the poor, rejected girl? Was that what this was? This might've been worse than his trying to steal a kiss.

"I don't need anyone to check in on me. I'm fine. We can be civil, but I think we should keep our interactions to a minimum."

"We live in a small community. We're going to see each other constantly."

"But we don't need to seek each other out. It's for the best that we don't talk unless necessary."

"We went from living together to not speaking at all?"

“When you get mated to someone who isn’t the same person who you were kissing, things get awkward like that. I don’t know why you did it. If it was for Charlie, I’m forever grateful. But I guess it doesn’t matter if it was or wasn’t. You’re with a woman who hates me, and we weren’t exactly *just* friends. Whatever there was between us? It’s long gone.”

“I did what was best.”

“Yes, I’m sure you did what *you* thought was best. I wish you all the best with your mate.”

He glanced over my shoulder, and I stiffened, knowing exactly who was coming.

The queen of the prom was heading our way now. This was exactly what I’d wanted to avoid.

Groza walked over. She had a strut like nobody I’d ever met in my life. It was no wonder she turned heads wherever she went.

“Duncan? We’re getting company soon,” she said, like a chiding wife.

He didn’t move, so I did.

“Have a good night,” I said, making my escape while I could.

He might not be jumping when she snapped, but I wasn’t stupid enough to believe he’d follow me while she watched.

Chapter Four

I MADE my way out the back exit, which was closer to the cottage, with Charlie's red wagon. It was easier to collect wood than tell anyone I was having problems. The person I would've most likely talked to was literally sleeping with the enemy. Turning to him was a nonstarter. Wasn't like he was the first man in my life to abandon me and fall down on the job. As soon as I started to count on them, they were doomed to disappoint. Why did I even bother?

Then he had the nerve to chase me down and carry on about civility. He could shove his civility.

I walked over to a downed tree, giving it a kick to see if it would break apart, pretending it was Duncan. It was being stubborn, which shouldn't have come as any surprise, so I kicked it again, and a couple more times, cursing it as I did. I was about to give it another barrage of kicks when a crushing pain made my head feel like it was going to split open and my world went dark.

I woke with duct tape over my mouth, arms tied behind my back. Both my knees and ankles were tied and looped a couple more times in between for good measure. The amount of rope they used could've tied off the *Titanic*. Not even Houdini could've escaped this. There was a sliver of light under the door of what seemed to be a small closet.

I tried to shift around and get my bearings, but there wasn't much room. It didn't help that my limbs were numb and my head was pounding. They hadn't even cleaned out a space, just thrown me on top of a pile of junk that was poking me indiscriminately. If this had been planned, it wasn't planned

well.

This wasn't Groza. She wouldn't have bothered to tie me up. I'd be dead and buried already. So who? Some random human looking to use me later on? I tried to wriggle around, but not only was there no slack in the ropes, they were so tight that they felt as if the rough bindings were rubbing the flesh from my bones.

Don't. Panic.

I lived with shifters. Buddie would realize I was missing and come looking for me. He'd track down my scent and find me. All I needed to do was remain calm and alive long enough for them to locate me.

Not panicking wasn't as easily done while I was sitting in a dark closet, dying of thirst and waiting for what was to come. Was it going to be some greasy, gross man who would try to use me as a broodmare? Would he try to share me with his friends? The only benefit to my current situation was that it was hard to hyperventilate through your nose. Still, I gave it my damndest.

I wasn't sure how long I'd sat there in the dark, because time warped like honey in an hourglass in the winter, every second dragging out. By the time there were muffled noises outside my door, it might've been fifteen minutes or two hours for all I knew.

"Okay, what is it you need to show me?" a male voice said from the other side of the door.

Was I a prize for someone? A gift?

The door swung open, and I squinted into the bright light. Two men stood there, one holding the door open, smiling and waving a hand toward me. He had a dull look about his eyes and a nose that had taken too many hits.

The other man let out a sigh, displeasure written all over his brutally handsome features. His shadowed jaw seemed to grow squarer as he dragged his fingers through midnight-black hair and nailed the other man with a glare.

"Magnum, what did you do? Where did you find her?"

Magnum's face fell. "It's their new guide, Kicks. She was walking around in the forest by herself. You always said how it would be good to have our own guide, and she was just there all alone. If they wanted her, why was she all by herself gathering wood?"

So not only were they shifters, I was quickly getting the feeling that Kicks was one of the alphas who was planning on visiting. From the way he was taking deep breaths, he also didn't seem very happy with Magnum's plan. Perhaps not so much a plan but a mishap?

“You can’t just take one. That’s not how it works. Remember, I told you, you cannot do things like this without talking to me.” Kicks spoke to Magnum similar to how I would Charlie.

Magnum dropped his chin. “Sorry, Kicks.”

“It’s all right. I know you had good intentions.”

What? This is okay? Come on!

I would’ve been screaming that, but the duct tape was muffling my words into an indiscernible mumble.

Kicks knelt in front of me, taking in my bent form with eyes so green they’d make a spring pasture jealous. He leaned his arms on his legs, sleeves shoved up, showing off muscular forearms. Every inch of this man looked like it was carved.

“Seems there was a slight mistake.” He had a smile that was smoother than a gold medalist’s dismount. It felt like a weapon to disarm and distract from the muscularity of his body and the hardness I could feel behind his eyes. He could put on a clown nose and blow a horn on a tricycle and I’d still spot it. One trait that the end of the world had honed in me was spotting a predator when I saw one. I would’ve seen him coming from miles away.

I was almost grateful for the duct tape giving me an excuse to gather up my thoughts before I spoke. Not quite, but close.

Kicks was shaking his head, testing a rope around my ankles with his finger. “Magnum, you might’ve overdone it a bit. She doesn’t look that strong.”

“But she’s a guide,” Magnum said, his voice holding a hint of awe and sounding so small in contrast to his size.

Kicks leaned forward, putting an arm under my knees and around my shoulders, avoiding putting pressure on my arms. It didn’t matter. The second he touched me, all my awareness shot to where we made contact. He carried me with a fluidity and grace that put me on edge. The smoother he seemed, the rougher my edges got.

He carried me over to a loveseat, the lone piece of furniture in the room. It was piled with the odds and ends no one wanted but weren’t quite ready to toss, like I was in the spare room of a business of some sort.

The tension created by being held by him relaxed the second he placed me down.

He reached for the edge of the duct tape covering my mouth. “This isn’t going to be pleasant.”

It couldn't be worse than sitting in a dark closet, wondering if I was about to get killed.

With a fast tug, it was off. It was like payback for what I'd done to Rastin. At least he had asked for it, even if I had enjoyed it slightly.

I let the pain ease for a second at most before I asked, "Where the hell am I?"

"We'll get to that soon enough," Kicks said, moving to kneel behind me.

He was unnerving when he was in front of me, let alone where I couldn't see him. Still, I forced myself to remain calm, as if walking out of this room was a foregone conclusion.

Why wouldn't he tell me where I was? Had I taken death off the table too quickly? I didn't blurt anything else out, trying to show some restraint for once in my life.

"Magnum, exactly how long was she left in there?" Kicks asked. "Her hands are nearly gray."

"You were out and she was sleeping, so I figured I'd let her nap," Magnum said, not sounding very confident.

"Nap? I was unconscious. You hit me over the head." Well, there went keeping my calm, but that omission was too much of a doozy to let go.

"Magnum?" Kicks asked in a scolding tone.

Magnum looked at me and then Kicks. "It was just a little hit," he said, his voice even smaller.

"Go. We'll talk later." Kicks' hands shifted to my head, grazing over my scalp with a light touch and setting off little tingles down my spine.

"I'm fine. Or I will be once you cut me loose." And stopped touching me. That might've been even more important.

"Considering how tightly he tied these, this is going to be more unpleasant than the tape," Kicks said. He was back in front of me, reaching into his black combat boot to pull out a knife. I scanned the thin sweater he was wearing for more hidden weapons and then realized he probably didn't need any.

He reached behind me, making short work of the ropes on my wrist. He was cutting the ties on my legs when the pins and needles started like an attack of hornets.

Kicks took the seat next to me and swung my legs up onto his lap, massaging my calves.

I would've complained, but I was in too much pain to stop him. "Who are

you, exactly?” I’d already made a good guess, but I wanted it confirmed.

“My name is Kicks. I’m alpha of the Arkansas pack.”

Yep, one of the alphas that I’d been warned was going to come. Duncan hadn’t wanted me to speak to them, let alone like this.

“Your name is *Kicks*?” Normally I wouldn’t mock a person’s name, but I also didn’t typically meet people after one of their underlings had assaulted and abducted me. I had a knot on my head and my limbs were being stung. He could handle a little poke at his name.

“Long story,” he said, smiling.

If the barb at his name had offended him, he wasn’t going to let me know.

The silence stretched out, the awareness of his hands on my legs growing as the pain dulled. I attempted to move them off his lap, but he draped his arm across the top of them, effectively halting my movement.

“What are you doing? Let go of my legs.” He looked relaxed, but his arm was like a steel bar. I’d known shifters were strong, but he was immovable. Instantly, our situation had gone from conversation to confrontation.

“We need to have a chat first, darlin’.” He patted a leg in a manner that was too familiar, as if he were used to bestowing such liberties on a regular basis to women he didn’t know. I suspected he was. His arrogance didn’t seem unearned.

“Don’t call me darlin’, and I don’t need to chat with you at all. I have a pack that’s going to be looking for me.” It was still light out and, from the sunlight streaming in the window, not much past noon.

“Really? Because that’s not what I’ve been hearing around.”

It was one thing to know Groza wanted me dead, that she wanted me out of the pack at all costs—it was quite another to hear it from a man I didn’t know who’d just dragged me out of a closet. It wasn’t only insulting but a possible deathblow to my leverage in a negotiation in which I was already under-armed.

“Are you so gullible you believe every rumor you hear? You’re not getting reliable information.” Groza might hate me, but the rest of the pack still wanted me. Well, at least most of them did, and if you cut the head off the snake, I’d be sitting pretty.

“I’ve been called many things, but never gullible. Now, we are going to have a chat.” He still had a muscular arm draped over my legs.

I guessed we were going to have a chat.

“Then chat away, *Kicks*.”

I leaned back, crossing my arms and making it as clear as day I didn't care what he said. I'd let him speak because I had to, but that was it.

“It would be easier for me and all involved if you didn't tell anyone what Magnum did today,” he said.

Was he insane? He had to be. Why would I keep this secret?

“I've been gone for hours. It's going to take me...” I had zero idea where I was. “I don't even know how long to get home. They're going to know something happened to me.” If I was a normal member of the pack, it would be different. But I was the guide. Someone showed up to haunt my stoop almost hourly. It was almost as if they got crazy if they couldn't find me for more than an hour.

He shrugged. “Say you got lost.”

Like that would be the end of it. He clearly wasn't used to being questioned, and it probably had nothing to do with being an alpha. I doubted he'd ever been pushed by anyone. He'd probably come out of the womb issuing demands, and the nurses had fallen in line.

Except for me. I had no plans to follow any of this man's orders. I knew where they'd lead.

“Why would I do that?” Instead of my agreeing, being smart about it, I could hear my voice getting shrill, as if I were trying to pick a fight with him. Like some sort of defense mechanism that was built into my feminine DNA told me this man was even more dangerous than my kidnapper. His thug might break my bones, but if I gave this man an inch, I'd be self-destructing.

“Because if you don't, Duncan will have the right to kill Magnum for harming a guide in his pack's protection. What Magnum did was stupid, but I won't allow anyone to kill him when there was no real harm done. If he tries, we'll truly have a problem.”

He was still speaking calmly, his tone pleasant enough, but I could sense the steel in his words, the conviction of his belief. If he said no one was going to touch Magnum, no one would be touching him.

For a fleeting second, I wondered what it would be like to have a man like him at your back. I'd imagine that Magnum wouldn't have been wandering around looking for scraps of wood for his cottage. No, if this man said he had you, you were covered. Whatever he was, there was obviously a loyal streak that went down to the bone.

And *boom*. That was how fast people probably fell in behind him. He'd

never be that loyal to me anyway. Not. Me. I was a human, after all. Guide or not, that made me different.

“You said my pack wouldn’t be looking for me, and now you’re claiming Duncan would come and kill Magnum? Which am I supposed to believe?”

He smiled, as if he shouldn’t have to explain this to me. “There’s convenience and then there’s the optics. A disappearance would be easier. They could claim you left of your own volition. But if you were to go back crying the victim? Stirring up problems and getting everyone worked up?”

“Crying the victim? Magnum hit me over the head, tied me up, and shoved me in a closet. He could’ve killed me, and now I have to protect him and... What did you call it? *Cry the victim*? I’ve never cried the victim in my life. Now get off me.” I was nearly screaming by the time I stopped speaking.

This was the way he spoke to someone he needed a favor from? He was lucky he was holding my legs, which made striking him awkward, or I might’ve actually punched him.

He had the nerve to laugh softly, but didn’t let go of me. “I didn’t actually take you for that type, but I had to make sure.”

“Wow, thank you. I’m so honored you don’t see me as a walking victim.” I crossed my arms, looking about the room, too mad to give him my full attention.

“Look, I’m sorry about what he did,” he said, switching back to his smooth delivery. “You have every right to be upset, but it’s better for everyone if we keep it between ourselves.”

This guy was a psycho of the first degree. I never should’ve argued with him. I must be as insane as he was. I should’ve yessed him to death and hurried my way out of here.

“Fine. I won’t say a word.”

He didn’t move his arm from my legs.

“I *said* I won’t say a word. That’s what you want, right? So let go.” I pushed his arm, not that it made a difference.

“I need you to actually mean it.” He was smiling again, and it was obvious he was used to charming his way through a lot of things. It wasn’t going to work. Or not enough. I refused to be charmed by anyone.

“I said I’d lie.”

“Except you’re lying to me.” He tilted his head, looking at me like we were best buds, just having a chat on a slow afternoon.

“I’m sorry if I don’t feel especially responsible for someone who hit me over the head and tied me up so tight I’m going to have bruises all over me tomorrow.”

His eyes went to my arms, and he reached out and ran his finger over my wrist, as if he actually felt bad about that. He was too slick to trust.

“Fine. Give me a few minutes and I’ll drive you back.”

“Fine,” I answered, not quite believing it. I’d already tried to leave once, but now it was okay?

He let go of my legs. I tucked them up to my chest, and he got up and walked to the door. I purposely didn’t look at the window I was going to climb out of as soon as he left the room.

“Magnum, come here,” he called, not leaving the room and giving me an opportunity.

Damn it. And why was he bringing Magnum back? Was he going to get him to hit me over the head again if I didn’t agree?

Magnum walked in. Kicks pointed at me. “You hurt the lady pretty bad. See what you did?”

Magnum stared at my arms, a little gasp coming out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just got excited because I knew Kicks wanted a guide.”

He was looking at my wrists, frowning. He met my eyes for a few seconds before breaking contact, as if he were scared of me. I wanted to scream, but more at Kicks than Magnum. Being mean to Magnum, even after what he did, felt like kicking a puppy.

“It’s all right. I’m not that hurt. But don’t do that again.” I pointed, trying to reinforce how bad it was.

He nodded. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Okay, Magnum. You can go.” Kicks patted Magnum on the back as he walked out, then came over to stand in front of me.

“They’ll want to kill him, or at least hurt him. I won’t let that happen, and a feud between the packs isn’t a good idea right now. If you really want to see him killed or battered to within an inch of his life for a mistake, then it’s your choice.” He angled his head toward the door, as if that was the last he’d say about it.

It was worse than the strong-arming tactic and made me want to hit him even more.

“Fine. I’ll lie for you.” I got to my feet, realizing how much taller Kicks was than me, and tried to keep a reasonable space between us.

He smiled, this one seeming a little warmer and a tad more genuine than the last. "Come on. I'll take you home."

Chapter Five

“HOW FAR AWAY ARE WE?” If they made me late to get Charlie, and he was freaked out for even a second, I was going to hand Kicks to them on a platter.

“Only a few minutes down the road. We’re going to be in the area, but I wanted my own space. Not sure how long it’ll be until we figure some things out.”

Yeah, he wouldn’t be the type to play nice with other alphas. If you couldn’t see that, you were stumbling around in the abyss. I could play nice with lots of people, and I didn’t want to be there either.

Instead of his telling me where to go, his hand was on the small of my back, then curved to the side of my waist as he steered me. He was clearly the type that was very comfortable touching people. I’d grown up in a generation that frowned upon such easy liberties. I *should’ve* hated it on principle alone. I should’ve told him to stop touching me. Except I sort of didn’t mind the contact—something was comforting about it for a reason I couldn’t quite fathom. I wasn’t going to dwell on it either. I’d get out of here and probably never speak to him again, which was for the best. I’d already had one too many sloppy situations with sexy shifters. He could go find himself another human who didn’t know the score to dally with.

I forced my attention from him to my surroundings. The place looked like a boutique hotel, one of those little diamonds that was nestled in charming small towns. Before Death Day, people would probably come and visit, go check out the historic site where I now resided, and then maybe do a little antiquing the next morning. It would’ve all been so perfectly pleasant, and so

at odds with life now.

We turned a corner and walked into a lobby, all done in dark colors and rich woods, antique lighting hanging from above. Lit antique lighting?

“This place has a backup generator,” Kicks said, following my gaze.

So they hadn’t chosen it for its charm. Why didn’t I find that shocking?

There were several men and women lounging on chairs, checking me out as we approached.

“Piper, that’s Crackers, Evangeline, Bird Dog, and Roxie.”

It hit me then that Kicks had never asked for my name. He’d already known it, a detail that lingered in my mind as I turned my attention to the others.

I got a couple of nods and quick smiles. They didn’t look at me with quite the same awe as my pack, but there was still a feeling of being in a glass case.

“I’m going to run her home. If anyone shows up, tell them nothing. I’ll be back soon,” Kicks said to his people.

There were a couple of knowing looks. He might not think Groza would come looking for me, but clearly he was concerned *someone* might.

Kicks’ hand was urging me to the door. As I turned to leave, I noticed Crackers’ gaze shift to where Kicks’ hand was at my waist, but the brisk air outside stole my attention.

We walked out onto what could’ve been a quaint main street in any small town. Down the way, there was someone driving a large yellow machine with a shovel in the front, pushing cars out of the way and into a pile up farther down the road, like a makeshift barricade of sorts.

Kicks waved in the guy’s direction before he walked to a motorcycle parked in front.

“You want a helmet?” he asked.

“Uh, *yeah*.” If I had a death wish, I could’ve fulfilled it many times over in the last few months. I wasn’t planning on dying now, after I’d beaten all the odds.

He walked toward a row of other bikes until he found a helmet and handed it to me.

“You’re not going to wear one?”

“No breaking this skull,” he said, smiling. I didn’t know if it was arrogance or a shifter thing. Talking would only slow things down, so I didn’t bother asking, either. His death wish wasn’t my problem. Charlie would be getting done with school soon, and I didn’t have time for any more of these

games.

He climbed on and waited for me, holding out his hand, and I suddenly froze.

I wasn't sure why I hesitated to get on the bike. It wasn't about a fear of motorcycles. There was something about him sitting there, on his bike, his hand reaching for me in invitation that sent a tingle of foreboding through me for no sane reason.

No, that wasn't true, was it? I had plenty of reasons. I'd been dragged here unconscious. Then he hadn't wanted to let me leave until I promised to lie. Of course I didn't want to get on the bike, right?

"Do you want to go home or not?" He was watching me, as if he was trying to see inside my head, noting every slight movement, like any twitch would fill up a sheet in his mental file.

"Yeah, I was just..." Just what? Terrified of getting on the back of the bike with him? Getting that close to him again?

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." I got my legs moving and settled in behind him, pushing the weird feeling from my mind.

He hadn't exaggerated when he said we were only a few minutes away. The walls of the community and the welcome window came into view within minutes. This would've been less than a twenty-minute walk.

I tapped his side, then his shoulder, trying to get his attention as we got closer and closer. He kept going until we roared right into the heart of the town for all to see. For someone who wanted me to lie, he could've made things a little easier by not announcing our arrival. The entire pack was watching us ride up. The people who hadn't been outside were coming out onto their stoops by the time he stopped in the center of town.

I got off the bike, ignoring Kicks' hand.

Duncan was there before I'd gotten both my feet on the ground.

"What the hell happened? Where have you been? We were about to send out trackers," Duncan said.

I glanced behind him, seeing Groza heading over. She was busy staring at Duncan, and her quick glance toward me looked more disappointed than relieved. If they'd been about to send trackers, it wouldn't have been her call.

Kicks got off the bike and came to stand so close to me, his arm grazed mine. Duncan's attention shifted immediately to Kicks.

I almost reached out and laid a hand on Duncan's arm, if only to draw the

attention back to myself. Groza's glare caught my attention before I made that error and was left with a stump. Groza laid a hand on Duncan's arm, as if making sure I remembered who belonged to whom.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to worry anyone. I went for a walk and got lost. Kicks found me," I said.

Groza smiled at Kicks. "Kicks, thank you for bringing her home. We were all getting rather worried."

"Of course," Kicks said. "We're still getting settled in, so I'll be going. See you tomorrow." Kicks nodded at Duncan and then turned to me. "Try not to wander off again, darlin'." The words weren't too bad, although a bit overfamiliar. It was the smirk he gave me, the one that was so hot, like we'd just rolled around in the sheets for the last few hours, that had my cheeks burning. Anyone watching would either have to be blind or assume we'd just had an afternoon romp.

He'd cornered me into lying and this was how I was repaid? What the hell was this guy's problem? Next time I caught him alone, I was laying into him so hard he'd be lucky to keep all his skin. I should've let him dig out of that hole his man had made. Last time I was saving their asses.

Kicks rode out through the crowd, who were taking turns looking at him and then back to me, trying to decide if one and one added up to an afternoon tryst. There were enough grins to tell me they thought it did.

I turned, and Duncan was looking at me, doing the same math. Of all people to judge, I wasn't going to tolerate it from this man.

"I've got to go get Charlie. It's getting late."

"Buddie has him," Duncan said, his tone chillier than a corner store frosty, without any of the sweetness. Groza had already dropped the polite attitude, acting as if I hadn't spoken at all.

"He'll want to see me." Every set of eyes was on me as I left.

I'd been back in my cottage for all of ten minutes, waiting for Buddie to show up with Charlie, trying to get my head together for a second, when Duncan walked in.

I swung around. "You don't live here, remember? You have to knock."

"What happened with Kicks?"

"What I said—I wasn't paying attention and I got lost. Kicks brought me back."

He took a step toward me. "You realize I can smell your pheromones? I can hear your heart race? That I can *smell* him on you? He's not someone to

get involved with.”

“I was holding on to him on the bike. Of course I smell like him.”

“And what about the fact that your skin is rubbed raw from kissing him?”

I lifted a hand to my mouth, before remembering the duct tape. Duncan was narrowing his eyes, as if that action had just admitted guilt. He was missing something crucial, though. There was no guilt. I owed him absolutely nothing.

“You realize that my heart might be racing because I’m annoyed you walk in here all the time like you live here? Do you also realize that we aren’t anything other than pack members, if that? I can bang half of this pack and it’s none of your concern.” The cottage felt smaller than ever as we faced off. I walked around him, trying to avoid touching him as I went to the door. “It’s unfortunate you choose not to believe me, but I don’t owe you an explanation.” My hand went to the doorknob.

“That’s it? I don’t deserve anything?” He didn’t budge as he waited for an answer, looking at me as if I were hurting *him*.

“Let me ask you a couple questions—how long did it take you to lose Groza before you came here? Did you lie about where you were going or did you just disappear?”

His lips flattened. “Don’t bring her into this.”

“No? Why not?” My back stiffened. He could say whatever he wanted about Kicks, but I couldn’t speak of Groza?

“Just because I’m with her doesn’t mean my feelings for you stopped. That I don’t care what happens to you.”

“Yeah, well, pretend you don’t, because we can’t do this. *I* won’t do this.” I couldn’t keep doing this. Every confrontation, every fight, felt like it was wearing away another layer of strength. I needed everything I had to keep Charlie okay. I couldn’t waste anything on Duncan, not anymore.

“I’m here because I care about you, and you don’t understand the kind of man Kicks is.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“You can’t. Not. With. Him.”

Oh, but I was fairly certain I would, because Duncan wasn’t an option.

“It’s none of your concern. Get out.” I opened the door just as Buddie and Charlie were walking toward the cottage.

“Duncan!” Charlie yelled, flinging himself at the alpha.

Buddie followed him in, looking at the two of us with an expression that said he knew we'd just been going at it.

"Hey, little man," Duncan said, swinging him up into a hug. His smile was genuine as he looked at Charlie, which almost made this all so much worse.

The unfortunate side effect of me and Duncan putting distance between us was that Charlie was an unwilling victim. He was in the same community, same pack, but the distance was real and the gap growing.

"Are you taking care of your sister?" Duncan grinned at Charlie.

"Of course. When I get bigger, I'm going to be really good at it, too." The pride was gleaming in Charlie's eyes. I'd been so terrified of what I'd chosen, and he couldn't wait until the day he shifted.

"You're already good at it." Duncan threw him up in the air, to happy giggles.

"Charlie, do you have homework?" I asked, grabbing his school bag and sending the hint to Duncan.

"Yes, Piper."

Charlie wasn't a big eye roller, but with that tone, he didn't really need to be.

Duncan put him down, shooting a glare in my direction over Charlie's head. He could look as hurt and betrayed as he wanted. It didn't matter. This conversation was over. Whether he liked it or not, he knew it too.

He turned and walked out, his steps heavy.

Chapter Six

RASTIN ANGLED his head in the direction of the group on the other side of the gathering that I'd been secretly staring at. Or not so secretly, since he seemed to have noticed.

"They're going to come and find you either way. Go over there first. You'll feel better," he said, his voice a bit softer than his normally cutting tone.

"Maybe later." The only reason I'd come to the roast tonight was because Duncan wouldn't want me here with the other alphas. Problem was, *I* didn't want me here either. I hated these things, and nothing had changed in the last couple of days. It didn't matter how good the food smelled or the free-flowing ale and wine. The bonfire didn't offer enough heat to help the chill I was feeling. In an area filled with happy, laughing people, I was miserable. The only thing that could make my night worse was forcing a conversation with a group that included Duncan and Groza.

I snuck another glimpse at them. They were standing together, holding court and looking perfect. A few months ago, Duncan had been the first person I'd turn to. Now I didn't want to walk across the clearing because he was there.

"You already met Kicks. Maddocks is easy in comparison. They're going to seek you out anyway. Every alpha that comes in this area is going to," Rastin said, pulling me away from my thoughts.

Maddocks looked like a blond god standing next to the two other dark-haired alphas.

Rastin was right, though. I was here, so might as well get it over with—

might save me some aggravation tomorrow or the next day, and it was better to choose my moment than sit and wait.

I let out a loud sigh, letting the realization that this meeting was going to have to happen now settle in.

“Are you going?” Rastin said.

“I’m going.”

“You want me to come?”

I wasn’t sure when our dynamic had shifted to this annoying sibling type of situation. I wasn’t sure if I liked it, either.

“If I’m going, I’m going alone. I don’t need anyone to hold my hand. Talk about embarrassing.”

There was a giggle from a few people away. Damn these shifters and their hearing.

Rolling my eyes at the gigglers, I made my way across the clearing. It felt like I was sloggng through a swamp trying to get to them, for all my enthusiasm.

All four of their gazes turned and locked on to me, like heat-seeking missiles, as if I’d sent out flares on my approach. I could see the storm building in Duncan’s eyes as I drew close. Groza’s glare iced over.

“I see we have guests,” I said, acting as if Duncan and I were on cordial terms and I hadn’t been on the verge of stabbing him the last few days.

“This is the new guide you’re hiding?” said Maddocks, who seemed to have a natural ease with people. Even his skills weren’t enough to tackle the tension in this group.

“Piper, this is Maddocks,” Duncan said. “He has a pack in Florida.” His tone was almost as chilly as Groza’s stare.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, trying to force some thread of enthusiasm into my tone when I was devoid of any.

“Same here,” Maddocks said, actually sounding genuine.

“Nice to see you again,” Kicks said, smiling like we shared a secret.

What was the deal with this guy? I’d done him a favor, and he was intent on outing a tryst that we hadn’t had.

Duncan stiffened as he split his glare between the two of us.

“You two met before?” Maddocks was ping-ponging his attention between all of us, trying to make sense of the situation.

“You could say we had a moment,” Kicks said, again with the innuendo.

“Not much of one, though, was it?” I added. If he could hint at certain

things, then so would I. If he wanted to pretend we'd played ball, I'd tell everyone we'd been playing miniature golf.

I feigned sophistication, but underneath, my heart was racing. His familiarity had a way of making me feel unhinged and downright raw.

Kicks put his hand to his chest, as if I'd wounded him. "Really? I treasured our meeting."

If Duncan's stare grew much hotter, I was afraid he was going to start spewing lava out of his eyes.

Maddocks laughed softly, only seeming to focus on our little wordplay. "Kicks, looks like you're losing your touch with the ladies."

There was no surprise that Kicks would be a ladies' man. There'd been something about the ease with which he touched me that spoke of lots of experience with the fairer sex.

Kicks leaned in closer, his hand going to the small of my back like I was a magnet. "You through with me, Pips? Say it ain't so, darlin'."

"You win some, you lose some." I shrugged, waiting to see if he'd give up. For some reason, I didn't think he would. Or maybe I hoped he wouldn't?

"Game isn't over yet, is it?" He had a smirk that could make a girl forget every good decision she'd made.

Game. If I was smart, I'd remember that word choice.

"Are you coming to dinner tomorrow?" Maddocks asked.

I jerked, having forgotten we weren't alone for a minute. Duncan was gripping his mug so hard I was surprised he hadn't dented the pewter when I turned back to them.

"Of course she's invited," Groza said, sidling over to me and not leaving the requisite ten-foot distance, as if we were on the best terms. "I was going to come by and invite her myself."

Duncan's mouth was in a line as he looked at me, silently demanding that I decline the invitation.

Why would I listen to him at this point? He could do whatever he wanted, and I didn't have a single say in his actions. Why should he have a say in mine?

"I'd love to. Of course I'll be there." I even forced myself to smile at Groza, as if the sight of her didn't make bile churn in my gut.

It took all of a second for me to regret accepting. Talk about cutting off my nose to spite my face. It was as if I were walking around with a chainsaw

lately, willing to hack off my entire face in the spirit of scorched earth.

I was still ruing my words as Groza lured them all into conversation. It was time to make my way out of this little group. If I was going to have to sit and eat with them all tomorrow, rest was needed. Plus, if Groza wanted me there, it couldn't possibly be to my benefit. I'd have to not only have my guard up, but shield my back, sides, and all possible vulnerabilities.

"Leaving?" Kicks said as I tried to quietly sneak away from the group.

"Yes. I'm tired. Goodnight." I picked up my pace. Charlie was having a sleepover with the guys tonight, so I should've been able to make a clean break—if it wasn't for Kicks.

"I'll walk you home. I wanted to check out more of the village anyway." He fell into step with me, casually looking around as if we were happy tourists together.

"I don't appreciate your games," I said, disillusioning him of any real civility between us. We could stroll together all night long and it wouldn't change anything. I walked faster, the cold night air stinging my cheeks. The soft candlelight glowing in the windows of the village that I usually took pleasure in didn't even calm me tonight.

"Really? I find it an amusing pastime." He didn't even try to deny it. He might even start whistling for as bothered as he seemed.

"You find these games amusing?"

"Yes, I have to say I do."

That was all I was going to get? No explanation, and definitely no apology.

"You seem intent on getting under Duncan's skin. Do you dislike him for any particular reason?"

"I don't dislike him at all." He lied with an ease I wish I could one day master.

"Well, whatever your beef is with him, leave me out of it. In spite of what you've heard, there's nothing between Duncan and me. I'm not the target you're looking for."

"Yeah, I could see that with the way he stared at the two of us yesterday."

"He was worried because a member of his pack was missing. That's all that was."

"Sure. Makes sense," he said, giving me a side-eye that confirmed my skills in lying didn't even come close to his.

"I'm surprised Groza didn't try to hook you," I said, trying to get under

his skin for a change. “I’d think you two would be extremely suitable.” They could both spend their days plotting against each other, or maybe they’d do it together.

“Who said she didn’t?” He laughed at my expression. “What’s so shocking about that? Am I that loathsome?”

“You’re—okay.”

“Trust me when I tell you, there couldn’t be two more unsuitable people.”

I used to think that was the case with Duncan and Groza, but that hadn’t been accurate either. I wasn’t taking anything at face value ever again.

I stopped well shy of the cottage. “Well, I’m home, so thank you, but goodbye.” I wasn’t letting him anywhere near the front door. No, we were standing out in the street where anyone who cared to look could see us.

He nodded, as if he realized it was not the time to push his luck and try to follow me the rest of the way.

I walked to the cottage, glancing back only once I got to the door. He was long gone.

Chapter Seven

I DIDN'T WANT *to go*. That was the only thought in my head all day. I couldn't sleep last night because all I could think of was this stupid dinner. Now I was tired and cranky, and I still had to go to dinner. There was no way I was going to make it through a meal when my stomach felt like it was being squeezed.

"Why are you going to Groza's tonight?" Charlie asked.

How was I going to defend why I was going and make it sound good?

He'd been watching me get ready in my bedroom of the cottage with a worried eye. As much as I'd held back my feelings about Groza, the concern in his eyes told me he was already shouldering some of the weight. He never saw me around her, so was it talk at school? Was someone saying something to him? Who was I kidding? Even a five-year-old could see we hated each other.

I put down the shirts I was deciding between and sat on the bed. "She's the alpha of this pack, and she invited me. I thought it would be nice to go."

"But she doesn't like you." Charlie stared at me as if that hadn't answered anything. "Why would she ask you to her party?"

I had a couple of options, and like usual, I had no idea which was right. Did I ask him where he'd heard that and deny it? Treat him like he was an idiot? Make him less likely to ask a question next time? Or try to shield him from how much she truly hated me? And I her, for that matter?

"I'm not one of her favorite people, but this might be an olive branch of sorts, a way to be nicer to each other. I'm figuring it's the right thing to do." How could I tell him I'd said yes because I was trying to spite Duncan? That

I was walking into a viper's nest? I might burn in hell for all my lies lately, but practice made perfect.

Once he was grown, if he had a beef over some of my choices, I wouldn't be surprised. But I felt pretty good about defending this one.

"You mean like when you tell me I have to share, even with Alec, who hogs everything? Because kindness is better at winning hearts than meanness?"

I'd said that? It sounded pretty good. "Yes. Like that."

"But then when he hit me you told me it was okay to punch him? So I don't understand. Are you nice till she hits you?" He sat on the bed next to me, staring and waiting for a definitive answer that would surely be remembered and used against me at some unexpected moment in the future.

I really wasn't ready to have this conversation tonight. How did I explain to him that the rules in life had all changed? That I had no idea myself? A year ago, there was structure; there were consequences. Now? If he didn't hit Alec back, according to Buddie, he'd end up lower on the hierarchy of shifters and eventually maybe end up so low he could be a punching bag for the entire pack. That conversation had made me want to go running and screaming from pack life altogether, but I couldn't tell him that either. How did I raise a kid and not screw him up when I didn't feel like an adult myself most days?

"Look, the rules here might be different than what they used to be before Death Day. I'm still learning them too. But tonight I don't think anyone is going to be hitting anyone. Plus, there are people who want to get to know me better."

"Why don't they want to get to know me too?"

I ruffled his hair. "They do, but this is more of an adult dinner. You have kid parties, and this is a big-person party."

He seemed to ponder that for merit, and then he nodded.

"Hey, here for the kid," Buddie called from the other room. "Where are you, Charlie?" He poked his head in the door. "Rastin got us a new game."

"Really?" Charlie was up, and just like that, I was off the hook. Why couldn't Buddie have come just ten minutes earlier?

Charlie barely looked back at me as he ran to go find out what the new game was.

I spent the next few minutes in pure dread. Maybe I could show up late? Say I wasn't feeling so well? I could probably trim ten minutes off that way,

but then getting out earlier might be trickier. I should save the headache for after dinner.

I'd go, and if it got bad, I'd plead a migraine. They already thought I was weak anyway.

I grabbed the black sweater, least-worn jeans, and sturdy boots and walked out the door.

Kicks was on his way toward my stoop, heading from the guys' house.

"I was checking in with the guys. Figured we could walk over together." That same gleam was in his eye.

Checking in? Now? Timing was a bit suspect. I'd call him out on it, but he wouldn't care anyway.

No matter what I did, we'd be walking over together. It might look worse if I tried to put a few paces between us, like I was trying to hide something. Boy, did this one like to stir up trouble and irritate the hell out of Duncan.

Although I wouldn't exactly mind irritating Duncan myself. All *he* did lately was irritate me. "Sounds good."

"Do you have dinners there frequently?" he asked innocently, as if he didn't know.

"No. This is actually my first time dining there, as you might've heard." I glared his way, silently asking if we were really going to play this game.

He was smirking again. "I don't like to assume too much."

"Don't you, though?"

He laughed. This man had no shame in his game.

Duncan looked as if he were going to march over and punch Kicks in the face the second we arrived at their house, a charming gingerbread ordeal and the nicest building in this development. Groza looked at Duncan as if she wanted to punch him. For some reason, this made Kicks smile even more, and it didn't look like it was forced or fake. He genuinely enjoyed getting in Duncan's head and messing around in there.

Groza turned to us and used every ounce of energy she had to force a smile. The effect sent a chill down my spine.

"So glad you two could make it," she said, waving us in.

We stepped inside, and the only one who didn't seem tense was Kicks, who was smiling and commenting something or other about liking her house. He seemed to genuinely mean it, too.

As he was enjoying the décor, I felt like I had just entered purgatory and was counting the minutes until I could go somewhere else, anywhere else.

Maddocks arrived only a minute or so later. He again looked about the room as if he knew something was off but couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. I guessed his gossip resources weren't as good as Kicks'.

Groza ushered us all over to the table, and somehow I ended up seated in between Maddocks and Kicks. I'd just sat when Kicks reached over and grabbed my chair, sliding it closer to his.

Duncan was scowling again, not playing his assigned role as Groza's mate very well. He should've taken tips from Kicks, who seemed to be overselling our relationship. Groza was barely hanging on to any remnants of the happy host. Maddocks looked as if he was finally catching on to the not-so-subtle interactions between the rest of us. He kept coughing, as if trying to stifle his laughter.

Groza and Duncan put out some platters of meat and side dishes, family style, in the center. I'd been prepared to not eat at all, convinced that Groza would use the opportunity to do away with me if at all possible. I still wasn't totally sure she wouldn't be willing to kill half of us to get rid of me, and I waited until she started eating before I took a bite. It wasn't like I had an appetite anyway.

"I'm glad we're all here," Maddocks said, nodding toward Groza and Duncan. "I appreciate your hosting us."

I'd never gotten so far as to imagine hosting parties with Duncan, but sitting here as a guest with his mate? It stung like I'd stumbled into a wasp's nest. Not knowing it was coming didn't make it any less excruciating.

"Of course," Groza said, sounding a little more natural, as if my unease was soothing hers. "Hopefully some of the other packs will be able to join us next time. We all need to stick together during this time, especially since we have no idea what's coming our way."

Kicks shifted, leaning back and slinging his arm along the back of my chair. "I went past that clinic you raided. Wasn't much left of it to go through. Did you find anything of interest there?"

I wasn't sure Duncan heard anything. All he seemed to be aware of was Kicks' arm behind me.

"No. Nothing," Groza said. She shrugged, but it wasn't fluid. It was like there was cement setting in her veins, stiffening up every move.

"Well, if you don't mind, I'm going to swing by and check it out on my way back to Arkansas. Since Pips has already been there, it might help if she went back with us to search around a bit more."

Wait. Huh? Why would I be there? I was about to ask him what the hell he was talking about when Duncan interjected first.

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” he said. There was a jerking motion, as if he’d been about to get to his feet but restrained himself at the last second. Or maybe Groza had?

“She’s a guide. She can go wherever she wants. Or did the rules change?” Kicks said. He made no effort to hide his challenge behind smooth wording this time.

I was beginning to get a hunch where Kicks’ name came from. Part of me wanted to kick him under the table and tell him to stop being a troublemaker. The other part reveled in someone telling Duncan he had no say in what I could do. It kept my boots flat on the floor.

“The pack wants her *here*,” Duncan said.

“Yes, I’m sure the *pack* does, but the ultimate decision isn’t the pack’s. It’s hers,” Kicks said.

He was looking at Duncan with the most hostility I’d seen from him yet. Typically he was like a smooth, windless lake. Today I could see the stirrings of the creature who dwelled beneath.

Groza laid a hand on Duncan’s arm, as if reminding him he had a mate. It had the desired effect, as he turned toward her, giving a slight nod. I took it for what it was: an apology.

She returned the nod, but neither of them looked like they meant it. A break away from here wasn’t the worst idea. I didn’t need to be in the middle of their relationship, where I kept somehow getting inserted. If it wasn’t for Charlie, I would’ve been gone months ago. But I did have him to think about.

“I think Piper should be able to explore her options,” Groza said. “It’s only fair.”

“I’m glad you agree,” Kicks said.

I was going to have to put my foot down with him. I was just about done with being used as his ammo against Duncan. But I’d give him this last round. I’d straighten him out later.

It seemed like things were settling down somewhat. I had to make a concerted effort to ignore Duncan’s *I’m going to kill you* stares directed at Kicks, but other than that, no one looked like they were about to lunge over the table.

I was looking at the clock on the mantel, wondering if it was time for my

headache to set in, when Kicks took a sip of his wine and leaned back a bit. There was something in his movements that reminded me of a sniper about to shoot another round.

“Was the ceremony performed yet? Because the word going around is that it hasn’t,” Kicks said.

My mind immediately went to Duncan and Groza, and whatever they would do for their mating ceremony. I hadn’t heard anything about it, but I hardly expected to be invited. Except they didn’t answer, and slowly everyone’s gaze settled on me—not them.

I looked at the not-so-happy couple and back to Kicks. “You mean them, right?”

“No. I mean you. The initiation ceremony for spiritual guide.” He sounded slightly gruffer than normal, as if having to tell me was like taking a wood file and running it over his rug burn.

I glanced around the table, but no one was talking.

“Not only has it not been done, but no one here even informed her about it?” Kicks said, glaring at both Groza and Duncan.

Even Maddocks was making faces now. What was going on here? What were they hiding from me?

I looked at Kicks, pretty sure he was the only one who was going to give me any answers. That was scary, since he was the one who liked to play games the most. “What exactly is this ceremony you’re talking about?”

“Usually a passing guide sets up a ceremony for the guide who will take her place before she passes on. Yours didn’t, but it should’ve been done either way.” He turned another accusing stare on Duncan and Groza.

“The risks outweigh any possible benefit,” Duncan said, as if that should be the end of it. “Not to mention no one here has ever done it.”

“Not a problem. I’ll call the California pack and have them talk me through it.”

Maddocks cleared his throat, almost as if he were afraid to get involved but felt he had to. “If she’s ever going to reach her true potential and what she can offer, it has to be done.”

“What exactly is that potential?” I asked.

“Only guides are privy to the full scope of the gifts they receive, and it’s thought to be individual,” Maddocks said.

So no one knew exactly how strong this could make me. Still, “true potential” was a strong term, and Maddocks seemed like an honest man—

wolf, shifter, whatever the correct designation was. I wasn't going to sit here and tell this group how I'd felt like there had to be more to this guide stuff than sitting around and acting like a placebo. But this ceremony was the key, wasn't it? This was the problem. I wasn't sure what the ceremony might do, but if it gave me some sort of advantage in this messed-up world, I was taking it. I had to do it not only for me, but Charlie too. Right now I felt like a sitting duck with Groza's goons targeting me. If this could change things...

There was something calm and levelheaded about Maddocks, even his hesitancy to speak, that lent his words considerable weight. I looked at him, as if for some sign that he truly believed this was the right thing.

He gave me a short nod.

"We should wait until we can get another guide here. There's no reason to rush things," Duncan said, sensing that his argument was losing traction.

"How long would that be?" I asked.

"It takes what it takes. It's better to wait and be safe," he said.

He was sitting there, playing house with Groza, and yet he wanted to control my life, tell me what was best.

"You know that'll never happen," Kicks said. "There's only one other guide in the U.S., and he doesn't like to go more than ten minutes from his home." He turned his attention back to me. "It's your choice. This is something you have to decide. All due respect, you're not bound by any alpha's rules. You operate above the pack hierarchy. If you choose to do it, that's it. You do it."

I operated above the rules of the pack? Why had no one bothered to explain *this* to me either? Why was I hearing it for the first time from Kicks at the most awkward dinner in history?

Oh, I knew that one easy enough. Duncan and Groza. Why would they feel the need to tell me I didn't have to listen to a word they said? That would put a dent in their monarchy ways for sure.

Screw the risks. Screw Duncan and Groza.

"I'm doing it."

"Great. I'll help you," Kicks said. "We can do it tomorrow."

It was only later on, after my rage and rebellion had settled down, that I realized I hadn't asked if it could kill me. That Kicks might've used my annoyance with Duncan's high-handedness to steer me right into what he wanted me to do.

Chapter Eight

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND. I thought you were already the guide?” Charlie’s question trailed into a yawn on the last word.

“I am, but there’s another piece to this whole thing I didn’t know about.”

“And you have to do that?” Charlie’s heavy-lidded eyes held worry.

“Yep.” If my reply had been any peppier, I could lead a cheer squad.

I turned on my side, trying to get comfortable in his little bed while waiting for him to drift off.

Normally he’d be asleep by now, but I’d opened my mouth about the ceremony tomorrow and opened the Pandora’s box of his never-ending curiosity. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him. He was just a little kid, and this was unsettling to me. He’d already been through so much. I didn’t want him to be a scared little kid. All I’d wanted was to prepare him so he wouldn’t be worried if I was a little worse for wear tomorrow, and now he was worried anyway.

Why couldn’t this whole parenting thing be easier? Or at least produce results faster? It was like taking a final exam every other day, but I wasn’t going to get my results for another decade or two. What I wouldn’t do to be able to talk to my mother or Widow Herbert for a few minutes.

Charlie’s eyes finally closed and his breathing evened out. Okay, not too freaked out. I hadn’t ruined him yet—but there was always tomorrow, next month, next year. It was better not to dwell on all the available time I’d have to screw him up. Worst-case scenario, I could always blame it on the apocalypse, right?

The door creaked open downstairs, and I jerked up. Groza’s goons hadn’t

ever dared enter while I was home, but that didn't mean they wouldn't start, especially after tonight.

I grabbed the toy bat in the corner, a gift from Buddie to Charlie, and crept toward the stairway.

Duncan was leaning on the door. Even in the dim light I could see his eyes fixed on me. Could feel the heaviness he'd brought with him.

I'd gone from a very successful run of limiting our conversations for months to abject failure.

I crept down the stairs. "What are you doing here?"

I didn't wait for him to answer and made my way into the kitchen, putting water on the wood stove. I'd need a coffee or a tea if I was going to have to deal with whatever he'd come to tell me now. I'd take whatever small amount of extra energy I could get. Every time I saw him, it was like jumping into the ocean with a thousand paper cuts. As much as I was awed by the beauty and the vitality, I was tired of the burn. I'd rather sit by my puddle in peace.

"Do you realize what you're getting into with this ceremony?" he asked, following me into the kitchen.

I usually loved the coziness of this cottage, but it always felt too small as soon as he walked in.

"How could I when I didn't know there *was* a ceremony? I'm surprised you have the nerve to ask that when you should've been the one to tell me." I busied myself with the water so I had an excuse to not give him my full attention. Even half of my attention was too much.

"Because Groza and I both thought it was for the best if you didn't do it."

Not only was he with her, but now they were making my decisions for me—together. If he'd wanted to stop me, this was the worst way to go about it. Maybe shifters, with their pack ways, thought differently, but he might as well have just held a gun to my head and told me to go through with the ceremony.

"And why, in your great wisdom and joint counsel with Groza on your chilly, wintry nights in bed, did you decide that it was a bad idea?"

"You're twisting this. It wasn't pillow talk. It was a conversation that came about due to the health of the pack."

Pillow talk. That had been a reminder I could've done without. The guy didn't know how to stop digging. Apparently he was tunneling a course to China.

"Well, it's my choice, not yours. Not Groza's. I've decided to do it."

“Kicks talked you into this. He goaded you.”

“I can make decisions on my own. I know it might seem like a shock and all, but I do it constantly.”

I turned to go fix my French press, and he grabbed my shoulders, spinning me to face him and holding me there. His touch was a bittersweet reminder of the past, one I kept trying to forget. But he kept bringing it back to the surface.

“You’re human. We have no idea what this might do to you. You need to change your mind.”

So that was the problem. The whole “human” thing. He’d finally put down the shovel, but only to hop onto a backhoe.

“Well, I’m not going to. Jaysa made me her successor—she made me the guide, and she did it for a reason. She obviously saw something in me, and I’m sure everything will work out.” Unfortunately, I had zero confidence in anything Jaysa had done, or her thought processes. But it would still be fine, because it had to be for Charlie.

“She was a shifter who was always selfish and more than a little crazy.”

So now Jaysa was crazy? That was why she’d done it? Why had this man even kissed me if he thought so little of who I was? If I didn’t want to avoid that subject like a bad case of Ebola, I might’ve asked him. But that was a subject better left dead, like so many others between us.

“Why are you here talking to me about this? We aren’t together. It’s not your place.”

“I’m the only reason you’re here. I’m also the co-alpha of this pack. I have a say in this.”

“Well, according to Kicks, you don’t have a say.” I knew the second I mentioned Kicks that I’d hit my target, even before I saw the flare of anger burning in his eyes.

“Not only could it be dangerous, it could change you.” He was still holding on to my shoulders, as if he couldn’t let go. I wasn’t quite good enough to keep, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want to anyway.

That was the heart of the problem. As long as he wanted me here, I’d never be fully welcomed. In a way, I couldn’t even blame Groza for trying to oust me. None of us could go on like this indefinitely. If he’d come here to discourage me, he’d done the exact opposite. I needed leverage, more strength and options. I might have to leave this pack, and no one would want me if I wasn’t truly a guide.

Watching Duncan and Groza play house had turned out to be less fun than I'd ever imagined. As far as Charlie, it was better for him as well. It was only a matter of time before he realized Groza's hatred of me would eventually spill over onto their relationship. There was no way she'd ever truly give him a fair shake, not the way she felt about me.

"Again, that's not your problem," I said.

"You're not listening to me because we kissed, but I'm trying to help you."

His reminder finally brought me to my senses, and I shoved at his chest. He dropped his hands, giving me more space.

"This isn't because we kissed," I said. He had no idea how belittling his words were. Could he be *that* unaware? It wasn't because we'd kissed. It was getting thrown in the trash like yesterday's newspaper afterward. It was that as much as I tried to move on, he wouldn't let me. It was all the problems that had ensued because he was still coming here, trying to keep me in this place of limbo, from which none of us could truly move on.

The worst part was, I wasn't even sure he knew what he was doing himself.

"I've got a big day tomorrow. I need some sleep." I nodded toward the door. After this conversation, worrying about his feelings was bottom of my list. He was lucky I wasn't chasing him out with Charlie's tiny bat.

"I hoped we'd be able to speak calmly about this, but—"

"No. I'm too irrational, I guess," I said, cutting him off and finishing what he was truly thinking.

I didn't wait for him to leave this time, instead retreating to my room and shutting the door.

Chapter Nine

I WAITED for Buddie on the porch in the crisp morning air. The anticipation of what was about to come was tying my stomach into knots.

“Can you pick Charlie up from school if I’m running late?” I asked as soon as he appeared.

“Yeah, of course.” He glanced around the street, looking as if he were stalling for a second before he asked, “You sure you want to do this? Duncan stopped by not long ago and was telling me some of his concerns.”

“Positive.” I’d seen Duncan walking over there and known exactly what he was up to. It didn’t matter how many people he tried to scare, or put up to talking to me. “If I’m going to be the guide, I’m going to be. The. Guide. Dipping a couple of toes in won’t help anyone—least of all me.” The precariousness of my situation here was like sinking into quicksand. Staying still might slow my death, but I was still inching away from the land of the living. The only chance I had was to lunge for whatever vine I could find. If there was another option to be explored, no one would stop me from trying it.

He rocked back on his heels, casting a glance around as though he’d wished for a different answer from me.

“What? You’re against it, too? You can’t see the value in doing it?” Did no one—not even Buddie, who had a front-row seat—see how I was slowly getting cornered into having to do something? It didn’t matter if I wasn’t openly complaining. He knew it as well as I did.

He finally sighed and shrugged. “I’m disappointed because I wanted to be there. What if you do something really cool? Like burst into flames?”

“Let’s hope it’s really boring. I have no desire to become charcoal.” I’d

been better off not asking at all. The knots in my stomach, which had been little, manageable things, were growing into the size of boulders.

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll fetch Charlie instead of watching the circus, but if it turns out to be a real spectacle, I’m going to be pissed.” He blew out a long breath, as if resigning himself to missing the show of the month, maybe even the year.

“Thanks.” I turned back to the cottage, yelling through the door, “Charlie!”

“I’m coming,” he yelled back. It was followed by the clomping noise of his dragging his school bag down the stairs right behind him. For a little kid, he was disproportionately loud.

He dashed past me, and Buddie handed him a donut. Not exactly the best start for his day, but mine wasn’t looking so hot either.

I retreated inside, boiling water for my third coffee, the smell comforting me even as the overload of caffeine might not be the wisest choice. I had to finish getting ready for the ceremony, but we hadn’t covered the finer details in the plans last night. What did one wear to something like this? Would there be a crowd to witness it? Should I attempt something grander than a ponytail?

I settled for my standby jeans and sweater, since I didn’t have anything nicer anyway. Gulping down the last of my coffee, I made my way to Groza’s.

Duncan, Maddocks, and Kicks were standing on the front porch talking when I got within sight. Duncan was glaring toward Kicks, as if he wanted to drag him off the porch and pound the hell out of him. Kicks was leaning against the railing. If he noticed the looks, which he had to have, he certainly didn’t seem bothered. Maddocks watched the exchange with a smirk. Kicks turned slightly, directing a comment to Maddocks, who laughed as Duncan’s scowl intensified.

The attention slowly shifted to me as I closed in.

Groza emerged just as I stepped onto the porch, as if she had an internal alarm that went off when I neared Duncan’s vicinity. It was only going to be the five of us? I’d been wary of an audience, but a few extra people around might’ve helped dilute the tension in this group. Maddocks was pleasant, but he wasn’t enough, as evidenced last night at dinner.

“So what’s the plan? What do I need to do?” I asked, ready to get this thing moving before I chickened out.

Duncan’s chest rose and fell with a deep breath, and Groza’s jaw was set

tight. It was clear that a good night's sleep hadn't changed anyone's opinion on the matter.

"Let's get ready and then go in the back, where there's more privacy," Duncan finally said, his eyes lingering on me as if he were hoping I'd come to my senses.

I straightened my spine. He shook his head before he retreated inside. Groza rolled her eyes, as if I were more idiotic than she'd even imagined, before following him.

Well, that just cemented things for me. Anything Groza didn't want me to do was something I needed to get done, and immediately.

"You need to wear this," she said, indicating a white silk robe draped over a chair. "Nothing else. It might affect the energy flow."

I took the robe and glanced around. She pointed to a bathroom. I took it as a gift to be alone for a handful of minutes. There were yards and yards of billowy silk that didn't hide much from the eye, considering its abundance. I tried to strategically place folds, and then my hair. I walked back out, my nerves feeling as bare as my form beneath the fabric.

The moment I re-entered the room, every eye turned sharply to me. Groza's gaze flickered red, while Duncan's eyes traveled a slow path up from my toes to the tips of my—

Kicks stepped in front of me before the path completed, his body becoming a barrier between me and the others.

His eyes stayed locked on mine, his jaw clenched with an effort that suggested he was battling his own instincts to look lower. Or was that boiling heat for Duncan? I was used to these shifters struggling with restraint, but I'd never seen Kicks so riled.

"You'll be cold outside, so until we do the ceremony, keep this on." He draped his jacket over my shoulders, enveloping me in the remnants of his warmth and the scent of coconut and amber. There was something almost intoxicating about his smell. It made me think of laying on the beach at sunset on a warm summer evening and all the delicious things that might come with that.

He pulled the jacket closed as he leaned in, smiling slightly. "Not sure this is the right time, but I appreciate the sentiment," he murmured, the friction I'd sensed in him seconds ago softening, as if I'd somehow doused his anger toward Duncan.

I gasped slightly, belatedly grasping what that implied. My face flushed

and I couldn't hold eye contact anymore. "Huh?" I asked, as if I had no idea what he was talking about. He couldn't have known my thoughts, could he?

His shadowed jaw brushed my cheek, sending a shiver through me. "Pheromones, Pips. They never lie," he whispered.

My lips parted as the full situation hit me like a hammer. He could smell my thoughts, or at least this kind. My body's response to him was as clear as if I'd spoken it. I was a human among creatures with the smelling ability of dogs, and I was currently thinking like a—

No. I wouldn't go there. My cheeks were already red enough.

"Are we doing this, or do you two want to keep flirting in the corner?" Duncan's voice shot through the room, shooting verbal shrapnel all over the place.

Before he turned around, Kicks smiled at me like he'd been the one to take the shot and hit his target. There was definitely some bad blood between these two, but I wouldn't ask why. I had enough problems without getting drowned in theirs.

"Let's head outside," Groza said, waving me forward with a new urgency, as if the quicker this was done, the faster I'd be out of her hair for the day.

Her backyard was as cute as the house. A tall hedge enclosed a small area with a bench and bistro. A shed with flower pots stood in the corner. No one as cold as Groza should be allowed to own a home as warm as this. It was false advertising.

She extended a flask to me. "Drink this. It'll initiate the change."

Wait, she was in charge of the contents that would finish the change? The woman who wanted to kill me? Had driven me out of the pack? Had threatened my life if I returned? I was supposed to drink something just for me that she'd had in her possession?

I must not have been the only one with concerns—Kicks grabbed the flask before me.

"Kicks, that's for her," Groza said.

He unscrewed the cap, took a whiff, and then sipped it, acting as if Groza hadn't spoken.

"Why do you have to always cause problems?" she asked. I might've been number one on her shit list, but Kicks didn't appear to rate very high either.

"What problem? Thought I might get a little pick-me-up before the show.

It's not like it's going to turn me into a guide." He handed the flask to me. "Taste likes shit, so don't expect much."

He winked as he handed it over. Just when I'd thrown him back into the ass column, he did something like this and it blurred the lines again. Good guy? Utter jerk? It was hard to tell where to put him. It was as if he practiced staying within the gray zone.

I accepted the flask, my hand shaking slightly.

Kicks was watching too intently to have missed that. He turned to the group. "We need a minute."

He grabbed my free hand and tugged me with him back into the house.

Duncan's eyes were burning into me as we walked away, but he stayed put. Groza's invisible collar and leash didn't allow much slack.

Kicks was smiling as he opened the door. The minute it shut, it fell.

"You're fine," he said in a tone so steady, it was almost convincing. At that moment, all I wanted to do was believe him. His voice felt like the only thing I could cling to.

I wanted to believe him blindly, but logic wouldn't get its bony hands off my doubts. "If you're so sure, why taste it first?"

"Taste testing." He smirked, as if that were truly the only reason. "You. Are. Ready."

"Yes, I'm ready," I said, repeating him, though my voice trembled in spite of my attempt to sound calm.

I didn't glance back at Duncan through the window, even though it was his thoughts that were eating me up, eroding my confidence, making me want to back out of the whole thing.

Kicks narrowed his eyes and glanced over my shoulder before focusing all his attention back on me. Suddenly his hands were cradling my face, as if he could somehow gauge the strength of my spirit through touch.

A current seemed to pulse between us, leaving me yearning for a clue to his thoughts. He studied me, his eyes delving deeper than the surface, probing for something unspoken.

He was assessing me. From the moment I'd met this man, it felt like he'd been taking my measure.

"It might be rough, but you'll get through." He was still cupping my cheek as he watched me with intent eyes.

"What did you just do?"

"I needed to feel your energy, to understand the strength you possess."

You'll endure."

"How rough?"

As soon as he tilted his head, as if he were trying to figure out how to break it to me, I knew it was going to be torture.

"From what I've heard? It's akin to having your soul torn from your flesh and then violently thrust back in. Agonizing, but short enough to bear."

His words didn't make me want to go through with it any more than I had before, but they stripped away the bulk of the fear. I'd live. Once I did, I'd be stronger for it, and I'd be able to protect Charlie better. That was worth any amount of pain.

I slowly started nodding, building myself up to go out there and get it done.

He dipped his head a little closer to mine. "I'll be there with you, from beginning to end. If anything seems off, I'll step in."

"Why are you doing this? What's your stake in this?" There had to be something. The one thing I was sure of: Kicks was no one's white knight.

"How could I let you perish when I've already decided you're going to be part of my pack?" A smile slowly lit his face, and I wasn't sure if he was teasing or deadly serious.

"Is that so? Do I have a move-in date?" I asked, keeping my tone light but poking to see how serious he might be.

He leaned in closer, his hand on the counter beside me, his presence feeling like it was surrounding me, and all I wanted to do was lean in and leech some of his strength.

"Still working out the finer details." His eyes dipped lower, to my mouth, and I knew exactly which details he meant.

If I ended up in this man's pack, I'd end up in his bed as well. There'd be no chance in fighting it if I was with him day after day. Even now, I could feel myself swaying closer.

The sound of the door opening had me jumping back. It hit me that we'd been standing nearly on top of each other in front of the window.

"Is everything all right?" Duncan asked, his voice tight.

"Perfect," Kicks said with a chilly smile. He strode toward the door, and I followed, my legs feeling unsteady, but not because of the ceremony.

Duncan didn't look at me until we were back outside.

"Piper, are you ready?" he asked.

"She's ready," Kicks answered for me, as if Duncan had no right to

address me directly.

“Now you’re her spokesman?” Duncan’s rising ire was palpable.

Kicks directed his attention to me, his tone softer as he said, “Pips, are you ready?”

“Yes. I’m ready,” I said, meeting his gaze with a confidence I didn’t have a few minutes ago.

“Do you feel better now?” he said, his brows rising as if Duncan did object, they were going to come to blows. The tension in the air crackled like a lightning storm about to unleash.

Maddocks stepped in between the two men. “We need to keep our voices calm. Nothing can tarnish the ritual. The energy can’t be conflicted.”

Duncan exhaled deeply, stepping back, while Kicks remained as immovable as a mountain.

The tension eased, and Maddocks, the calmest prevailing alpha, nodded toward me.

Kicks faced me once more, and said one last time, with unbreakable confidence, “You’re ready.”

I opened the flask, downing the entirety of it before I could second-guess my actions.

It didn’t take long to kick in. A feeling of being tugged on began slowly, like I was wearing a bodysuit and someone was gripping it, trying to pull it from me. The sensation built, and I dropped to my knees. Kicks knelt with me. I saw Duncan reaching for me.

“No,” Maddocks said, putting himself in between us. “You can’t touch her during the ceremony.”

The tugging rapidly increased until it felt like I was being torn from my body. The rending was akin to what I imagined it would feel like to be filleted and then dipped in a vat of gasoline. An uncontrollable scream ripped from my throat. I didn’t care if it made me look weak. I didn’t care about much other than surviving.

All at once I was staring down at my form, kneeling on the ground below. All around me there was a tornado of buzzing and blurring light, and then it felt as if my chest was hit with a lightning bolt that stole my thoughts, the air, everything. The world around me blackened and then just as suddenly returned. I was seeing through my own eyes again, feeling like I’d been slammed back into my body.

It was shorter than I could’ve hoped for but more painful than I’d feared.

No one had to tell me it was over as I lay on the ground, utterly depleted, my body and soul feeling like it had been through a meat grinder.

Duncan peered down at me with concern. “Piper? Are you back? Are you in pain?”

“I’m fine. Just drained,” I replied, my throat raw from the primal scream that had been wrenched from me. My voice was barely above a whisper.

As I attempted to rise, Kicks’ arm was around me, supporting my back. “I’ll get you home,” he said.

“I’ll take her,” Duncan interjected.

Kicks was already lifting me into his arms. “I’ve got her. You tend to your own mate.”

Something about the way he worded that would’ve given me more pause, but I was too emotionally and physically destroyed to care at the moment.

We exited Groza’s backyard, leaving a fuming Duncan and a furious Groza in our wake. I didn’t care. I just wanted to get to my cottage and some semblance of safety.

Kicks carried me as if I weighed nothing, his steps sure and even.

“I should try to walk,” I protested feebly.

“I’m taking the long way around. No one will see you,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you,” he reassured me as he navigated us back to my house.

Chapter Ten

“CHARLIE, come on! You’re going to be late for school!” I took another sip of coffee, my mind wandering to where I’d seen Charlie’s red wagon last. Once he was off to school, I’d need to collect logs. Despite telling Kicks yesterday not to bother with the wood, he had still brought a fresh stack. That stack was already gone. At least being a spirit guide for the pack meant having days to myself, no need to take a day off for mundane tasks like wood collecting.

Thumping footsteps reverberated through the cottage, feeling like they were shaking the very walls.

“Charlie! What are you doing up there?” I yelled up at the ceiling.

“What do you mean?” he said from behind me.

I jerked around to find him already sitting at the table.

“What was all that noise? Those loud footsteps?” He was only five; he shouldn’t have been able to make such a sound, or so I thought.

“What noise?” he said, his face a picture of innocence and confusion.

He wasn’t a trickster kind of kid, and his face was scrunched up, as if he couldn’t figure out what I was talking about.

“It was nothing,” I said. Was it? Or did this have something to do with the ritual yesterday?

“But you said you heard something?” he asked.

Sometimes I felt like I was living with a mini detective. The kid could be like a dog with a bone.

Oops. That might not be very politically correct in this crowd.

The front door swung open, saving me from my thoughts.

“I’m here!” Buddie called from the porch.

“Time to go,” I said, handing Charlie a roll as he dashed past. “You need to eat something.”

As soon as they were off the porch, I caught Buddie handing Charlie a chocolate donut.

I took his plate of eggs he hadn’t touched and ate them as I looked upward. Whatever that had been, it was gone. Were noises part of the transition? Too bad I didn’t have another guide to ask. Kicks had given the impression he knew the other guide. Did he have a satellite phone? Could he ask for me?

Probably not a good idea to get too reliant on him. Every time I thought he was on my side, he did something questionable. “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time,” I muttered. “Or is it ‘tells you who they are’?” Too bad there weren’t any smartphones left to check.

“‘Shows you.’ It’s a quote from Maya Angelou.”

I spun and then literally fell out of my chair when I saw Jaysa sitting there. The last spiritual guide, all in black and looking as old as she had in life.

I froze where I was, on my butt, on the floor. Could she see me? She was looking right at me.

“What the...” *No, don’t engage. Definitely don’t say hell. Don’t meet her eyes. Actually, don’t look directly at her at all.*

Was she a ghost? She certainly wasn’t alive. I looked down, still catching glimpses of her from the corner of my eye. Was she rolling her eyes at me?

“I know you see me,” she said curtly.

Even in death, she was still a bitch. What was I supposed to do? Engage and risk her sticking around? Okay, I’d get up and go in my bedroom, and hopefully she’d leave. If this was part of the transition, Duncan might’ve been right. I didn’t want it. Unfortunately, that choice was off the table.

I calmly got off the floor and walked into my room, shutting the door.

“I know you can hear me. How long do you want to play stupid?”

She really was a mean ghost. More reason not to interact and encourage her to stick around. If I couldn’t block her while in the bedroom, I might as well go back to the kitchen and get on with my day. No reason to panic.

She was at the table again. “I went out on a limb for you. Gave you a chance to have a future with the pack and Charlie. Remember your ‘woo-woo stuff’? Well, welcome to the club,” she said with a sarcastic edge.

It was one thing to see ghosts, but a nasty one? No. This wasn't going to work. I was giving her too much attention. I'd go about my business and she'd leave.

Going back to the bedroom was a lost cause. I didn't want to bring her with me outside, or into Charlie's room either. I'd peel the potatoes I needed to get done and kill her with boredom.

"How long will you pretend I'm not here?" she asked, shifting in her chair as if she were real. "If I've made the effort to talk to you from beyond the grave, clearly I'm not going away easily. Don't you want to know why? We could wait a few years, if you like. I've nowhere else to be."

I kept ignoring her. I tried not to look, even as yarn appeared in her hands and she seemed to be settling in.

"What do you think?" she asked, holding up the beginnings of a blanket.

When I didn't answer, she went back to it. She wasn't going away.

I admitted defeat and sat down across from her. "Fine. Why have you made the effort to visit from the great beyond? What do you want?"

"To help. Isn't that clear enough?"

Coming from her? No, not really, but I wasn't sure I should insult a ghost, and especially not *her* ghost. "Help how?"

She paused her knitting. "With what's coming."

"What are you talking about?" "What's coming?" Was there something about to hit me that I was completely unaware of that was even worse than what was going on and what had happened? I'd made it through Death Day without her, and the ceremony, but *now* I needed her help?

"Well, I didn't exactly follow the playbook when I transferred my powers to you. Things might look a little different to what we're all used to." She vaguely waved a hand in the air, as if dismissing any concerns for breaking some woo-woo rule.

"I went into this whole spirit guide thing blind. It would be a nice change to have some more details." I was done watching my tone with this one.

"I don't have any. I gave you what I was given. What I was. I don't know how that'll manifest in you as a human." She shrugged so much it looked a bit overdone, as if she were downplaying some sin.

"Why didn't you do it the way you were supposed to?" I caught myself leaning on the table toward her, as if I were talking to someone among the living. I leaned back again, just to help keep my mental boundaries in place.

"If I'd come to you and told you what I was going to do, what would you

have done?” She rolled her eyes at me again.

I’d have thought the afterlife would’ve improved her personality a little, but I guessed nothing was a sure thing.

“I would’ve said no.”

“Then run to Duncan and told him. No. I did it the way I had to. I couldn’t do a ceremony or tell anyone because they’d have stopped me. This is supposed to go to shifters, not humans. I had to do it this way. There was no choice.” Her voice grew louder the longer she spoke. By the time she finished, she turned her full attention back to knitting, sending out a clear signal of what she thought of my possible opinions.

“Well, if you were going to come, why did you wait until now? I could’ve used some information yesterday.”

“I’ve been here for months. You couldn’t see me.” Now she tsked to herself, shaking her head.

I started doing a quick catalog of what I’d done, what she might’ve seen at that time. It was too much to think about.

“Well, now what? What’s your useful advice? Things aren’t going so well, and I’m pretty sure Groza wants me dead.”

“Yeah, it’s not really panning out the way I’d hoped.”

“You come back from the dead and *that’s* all you’ve got?” I probably should’ve let that one go, since my ghost seemed to be getting riled.

“For now? Yeah. That’s all I have.”

I blinked and she was gone. I was alone in the kitchen again.

If this was what she considered help, I was definitely underwhelmed.

Chapter Eleven

I TRUDGED THROUGH THE WOODS, pulling Charlie's little red wagon behind me. I tried to shake the memory of my conversation with a dead person from a few hours earlier. Groza might not have killed me, but maybe she'd spiked that flask with some sort of hallucinogenic that had a delayed onset. Was Kicks experiencing any visions? Figuring out how to ask him without telling him I'd had a chat with a ghost was going to be tricky. It might be easier to wait and see if the effects wore off on their own. Jaysa was still gone, and no other dead people had appeared yet, which was a good sign.

I had some time to think about it as I gathered up my wood. This time I'd hide it in the back of the cottage. Groza's goons weren't bright enough to look back there when they saw an empty stack in front. The idea of booby traps crossed my mind, but without the internet, I was clueless. Before the world collapsed, people always said, *How did we get by without the internet?* It was worse than I'd imagined.

Reaching a fallen tree, I snapped off a few branches. The sound of footsteps crunching on dried leaves made me freeze, waiting for a hello. A friendly face would've offered a greeting, but none came. As I bent down to grab a log from the wagon, I whipped around to find Walter and Berman, Groza's goons, standing there, watching me.

Now they were going to follow me out into the woods? Would they haunt my every step?

"What's the matter? Tired of sneaking around like petty thieves? Finally coming out of the shadows?" Goading them was reckless, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I was done with Groza's games, tired of the awkward

encounters with Duncan, and utterly fed up with these thugs who had been tracking my every move. If Groza had wanted me dead, she could have poisoned me yesterday when she had the chance. This was just more bullying tactics, her favorite pastime.

“You weren’t supposed to come back. You were supposed to leave. That was the deal. She warned you there would be consequences,” Walter said, his eyes looking dead, as if this was just another day of breaking bones to him.

His words didn’t sound like business as usual. Still, Groza wasn’t that crazy, was she? No matter what else was happening, the pack wanted me, almost to an eerie level. If I disappeared, there’d be questions.

“The pack has accepted me,” I countered. “You can’t just get rid of me.”

“We answer to Groza, and she wants you out. The pack won’t know what happened,” Walter replied coldly.

They weren’t messing around. This wasn’t like all the other times where they just made my life uncomfortable. They were going to kill me. I’d been back for months. Why now? It had to be the ceremony. What did she think I was going to become?

I couldn’t disappear on Charlie. He’d lost too many people.

“Tell Groza the ceremony did nothing—if that’s what she’s worried about,” I said, trying to take a step back and put more distance between us.

“She doesn’t want to hear it. There are no negotiations. Our orders are to kill you, and that’s what we’re going to do.” Walter and Berman took two steps forward, getting closer.

“What if I go now? No one will know I’m alive. I’ll just sneak away without a word.” At least I’d live to see another day, and I could go in and sneak Charlie out at a later date. If I was dead, he was on his own.

“That’s not good enough. She’s made up her mind. You need to disappear—for good,” Walter insisted.

This was it. I was dead. I wouldn’t get a chance to say goodbye to Charlie. He wouldn’t even know I was dead. I’d just disappear on him. There had to be some way out of this. Did I run? It was a long shot, but better than trying to fight the two of them.

I threw my stick at them, and then ran as fast as I could. It was a joke. One of them got a handful of my jacket within seconds. Walter jerked me backward with a force that sent me stumbling.

I managed to stay on my feet as I swung around and punched wildly. I’d tried to aim for his throat, but my fist connected with his chin—his neck was

practically nonexistent. My punch was too feeble to have any kind of effect, but I wasn't going to stand there and let them kill me without a fight. I pulled my arm back, launching another shot at him—then I realized his face had contorted, his mouth opening on a gasp, agony written all over it.

I glanced around, wondering if someone had arrived to help me, perhaps gotten a blow into his back or a shot that I hadn't seen.

It was only the three of us, though.

Berman was staring at Walter, looking as dumbfounded as me. He stepped closer, staring at his friend. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Walter didn't say anything, but there were gurgling noises coming from his mouth.

"Walter!" Berman yelled, as if that would somehow fix his friend.

Walter clutched his throat. Seizing the moment, I broke free, only for Berman to catch my arm after two steps.

"What the hell do you think you're—"

Berman's words were cut off by the deep groan that redirected our attention back to Walter, whose face was turning a shade of gray I'd never seen on a person. This wasn't the pallor of someone deprived of oxygen, but a dark, lifeless gray, akin to that of a slug—a hue entirely unnatural to humans, or shifters. The groan stopped as he stood motionless. Then he just tipped over and dropped to the ground, all stiff, like a domino, his knees not even bending on the way down.

"What did you do to my..." Berman's voice trailed off as he stared at his hand encircling my wrist. With a squeal that contrasted with his brutish frame, he released me. He held up his hand, letting out another small squeak.

The hand that had been gripping my wrist was turning gray, the same shade that Walter had turned.

We both watched, paralyzed, as it spread to his wrist. I finally stepped back—not out of necessity, but out of an urge to distance myself from what was happening. What I might've done...

"Stop it," Berman said. He made no move toward me, though.

I shook my head helplessly. How could I halt something I hadn't meant to do? Would I, even if I could? These two had tormented me for months and then come here to kill me. I'd be an idiot to save them. But it wasn't a choice anyway. I had no idea how I'd done it or if it could be undone.

Then it happened: Berman shrieked—a sound of pure horror—as his hand broke from his body, falling to the forest floor and shattering into pieces.

He reached forward, grabbing me, his desperation overriding his fear.

A lethal feeling of cold shot through me, eerily similar to the bolt that had hit me during the ceremony. He dropped instantly, convulsing on the ground.

Gray started creeping up above his collar. His eyes rolled back into his head.

They were both dying, if not already dead.

I stood there in the forest, more terrified than when my life had hung in the balance.

Jaysa appeared suddenly beside me, her gaze fixed on the fallen men.

“You’re really here, not just in my head? This is all really happening?” I was hoping this was a hallucination, hoping Groza had drugged me.

“No, I’m here,” she confirmed. She looked down. “And they’re dead.”

“Is this because of the conversion?” The weight of what had happened threatened to drop me to my knees. I shouldn’t have gone through with it. Duncan had been right.

“I think so,” Jaysa admitted, moving closer to the lifeless forms. “But I’m not completely sure.”

“How can you not know for sure? What else could have given me the ability to do that to another person?” I certainly hadn’t killed people by touching them prior to yesterday.

She shrugged. That was it. No explanation. No elaboration. Just that damned shrug and a bewildered look on her face.

“What did you do to me? Do you even know? Were you just throwing darts at the board?” I said, pushing her for answers she either didn’t have or wouldn’t give.

“I usually have pretty good luck at winging things,” she said.

Loud footsteps sounded, filling the air and vibrating the ground under my feet.

“Do you hear that?” I asked.

“Hear what?” She looked around.

I shook my head. If I had to explain, she couldn’t hear it.

The steps grew louder and louder, and a chill blew over the area. A feeling of frost settled on my skin, and the sense of something “other” lingered in the air.

“What is it?” Jaysa asked, sensing something was off but not feeling or hearing it.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, feeling as if my words were being heard by

more than the living—and the dead.

“Whatever it is, you don’t have time to worry about it. Your number one problem right now is cleaning this mess up. When these two don’t come back, Groza will send someone looking for the bodies. You can’t have them found like this, with your scent all over the scene.”

The feeling of unease, of *other*, slowly faded away. The steps were gone. The only thing left was my reality.

“Piper, what are you doing? You need to get it together and act. You’ve got to clean this up,” Jaysa said, moving to stand in front of me.

I shook off the last of the feeling, returning to the mess that I was now in. She was right, I had to do something, but what? How did I fix this?

“What do I do? I don’t even have a shovel, and they’d see a grave anyway.”

Jaysa looked at the bodies and shook her head. “No. That won’t work.” She walked around the crime scene, her fist on her chin as she stared intently. “We have to get rid of your scent.”

“How do I do that?” It wasn’t like these were normal conditions. Kicks had smelled my pheromones. How much easier was it going to be for the pack to smell my panic?

“Fire.” She uttered the word as if merely saying it would set the forest ablaze. She stared at me with a determined look in her eyes.

“You want me to light the forest on fire? What if it takes out the community? We’re not that far away.” She was crazy. If I hadn’t suspected it before, this was pretty much a red stamp on her forehead that read *CERTIFIABLE*.

“If you don’t burn them, she’ll burn you,” Jaysa said, her eyes growing wide.

Groza wouldn’t do it. She didn’t like doing her own dirty work. She’d send more of her goons after me. Unless this scared her off...

“I just took out two of her head henchmen. She might not. Maybe she’ll be afraid to send more after me?”

“She won’t have to send anyone.” Jaysa walked over and stood in front of me, her eyes murderous. “If you don’t get rid of these two bodies, she’ll drag them back to the pack and hang them up so all can see what kind of monster you are. She’ll tell them you’re a fraud, a usurper who stole my power and tricked them all. She won’t have to *send* anyone. The entire pack will hunt you down and rip you apart.”

The woman knew how to get a point across.

“There’s got to be another way. What if I drag them to the nearest lake or something?”

Just then, the sunny day seemed to darken, and a loud bolt of thunder sounded in the distance.

“It’s going to rain.” I put my palm out and let my head fall back to stare at the sky. A single drop grazed my cheek. “That should help, right? If it gets rid of my scent, no one will believe I could’ve done this.” Not me, the helpless little human.

“Maybe,” Jaysa said. “If it rains hard enough, but I don’t trust it. I know her. Once she finds them, she’ll use it against you even if there’s no proof.”

A few more drops fell, and more dark clouds headed this way. “I won’t be able to set them on fire in the rain anyway.”

“Then leave now. Lingering here is waiting for disaster. And most of all, hope it rains like the very devil is driving the storm.”

Chapter Twelve

I PULLED Charlie's wagon back from the scene of my crime. The wheels were squealing loudly, as if even the damned toy wanted to give me up, when I nearly collided with Buddie.

"You okay?" he asked, squinting a bit.

I looked up at him as the rain plastered my hair to my face.

"No, nothing. I'm good. Just wet and cold," I said, attempting to sound cheerful. "Hey, can you bring Charlie to the roast tonight? I've got a ton to do." There was zero chance I'd hold it together in that crowd tonight.

"Yeah, no problem," he said, still looking at me like something was off.

"I was going to do some laundry and other errands. Maybe try my hand at some baking. Lots of stuff to get done," I said, inching away. "Well, it's miserable out here, so..." I nodded toward the cottage and took a few more steps.

He nodded in return, still squinting slightly, as if trying to connect the dots. I waved and hurried inside, knowing I wouldn't hold up to close scrutiny.

I shut the door of the cottage and leaned against it, the weight of the situation feeling like a burden I wouldn't shrug off anytime soon. My hands began to tremble, and my legs weren't much sturdier.

I entered the kitchen, torn between screaming, crying, or succumbing to a comatose state of panic. Jaysa, who'd disappeared in the woods, was at the table.

She wasn't alone—Widow Herbert was there too.

She was smiling at me. I rushed over to hug her, but there was nothing

but air.

“Sorry about that. No real body,” she said with a laugh that still filled me with warmth.

“I don’t care. How are you here?” It was the last straw in the emotional stack, and tears started flowing down my cheeks. At least the only people who saw me falling apart were dead and wouldn’t repeat it.

“I’m not exactly sure,” she replied, her expression thoughtful. “All I remember is an urge to see you, and then here I was.”

“You’re not stuck here, right? You’ve been somewhere else?” I asked. I was pretty sure Jaysa was stuck, but Widow Herbert deserved better.

“Yes. I’m hazy on the details, but I know I’m going back to somewhere good. This is just a temporary visit. I vaguely recall conversations with others who said they’ve often visited like this, but the living they visit don’t always realize they have company.”

As I stood there, staring at her, all the memories of the day she passed flooded back. “I’m so sorry about what happened. That you died the way you did. I never would’ve dragged you into any of this if I’d known how it would end. I need you to know that.”

She waved off my apology, smiling. “Why? It was a good way to go, better than I could’ve scripted. I’m quite content with the outcome. No need for apologies. Walter quite enjoyed the stories too.”

“So, you’re happy?” I said, hoping for her sake and mine that it was true. It wasn’t until this moment that I truly realized how much guilt I’d been lugging around.

“Yes. The only reason I came to visit was that I felt you.” Her smile turned bittersweet, as if she knew what had happened.

“You know?” I said, my gaze darting between her and Jaysa.

“Yes. It’s not ideal, but there’s always a bright side.”

“Bright side? I’m like Medusa,” I said, glaring at Jaysa.

“But not so vulnerable anymore, either?” Widow Herbert said, as if it could’ve been worse.

I turned to Jaysa. “What did you do to me? What have I done to them? Wasn’t there some other option?”

Jaysa remained silent, avoiding my eyes.

Thunder rumbled outside as the rain intensified. It fit the moment and also brought me some relief. Every drop of rain helped hide the evidence. Groza would suspect, but no one would know for sure.

“Do you think it’ll be enough?” I said to Jaysa.

“I don’t know. Hopefully.”

She didn’t know much, did she? I held back my cutting words, afraid I’d lose the only allies I had, even if they were ghosts.

“Maybe I should leave. Staying might not be wise. But I can’t abandon Charlie again. That was a mistake. I can’t just disappear and reappear over and over again. It will mess him up more than I probably already have,” I said, leaving a path of wetness as I paced the small kitchen.

“He needs a pack. He’s a shifter,” Jaysa said, seeming to think she was in a position to scold.

She wasn’t.

“Don’t act as if you have the answers when it’s very obvious that you don’t. I’ll make the final call on what I have to do.” She’d turned me into a guide, with no real idea of what it would do to a human. Now I was killing people with my touch, and when I looked at her, she stared on with a shrug. She’d lost all right to vote.

“If you flee, they’ll know it was you. They’ll hunt you down and kill you. The rain is heavy now; hopefully, it will mask most of your scent. But you need to get a grip. Walking around like this, you might as well hang a sign on your door proclaiming you’re a murderer.”

I looked at Widow Herbert, who nodded slightly.

“She’s right,” she said. “It’ll look like guilt, and they’ll most likely catch you, especially with Charlie in tow.”

A murderer. She was right about that. I was a murderer, but they were going to kill me first. That counted for something.

“Okay, I’ll stay. I can’t go to the roast, though. I’ll pretend I’m sick.” Even the rain didn’t stop the roast gathering from happening. They’d gather under the many porches and the large gazebo.

“Only tonight, though. You can’t start hiding. You need to be seen, act normal. If you hide, your absence will be remembered when they start looking for suspects,” Widow Herbert advised.

“Yes, you need to act normal,” Jaysa added.

“She’s not going to be good at this,” Widow Herbert said, looking at Jaysa. “One of us is going to have to try to stay with her in public to help.”

“I can see that,” Jaysa said.

More coffee to warm up might not have been the best idea. I'd already been jittery and shaking, and yet somehow I'd thought a cup of coffee would soothe me.

A noise behind me had me jumping out of my chair so fast I nearly fell over. Kicks was there, standing in my kitchen, watching me as I barely stayed on my feet.

I looked past him to the closed door. If he'd wanted to kill me, he could've accomplished it several times over already, so why was he here?

"You can't just walk in my house." My voice was brittle. The day had worn me thin.

He didn't leave, or even glance at the door. "It was better than drawing attention to myself on your stoop."

"And why is that?" I crossed my arms, inching backward. There was something that made me feel incredibly vulnerable being in this small kitchen with him. Given the way he was crossing toward me and closing the gap, the feeling was not mutual.

"What did you want?" The counter hit my back.

"I saw you leave this morning with a hat. When you came back a little while ago, you look rattled and your hair was soaked. Something happened." He leaned on the counter by my hip as he waited for a response.

My hat. I'd left the damned hat in the woods. How could I have forgotten something so obvious? I had to go get it. Now. He had to leave.

"Was there a question in there somewhere? I'm still trying to figure out what you want."

"What happened in the woods that's gotten you jumpier than a live wire?" He tilted his head down, his eyes piercing into me.

"Nothing. Now, if you don't mind, I have to get going. I have things I need to do today."

I went to slide away, and his arm blocked my other side, caging me in.

"I know that look in your eyes. I've seen it many times. You've got a problem brewing."

"No. I don't. Now you need to move before I scream."

He didn't budge. "Go ahead. Scream if you want. I'm guessing you won't, though."

I met his glare with one of my own. “What exactly do you want from me?” I asked, the question running much deeper than what was on the surface. This man had a goal, a target he was trying to hit. I was pretty sure he got whatever he set his mind to, and I had to hope I wasn’t in his way and about to get run over.

“You.” That was it, one simple word, but it stopped my heart in my chest.

My lips parted, and I gasped at the truth I heard in his tone. I froze, losing all my words and having a hard time clinging to any coherent thoughts. What did he mean?

“What...” I swallowed, trying again. “I mean, huh?” That hadn’t come out much better.

“You’re in a pack with an alpha who wants you gone. In my pack, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“So you want me as a guide?” My lungs inflated and my heart beat again, even if a small part of me felt just a ghost of disappointment. It was insane to want him, but maybe it would be nice if he wanted me... Just a little?

“It would be a good start.”

So maybe more? Or was that a tactic to string me along, lure me over? This man knew how to work a woman.

What was I doing? I had to get my head in the game. Whatever he wanted didn’t matter right now.

“I don’t have time for this.” I went to lift my hands to his chest, give him a shove in the right direction. I stopped abruptly and crossed my arms instead. What if I killed him?

He noticed the quick change of direction, which was what I’d expect. He seemed to notice all things, all the time, like he was constantly cataloging everything and everyone around him, catching the smallest nuances.

“In order to get you for...my *pack*, I need you alive. Now that you know what I want, why don’t you tell me what your current issue is?”

“I told you. I’m fine.”

He looked down at my hands tightly tucked into my arms. “Why don’t I believe that?”

“Because you’re an arrogant ass?”

“Try again.” He leaned slightly closer. “I have a vested interest in keeping you alive. You sure you don’t want to utilize that?”

He wanted me alive. That was a serious lure. Groza wanted me dead. I scanned the room, wondering where my horde of ghosts had gone when I

needed some advice.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“No one.”

He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes.

“I mean nothing.”

“I don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into, but I know you need me.”

He wasn’t budging, and I couldn’t even push him away. If it were only that easy. “Yes, you sure seem like the good Samaritan type. I’m sure you do favors for all sorts of people with no strings attached.”

“How about this: I give you my word, no matter how bad your mess, this one’s on me. No strings.”

“Your word?”

“Yes, and I don’t give it easily.”

Was this a trap? Had I read this all wrong? Was he trying to get me to give up the location, basically forcing a confession from me? It didn’t seem like it, but how could I possibly trust him? I’d judged wrong before.

But I’d left my hat. I could guarantee I’d never get back there and get it without him on my tail. Not to mention the sound of rain was slowing. I’d make a brand-new trail of my scent if I went back there. I was doomed either way.

I took a long, slow, measured breath. “I like to take walks, and I might’ve gotten startled by something and left my hat behind.”

“How startled were you?”

I bit my lower lip, trying to keep it from trembling.

“It’s all right. I’ve been in some pretty startling situations.”

He cupped my cheek. Without thinking of what I was doing, I leaned into it for a second before I jerked away. I couldn’t be careless until I understood what I’d done. I could kill someone.

He backed away, giving me a few feet. “Okay, well, I’m going to leave and stretch my legs. Any suggestions on a good trail?”

It was a leap of faith to tell him anything, but coming here at all had been a gamble. If I hadn’t, Charlie would be dead. I couldn’t overthink it. I had to trust my gut. Kicks had already checked the flask for poison. He wanted me alive, which was more than Groza could claim. Duncan couldn’t be depended upon with her hovering over his shoulder.

“I like going out by the back gap in the entrance and wandering northwest

for a bit shy of an hour.”

He was gone before I could say anything else, leaving me to wonder what would happen after he found my victims.

Chapter Thirteen

I WAS LYING in my bed, struggling to sleep. Buddie had dropped off Charlie, and not one word had been mentioned about missing men. It couldn't be a thing yet if he hadn't mentioned it.

But it *would* be a thing. Groza would make it a thing, and then she'd come looking here.

"Stop thinking about it and get some sleep. You barely hold it together when you're *not* exhausted," Jaysa said from where she was sitting on the chair in my room.

"Telling her she has to fall asleep is the exact wrong thing to say if you want to help her," Widow Herbert said, her knitting needles clicking as she sat on the trunk.

If I wasn't so rattled about what else was going on, having two ghosts sitting with me would be freaking me out.

The bedroom door opened, and I jerked up. Kicks walked in, his face hidden by the darkness. I grabbed the matches by my bed and lit the oil lamp. I had to see him, see if there was revulsion filling his eyes.

The room lit up with a warm glow as he walked over and sat on the edge of my bed.

I'd been so eager to see his face, and now I was terrified to look at him. Crossing my arms, I glanced at the floor, his shoulder, my hands. Now that it came down to it, it was hard to meet his eyes knowing what he'd seen. That I was guilty of the mess he'd just witnessed.

"It's done. I got them *situated* so no one will ever find them."

He didn't sound like he was disgusted. Would he still want me in his pack

after this? Even be in the same room as me?

“Oh, well, that’s—good.” He’d buried my victims, or done something else with them. I guessed it was good—for me, anyway, if no one else.

They’d tried to kill me. I’d killed them—maybe in an unnatural way, but they’d deserved it.

I finally got up the nerve to look him in the face.

There wasn’t the disgust I’d expected. No, he looked more intrigued than anything else. Had he stumbled upon some other victims? Someone else’s dead bodies? A year ago, that might’ve been absurd, but people were getting killed all over the place lately.

“So, you definitely saw *my* situation?”

“Yes, I did. They seemed to have experienced some unusual conditions, if that’s what you’re referring to. To be honest, I’ve never seen that kind of situation before,” he said.

Oh yes, he’d found mine. Now that the revulsion hadn’t materialized, I got to my feet, finding the situation even more awkward.

“Well, I’m glad you had a productive walk. Can I get you a drink or anything?” I stepped toward the kitchen. Trying to act like Martha Stewart was a push, but it was an easier mantle to wear than “co-conspirator in a gruesome murder.”

He stood, following me, but I had a feeling it wasn’t out of thirst. Still, I poured him a glass so that I had something else to do.

I went to hand him the glass and then put it on the counter instead. No touching anyone until I got an idea of what had happened.

His gaze went to my hand. If he’d wondered why I was afraid to touch him before, he’d probably figured it out by now.

“I’m assuming by how badly you were rattled this morning, you’ve never had an encounter like that before?” He drank his water, watching me.

“No. Nothing like that ever happened before. Everything was normal until...the change.”

“You say that as if there are other things that are strange.”

He was watching me keenly, and I had to keep my eyes fixed ahead so I didn’t look at Jaysa and Widow Herbert, who were both now at the kitchen table.

“If I have to go on any more walks, we might have to delve a little deeper,” he warned.

That’s it? He’d covered up my crime, and now all he was doing was

warning me he might have to delve deeper if I went on another murdering spree?

“That’s—understandable.” Actually, it was quite gracious. Was gracious the correct word for this? It was certainly something more than “understandable.”

“You know, even with the situation cleared up, this isn’t going to go away.” He crossed his arms, staring at me quite seriously.

“He’s got that right,” Jaysa said from the table.

“I didn’t think it would,” I said.

“You’re likely to be the first they question. Of course, you had nothing to do with it,” he said, watching me with a new determination. “How could you have, when you were with me?” He spoke in a calm, even tone that had the determination of a cult leader telling his followers what they were going to believe, or at least swear to.

He didn’t need to work that hard. I was an easy sell.

“With you...” I nodded.

“We ran into each other in the woods. You were showing me some of the nicer trails to follow.” He leaned closer until we were mere inches apart. “You’d barely made it into the woods when we happened upon each other, and I was with you the entire time.”

“People will get the impression that...”

“Which is much better than the truth.”

I nodded. Duncan’s being jealous or getting the side-eye from pack members who thought I shouldn’t be dallying with the new alpha weren’t my biggest issues anymore. I’d rather this entire pack thought I was alpha-hopping than what I’d truly done.

“Groza won’t believe it. She’s going to know it was me, even if she can’t prove it. She’ll know.”

“Tell her to come to me. Let her call me out on it.” He looked as if he’d enjoy such a confrontation.

It was such a change from what I was used to around here. Even when we first arrived here, Duncan had me walk in next to Buddie, knowing how it would look. He had always tried to appease Groza.

Everyone groveled to her—but not Kicks.

“I’m going to go see if I pick up any whispers. Try to act normal.”

Jaysa was huffing in the corner, as if that was never going to happen.

Chapter Fourteen

I'D STRETCHED, breathed deeply, and done every calming thing I could think up, yet still felt like a jack-in-the-box with an overwound spring. There was no way to walk into this roast and not show my carnival colors.

My two companions were watching me, giving each other the side-eye. Even the dead were judgmental around here.

"There's a good chance Groza will have noticed them missing by now," Widow Herbert said. "You *have* to act normal."

"Those two didn't have kin," Jaysa said. "There's a chance no one will go searching for them until tomorrow. You have to do this—start adjusting now before everyone starts examining your every move. Holing up in the cottage will be like writing an admission."

"Walk, mingle," Widow Herbert said as I stalled out at the edge of the gathering.

"Do *something*," Jaysa barked.

I moved, even as my entire body seemed to be seizing up, and began to weave into the crowd. I couldn't appear to be hiding from all the alphas roaming around this place. Charlie had walked over earlier with his friend's family and was offering no distraction.

I felt like a boxer, dodging and weaving so I didn't have to interact with any of the problematic shifters in the group.

I made my way toward Gillian, then let her ramble on about her coffee plant's brown-tipped leaves for half an hour. For some reason, she thought I could fix it. As far as I was aware, I was not Mother Earth. Although I was discovering some new abilities lately, it seemed as if they leaned toward the

darker spectrum of life's cycles. There was a better chance I'd kill it than heal it.

I was standing there, waiting for a steak and having moved on to my next incredibly boring topic of Murrey's cow not getting pregnant, when the sound of heavy footsteps started. A shiver shot through me, and the skin on my arms puckered up like a plucked holiday turkey.

I looked at Murrey, the disgruntled owner of the cow, who was still chatting away about the various techniques he'd tried. The steps grew louder, pounding through the air, like I was at a concert with heavy bass, and yet no one seemed to notice? How was this possible? Not even the alphas who were spread out in the gathering seemed aware.

"Murrey, do you hear footsteps?" I asked, cutting his sentence short. At least, I thought he'd still been talking.

"Huh? There are people walking all around us." Murrey narrowed his eyes in confusion.

"No. Like thundering steps," I said, knowing my clarification would do nothing for him. He didn't hear them. No one did.

I scanned the area, looking for Jaysa, which was completely insane. Now I *wanted* to see a ghost. But she had shown up shortly after the noises last time. Maybe those were ghostly stomps?

Screams disrupted my search. Everyone, including me, turned toward the noise just in time to see Haggy falling to the ground, a hand clutched over his chest. Shifters might not get diabetes, but it appeared they did have heart attacks.

As everyone swarmed around Haggy, I stood there immobile as a blur in the distance caught my eye. Another chill brushed my skin, this time settling into my bones. It was like suddenly being thrown into an arctic pool. This was the source of the unearthly footsteps. My instincts screamed not to look at it, and yet part of me was drawn to it. Without consciously deciding, I looked anyway.

A young girl I'd never seen was walking toward Haggy. She had long black hair and skin so light it almost looked gray. She stopped, switched directions, and turned toward me. My lungs ceased to expand and my body began to tremble.

I wanted to run, but if she was what I suspected, it wouldn't do me any good. After all, everyone knew you couldn't outrun death. She stopped uncomfortably close, examining every inch of my face and then body with a

thoroughness that made my skin frost.

“What are you?” Her voice didn’t match her youth—she sounded like someone ancient, with a heaviness that nearly reverberated through the air, vibrating my bones. Everything about her seemed to have the gravitational pull of a black hole. Her eyes were like dark orbs that felt as though they could steal your essence in a blink if she wanted. Even standing here, terrified like I’d never been in my life, a part of me wanted to reach out and touch her.

“A woman,” I said. “A human,” I added, wondering if that was the confusion.

“No, you’re not,” she said immediately.

I didn’t argue. I didn’t want to speak.

Her eyes roved up and down my body, as if she were drawn to me more than the dead.

She was going to kill me. *I was dead.*

I gasped, searching the crowd for Charlie. Would I be able to say bye to him?

As if she could hear my thoughts, she grinned just slightly. “No, not yet,” she said. “But I shall see you again.”

I nodded, trying to keep my thoughts blank.

She turned and walked to Haggy’s body, and I took in a shuddering breath, and then another. She glanced back at me and then walked away. She walked right past Duncan, who didn’t so much as glance at her—no one did—and faded into the night.

I reached out to a nearby table, bracing myself.

Duncan turned, narrowing his eyes on me before he headed over. Everyone else was too consumed with Haggy to notice me.

“I didn’t realize you knew Haggy so well. Are you all right?” Duncan asked, stopping beside me.

“I’m fine. Just startled, is all.” I took a step back. I already had enough problems surrounding him—I didn’t need the trouble his attention brought. “You should go help handle things.”

“Don’t worry about Pips. I’ll watch over her,” Kicks said, putting his arm around my waist.

Duncan stiffened but nodded. If we weren’t surrounded by the pack, I wasn’t sure if he would’ve been so calm about it.

“Come on—I’ll walk you home?”

Kicks was asking, not dragging me along or bullying me, the way I

usually felt.

I nodded. I didn't think even he could fight off Death, but walking home alone felt daunting at the moment. I was starting to see the value of a placebo effect.

Kicks didn't question me or say much until we were back at the cottage. He followed me in, and I didn't try to stop him. Right now, in the tangled mess of my current situation, he was one of the only allies I had, and one that had some pretty damning evidence on me.

"I've made it clear I want you to come to my pack. Have you given that any thought?" he asked as he followed me into the kitchen.

He took the log I'd just picked up and started loading the wood stove for me. It was such a simple thing, but even that felt like a burden lifted.

"No. I haven't. Sorry." I'd been too busy with the other crazy things going on. I leaned on the counter, watching him. Even doing something as simple as this, he looked incredibly sexy. Was there anything he could do that would make him look unattractive?

He finished, straightening and brushing his hands on his legs before leaning against the table. "It's not safe here anymore. Or it won't be. The most dangerous thing you can do is refuse to accept the reality of your situation. You can't make sound decisions based on a set of delusions."

"I am not deluding myself. I'm painfully aware that Groza is going to try to kill me the first chance she has." She already had, after all.

"Then why are you hesitating? You think Duncan is going to save you? His pack will come before you every single time. He won't save you if it causes even the smallest detriment to his pack."

"And would that be so different from yours?"

"Yes. It would be," he said. "I rule my pack, and if I say you're untouchable, God help the person who crosses me."

I huffed softly. "Until I don't serve a purpose for you anymore either."

"That's not who I am. If I give my loyalty, it's absolute. I'd think that was obvious by now." His eyes hardened, as if that was the one thing I could've said to cut him.

I couldn't help but remember what happened with Magnum. Kicks had

been ready to wage war with another pack to keep him safe. I was getting so used to expecting betrayal, I anticipated it even when it wasn't happening.

"I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that." At least, not yet. For all his grand talk of loyalty, I didn't have the liberty of trusting him, not when Charlie's life depended on my decisions as well. Could I really trust *any* shifter? Their pack would always come before some human. Given enough time, Kicks would prove it too.

He nodded, but his gaze was still fierce, as if he could read my thoughts, knew that no matter what he said, he was still untrustworthy in my eyes.

"You know you can't stay here," he said, going back and hammering home the point.

"I'd think after what you saw, you'd have a little faith in my ability to protect myself." It was slightly surprising he'd still want me at all.

"Everyone sleeps. Even the strongest of us needs someone to watch their back."

The thought had been a nagging worry. Every night when I went to sleep, there was a part of me that worried Charlie would wake to find me dead in my bed.

"Come, check it out for a little while. What would be the harm in that?"

It was as if he could *sense* the capitulation. Maybe he actually could.

"How long?" I asked, feeling my nerves fraying even as I opened up that door.

"I can give you some time, but not a lot," he said, shrugging as if it were no big deal. "Think about it. I've got to go out of the area for a day or so. No one here knows I'll be gone, and I want to keep it that way. I think it might be better if you're with my pack when I do. If you did come with me, you wouldn't be far away, at least for a while. You could come and go back and forth to visit as much as you wanted. Charlie would still be able to see his friends."

He'd thought of Charlie? I couldn't seem to stand on solid ground with this man. Every time I thought I had him pegged, he'd do something that gave me whiplash.

"Think on it," he said, and went to leave.

He was leaving, and suddenly it felt like the rug was getting pulled out from under me. When had I started to rely on this man for any kind of stability? "When do you go?"

He turned back and then narrowed his eyes "In the next few days."

This was crazy. I'd killed two people by just touching them, and yet his leaving made me feel as if I wanted to hyperventilate? It was almost ridiculous, and a reason not to go.

"Let me think about it. I need to feel Charlie out and make sure he won't be too upset. He's been uprooted so many times already." Charlie had to come before any irrational thoughts I was having. How could I make a decision right now? I was barely sleeping, let alone thinking straight.

Kicks grinned. "He wants to come."

"And you know this because...?"

"I told him all the cool shit we have." He smirked.

"Still, I need to talk to him." Kicks had already tainted Charlie's opinion, but I wasn't taking his word on it. I wanted to hear it from Charlie.

Even if he didn't feel strange, there were a couple other potential problems that needed to be cleared. I wasn't unknowingly walking into another Groza situation, not even for a day, especially not with the way this one liked to flirt and lead people on. It wasn't like he'd tried to kiss me, or even outright hit on me. But when those eyes landed on mine... Man, the heat he threw off didn't need anything else. It was hard not to melt on the spot.

"Are you being..." This was a bit more awkward than I'd anticipated.

"Am I being what?"

He was doing it again, leaning there, looking at me, not quite smiling but definitely amused by something.

"Do you have a *situation* at home?" I asked, finally spitting it out.

"A romantic situation? No." He smiled way too wide for my sanity. He could seduce a woman with that alone.

"I don't need another awkward situation, is all," I said, dissuading him from reading into this question. I was not going down that road again. "Just to make it clear, flirting isn't going to get me into your pack either. That door is shut."

He nodded, still smiling. He either didn't care or didn't believe me. I needed to focus on believing that he didn't care, because that was much safer.

He straightened and made his way closer to where I stood, eating up the space between us. "If you're wondering if I act the way I do because I'm trying to seduce you in order to get you to my pack, I'm not. Yes, annoying Duncan does amuse me, but I happen to like looking at you, and that wouldn't change whether you were the spiritual guide or not."

“You know I’m, or was, human. I’m not sure what you’d call me now, but...” It was hard to even form words the way he was leaning closer, his eyes feasting on my face, my lips, as if he were about to ravish me.

“Yeah, I think that was covered a few times,” he said, his voice gruff.

“I’m not looking to complicate matters just for a good night or two.” Even if I were imagining what they might be like at this very minute.

“Darlin’, I take you to bed and I’m not sure I’ll ever let you crawl out of it.” He cupped the back of my head as he dipped his mouth toward my ear. “And it would be a lot better than good.”

“But I’m human.”

“You think that makes you inferior in my eyes? Only if I were a blind man would I ever see you as less than spectacular.”

He was breathing in deeply, as if he were trying to inhale me like some rare exotic scent. The door swung open and Charlie’s feet pounded in the hall.

“Piper!” he yelled excitedly.

Kicks straightened. “I’ll talk to you soon,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

I TURNED THE CORNER, heading to the cottage, and nearly stopped short in the middle of the lane when I spotted Groza sitting on my porch. Our eyes locked. There was no option of turning around or pretending I hadn't seen her. Had she seen me hesitate? Definitely, but that alone wouldn't prove my guilt, considering we'd been oil and water from our first meeting. It would've appeared more unusual if I *didn't* appear to dread seeing her.

Still, there was no denying I was cringing over this confrontation even more than usual. Did she know I was responsible for the disappearance of her two goons? She might suspect, but Kicks had cleaned the scene. He wouldn't have left a trail for her. No way she could know for sure. If she did, I'd already be ripped to pieces in the town square by now.

I continued walking, debating returning her stare or acting as if I barely noticed her sending waves of animosity down the block toward me.

Groza remained silent as I walked onto my porch. Her silence was even more unsettling than her confronting me. It was like she was forcing me to address the issue.

Screw her. If she had something to say, I wasn't going to beg her to tell me what it was.

I walked inside, leaving the door open behind me. She wouldn't have been waiting for me so publicly if she were here to kill me. No, she would've sent more of her goons.

I was straightening up in the kitchen when she finally walked in a few minutes later, shutting the door behind her. She made her way over to where I

was, stopping and leaning on the doorjamb. She said nothing for a few seconds, just looking me over. “I’m surprised you’re willing to be alone with me, considering what you did.”

“I’m surprised you’re willing to be alone with me, considering what you think I did,” I said, twisting her words. It wasn’t exactly the playing-dumb tactic I’d been advised to do, but I was getting a little tired of that act, especially with her. She had tried to kill me, after all. Tolerating her presence was hard enough without having to play dumb.

“So you’re admitting it?” she asked.

“Admit? I didn’t hear myself confess to anything.”

“At least you’re dropping the naïve act.”

I turned and smiled. Oh, the naiveté was long gone. That was for sure.

“Did you come for something?” I asked.

She smiled as she walked closer, but not *that* close. She wouldn’t come within reach of me. She might be here to try to scare me, but she was shaken as well. We both knew the truth. I’d killed them, but she couldn’t figure out how. If she had, she’d be much more frightened. It kept *me* up at nights, and I’d done it.

“So, what did you do? You’re too weak to have accomplished it on your own.” She looked me up and down again, as if emphasizing her point. “You must have had help.”

“You so sure about that?”

I could see a flash of terror in her eyes. She almost took a step back but caught herself at the last moment. It was nice to put a little fear into her for a change.

“I will find out what you did, and when I do, it won’t matter if you’re the guide, or God. Nothing will save you.” Her voice grew harsher as she spoke, suppressed rage trying to claw its way to the surface.

This threat had been weeks in coming. The only surprise was that it had taken this long.

I took a seat at the kitchen table, propping my feet up on the other chair and leaning back. “I’m not too worried about that, but take your best shot.”

I grabbed the bag of nuts on the table and ate a few, making it clear how little I cared about her threat.

I could almost hear her teeth grinding together. “Oh, I will.” She turned and left.

“I’m not sure that was the brightest,” Jaysa said, appearing at the other

side of the table.

“What? Giving it back a bit? I’m sick of taking it and not saying a word.” The rage had welled up so thick when Groza walked in that I wasn’t sure I could’ve stopped myself.

“That’s not going to help.”

“Nothing I say is going to change anything now, so why worry about it?” We both knew I’d killed her men. That, on top of Duncan wanting me, had finished off any chance of peace. I could act like a simpering fool for the rest of my life and she’d still kill me the second she could fifty years from now.

“If she turns this pack against you, you’re dead.”

“She’ll do it either way, whether I tell her to go screw or cower. I’m getting a little sick of being on my knees.”

I walked into my bedroom, shutting the door, and for once Jaysa took the hint.

Chapter Sixteen

KICKS STROLLED OVER, two cups in his hands. Every single person at the gathering watched him, clearing a path for him. He had a presence that might be stronger than Groza or Duncan's, from the look of it.

He held out one of the mugs with a mischievous grin. "Spiked cider?"

"Thanks." I wasn't much of a drinker, especially in this crowd. It was safer to keep my bearings while I was swimming with sharks. I hadn't heard anything about the two goons missing yet, but that didn't mean much. No one would've come to me with that news anyway.

Kicks leaned closer and whispered, "A move might provide a nice change of scene, considering the climate around here."

Duncan was watching us from the other side of the clearing, his expression as sour as a bucket of lemons. As uncomfortable as the attention was, there was also something sweet about being on the other end of things for a change. Everyone assumed something was going on with Kicks and me. Guess Duncan didn't like being on the other end any more than I had.

"Arkansas, right?" Seemed like worlds away, but maybe that was what I needed. Six months ago, I'd only had to worry about myself, and sometimes *that* had seemed like too much. Then it had been Charlie too. Now I had the majority of a pack looking to me like their existence hung on my decisions.

"Yes, but not for a while. If you wanted to keep Charlie in school here, it would be a five-minute drive from our current location. It's probably a shorter commute than where he went to school before Death Day."

"You're like a post-apocalyptic salesman," I said before sipping some of my cider, which was giving me a nice little burn. Was this part of the sales

pitch?

“You buying?” he asked, his smile making the burn a little warmer. “I’ve got a nice little suite ready and waiting, heat, plenty of fireplaces if you like the ambience, lights, movies, video games. It’s almost like stepping back in time.”

I glanced around and then looked at him pointedly.

“I make no bones about my intentions,” he said.

Obviously, since everyone hearing his plans to bring me over didn’t seem to be an issue.

Duncan headed our way. I wasn’t sure if he’d heard what we were talking about or just couldn’t contain all the acid in his overflowing bucket of lemons and had to come share. Maddocks was hot on his heels. He didn’t have the same “I’m going to kill someone” expression as Duncan, but his brow was furrowed.

“Making plans?” Maddocks asked.

“Just laying out her options,” Kicks said, unfazed.

“Her best option is here,” Duncan said, glaring at Kicks.

Maddocks took a softer approach, coming to my other side and smiling. “You need to keep Florida in mind as well. We’ve got plans to make our move to Main Street, U.S.A., the happiest place on earth. There’s a nice little suite in the castle with your name on it.”

I gasped softly. “In the *castle*?”

Kicks whipped his head to me, the smile wiped from his face.

But there wasn’t time to address the castle offer, as everyone whipped their heads to the east, clearly aware of something I couldn’t hear.

“What’s going on?”

“Strangers are here,” Kicks said, not breaking his stare toward the entrance.

Richie, one of the shifters on gate duty, appeared, signaling for Duncan and Groza, who were both on their way over. Kicks and Maddocks fell in right beside them.

I followed. I didn’t have the hearing everyone else did, so I’d need to be front and center to know what was going on.

There was a flurry of activity by the gate, and then three women appeared. Chugga, another shifter who did guard duty, was waiting by the entrance. Once he received a signal from Groza, he waved his hand, motioning the newcomers in.

Three women, all on the attractive side and probably in their early thirties, strolled in as if they had nothing to fear. Obviously they didn't know these were shifters. But even a human community was risky for women of childbearing age. It might not be affecting me in my current situation, but I hadn't forgotten that more women had died than men.

Jaysa suddenly appeared beside me, standing half in someone else's spot, almost creating a two-headed woman. As if I didn't have enough stuff around here to freak me out.

"They aren't normal," she said.

I hummed in response, hoping to encourage her to elaborate without having to say anything and look like the freak talking to herself.

"I don't know what's wrong with them. I only know there's something," she answered.

As far as ghosts went, there had to have been a better pick to send me. She was never sure of anything. I wanted to ask where Widow Herbert was, but Jaysa was already a prickly one. There was no chance that question would go over well.

Duncan and Groza approached the women. I headed that way as well. Jaysa might think they were off, but they looked normal enough to me. If they only knew what kind of situation they'd walked into, they'd be running out of here screaming bloody murder.

The darkest-haired woman stepped forward slightly. "Hello. We wanted to introduce ourselves. I'm Lola Ramsay. These are my sisters, Alisha and Harriett."

"I'm Duncan, and this is my wife, Groza," Duncan said.

It seemed like everyone turned and took stock of my reaction to that introduction. It might've been my imagination, since I was standing like a stone. I was barely even blinking, not willing to give anyone the slightest opening to say I looked out of sorts.

"We're setting up a development not that far north of here, and we were hoping you'd be interested in some trading with us?" Lola said.

For sisters, they didn't look much alike. Lola's hair was nearly black, and Harriett had nearly white-blond hair. Alisha's was more of a muddy brown. It wasn't just coloring, either. But if calling each other sisters made them feel better, who was I to question it?

"I appreciate your making your presence known, but we're self-sufficient," Groza said, killing any hope they might have harbored.

Maybe it might've been different if they hadn't been human. She'd likely starve to death before taking breadcrumbs from a mere mortal.

Duncan might've felt differently, but it was impossible to tell.

Lola's brows didn't rise; her lips didn't part. Not one part of her was surprised by this reaction. If anything, her face was set in place firmer than mine. Or firmer than mine had been, because I was probably showing *some* surprise. How had she known she'd be rejected, and if she did, why had she come? And what else did she know?

"I understand your hesitance with newcomers in times like these. Perhaps we could invite you to our settlement once we're further along? We think it's very important to be on friendly terms with our neighbors. You never know when there'll be a situation where you need to lean on each other." She smiled after finishing up what had sounded like a very nice lecture about how Groza was wrong.

There was no doubt about it—she was scolding the alpha.

"Maybe after you're settled," Groza said, her tone still implying it would never happen. "Where is it you're setting up?"

"Not that far to the north of here. I'm sure one of your people must've noticed us, no?" Her eyebrows rose, but this was an act if I'd ever seen one.

"Our people don't travel that far from our community," Groza said.

"Hmm. Well, that's strange. Must've been someone else's scout." Lola shrugged. "He didn't seem awfully friendly when we tried to interact, but we let the situation go, giving the benefit of the doubt that he didn't mean any harm. We like to go in with open arms, at least initially, or until it's shown that it's not warranted."

Oh, now that was a shot across the bow. This chick had some spunk. I'd come over here thinking I might need to shield these three, but now I was getting a feeling that they had it handled all on their own.

"Well, we'll be off, then. It was very nice to make your acquaintance, and hopefully we can find some mutually positive ground."

They nodded to Groza and Duncan before turning to leave. Then Lola turned, her eyes snagging on me. She stared for a few seconds too long before she continued on toward her sisters, who were waiting a few steps away.

"I told you something wasn't right with them," Jaysa hissed.

She might be onto something this time.

For once, I wished I was on better terms with at least one of them. Groza

had obviously sent at least one spy, and I really would've liked to hear what they saw.

Chapter Seventeen

CHARLIE WAS SLEEPING, and the cottage was completely dark except for a single candle burning on the kitchen table as I sat alone. Even Jaysa had disappeared for the evening, when I could've used a little company for once.

No one at the roast had questioned me about the missing men, but people were talking about them. They were surely searching at this point, too. Even if they were never found, Groza was looking to dump the blame on me. How long did I have? Should I pack a bag and leave now? Sitting here waiting felt like insanity, but leaving might be just as crazy. They'd track me down in under a day. Kicks might be my only option. But if they demanded he hand me over, would he truly back me up or take the easy way out?

The front door creaked open, and I jumped out of my chair.

Duncan stood at the base of the stairs. He was alone, without a horde at his back, so they probably didn't know what had happened to the men—*yet*.

Still, I got to my feet and edged closer.

He glanced upward, toward Charlie's room, and then back to me.

"He's asleep. Why are you here?"

"We need to talk." He motioned toward the kitchen.

If he was here to kill me, he wouldn't bother with the pretense of going into the other room. I'd already be dead.

I went in and leaned against the counter, leaving the width of the kitchen between us. Or I tried. He traced my steps, stopping only a foot or so away.

"Do you know Walter and Berman?" he asked, a hard edge to his tone.

It was more of a test than a legitimate question. They'd stalked me for

months. Of course I knew them, and his mate had just been here questioning me. She'd surely expressed her suspicions with him.

"I've seen them around. Why?" My voice came out cool for once. Seemed desperation had finally improved my lying skills.

He narrowed his gaze on me, calling me a liar. "No one has seen them for days. Groza has people out trying to track them."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. I hope they're okay." In spite of trying to keep my heart rate calm, a wobble crept into my words. Still, he had no proof.

His gaze intensified. "You have no idea what happened to them?"

He was mated to Groza, the alpha of this group. No matter what our relationship had been, it was something altogether different now. Telling him I'd accidentally killed two of the pack was nothing but a death sentence. I should've left already. I should've grabbed Charlie and gotten out the second I could. Then at least I would've had a head start.

"You really think I could kill two men?" I scoffed, as if the idea were ridiculous. A few days ago, I would've thought it was impossible.

He tilted his head slightly, tipping me off to my slip before he said a word.

"No one said anything about killing," he said. "We don't know if they're dead, do we?"

Shit. Double triple shit. He'd come here because he'd somehow suspected me, and yet there was surprise in his eyes. He looked off to the side as if trying to realign mentally.

"No. Of course we don't know they're dead. It was a poor assumption on my part." I turned, scrambling for a way out of this situation. "Did you want some coffee? I was just about to make a pot." Well, that was a dumb move. I hadn't offered him a civil word in weeks, and now I was going to make him coffee in the middle of the night. I might as well have confessed to murder.

He looked at me, not speaking, as if he didn't even know me.

I didn't move. I barely breathed.

There was a yawn behind me, and I jerked around to see who else was in my cottage. Kicks was walking out of my bedroom, shirtless and pants button undone, as if he'd dressed hastily.

He walked over to me, putting his arm around me and pulling me into his side.

"Hey, Duncan. What brings you by so late?"

Duncan's fists curled as he looked at Kicks, his eyes moving to where his hand was patting my hip.

He didn't acknowledge Kicks other than a glare before turning his full attention to me.

"If you had something to do with it, I suggest you let me know," he told me. "If I have to find out—"

"If you have to find out then *what?*" Kicks' voice dropped lower, nearly to a growl. "That sounds a little threatening, and I don't take kindly to threats directed toward Pips."

"So that's how it is?" Duncan stared at me as if he couldn't believe I'd sleep with Kicks, while he was mated to Groza.

I was too stunned to reply—but Kicks wasn't.

"Yes. That's. How. It. Is." His tone was so gravelly and rough, it vibrated through me.

Kicks squeezed my hip. The heat was about to come, and Charlie would be standing right beside me as I got the blowtorch. If Kicks wanted to offer up a shield, I wasn't going to be the idiot that let her kid get roasted out of pride. He was a full-grown alpha and maybe my only shot of surviving this mess.

I'd once thought Duncan might be the man who would stand beside me, but that delusion had been shattered thoroughly.

Duncan left the cottage, leaving the door swinging open behind him. Kicks went and closed it while I stood in the kitchen, feeling a shiver, and not from the sudden gust of wind from the door.

"Were you serious about having me visit?" I asked as he came back into the kitchen.

"Serious as a heart attack."

"I don't go anywhere without Charlie. Ever." I'd made the mistake of agreeing to that once, and it would never be repeated.

"I wouldn't ask you to," he said, his tone implying he wasn't like other people who had put me in that spot.

"I can leave whenever I want?" I said, trying to check any boxes I might've left open. I wanted this contract locked up before I made a move.

"Whenever you're ready to go, say the word." He leaned on the door opening, utterly unfazed.

"Then we're coming. I'll tell Duncan and Groza to let the pack know I'll be gone for a few days."

“I think it’s better if I tell them.”

I nodded. Letting him take that responsibility felt weak, but if he didn’t do it, I wasn’t sure I’d get out of here too easy. Duncan was going to put up a fight, and I was running on empty in that department.

“Can you leave tomorrow at first light? I think the sooner you get a little distance, the better.”

I nodded, my gut knotting. I didn’t take that as a sign that I was making a bad choice. Knots in my stomach seemed to be a constant condition lately, no matter what I chose. All the good, safe options had disappeared with the rest of the civilized world on Death Day.

Chapter Eighteen

BUDDIE BARGED into the cottage the next morning, his gaze immediately going to the packed bags by the door.

“So it wasn’t a joke? You’re really going with him?”

Damned Duncan. I’d planned on stopping next door and telling the guys myself, but he had beaten me to it.

“We’re just checking it out, visiting for a couple days, and it’s just down the road.”

Rastin popped in right behind him. “Do you realize how bad everyone around here is going to flip when you leave? Last time they were without a guide, things fell apart fast.”

“Other packs don’t have guides, and it’s only for a few days.” I’d woken up strung tight, and the two of them felt like they were winding me even tighter.

“But they *never* had one. This is a different situation,” Buddie said, as if I didn’t get it.

“I want to get out of here for a little while. I’ll be back soon.”

“But with Kicks?” Rastin said.

How bad was Kicks if he was the black sheep of this group? Actually, I could see how he’d gotten that reputation. He didn’t seem to respect lines, anyone’s lines, no matter how big and bold they were. It actually made me feel better about the Groza situation. He was the most likely person to give her the finger.

Charlie’s feet were stomping above my head, and I checked the clock. “Look, I have to go. I’ll be back in a few days. It’s not that big a deal.”

Kicks appeared at the open door, smiling at the guys in greeting.

Buddie and Rastin grumbled acknowledgements as Kicks grabbed my bags and Charlie made his way downstairs.

“You’ll close up for her?” Kicks said to them, casual but with an effortless confidence that they’d follow his orders.

“Yeah,” Buddie said, his voice lower than it had been moments before.

Rastin grunted again.

“Thanks,” Kicks said, as if he’d received an enthusiastic reply. He had an uncanny ability to stick it to people without ever coming across aggressive. It was a true talent.

Kicks led us out of the cottage, our bags in hand.

As we made our way toward the gates, we seemed to draw the attention of everyone we passed. I found myself repeating, “I’ll be back in a few days,” more times than necessary, regretting not having chosen to sneak out in the middle of the night.

It was a relief to get outside the walls.

“Piper, can I play video games today?” Charlie sounded as if the keys to heaven were dangling right out of reach of his little fingers.

He could play all day, and eat only ice cream and candy, if that made this easier for him. I looked at Kicks. “Is that possible?”

“Sure. He can play all day if that’s what you want.” He threw our bags in the back of the ATV.

“Really?” Charlie asked as we climbed in, looking like he’d just gotten a shot of adrenaline.

“You can,” I said.

It only took us a few minutes to get to the hotel. I could still walk back to the cottage if I wanted, which was good. It would be better if Groza couldn’t also get to me so easily. Still, it would give us some space, and maybe that would be enough to take tensions down a bit. I could only hope.

Charlie was bouncing up and down as we walked into the small hotel that had lights. It was crazy how something that had been a daily necessity now felt like a novelty.

Magnum was there, along with a few other familiar faces I’d seen in passing.

“Can I play games now?” Charlie said, eyeing up his possible playmates.

“Magnum, can you bring Charlie to the game room where the guys are and watch after him?” Kicks said.

Magnum nodded, smiling as if this was the best assignment he could've gotten. For some crazy reason, even with my past experience with him, I felt pretty confident he'd watch after Charlie better than most.

Kicks walked me upstairs to the third floor, which I believed was the top level. "I put you and Charlie in here. My room is down the hall if you need me." He waved his hand down to one of the only other doors on the floor.

"Thanks," I said, feeling stiffer than normal in his presence. I guessed it made sense, since I'd basically put me and my child at his mercy.

"We're having dinner together if you want to join. It might be easier to get all the introductions out of the way. They're a good bunch, but they're going to be curious."

I'd just finished having the last pack get their fill. I had nothing left to give. I was done filling other people up. All my energy was going toward keeping myself sane enough to make everything seem normal for Charlie.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess..."

"It's up to you. I'm simply suggesting an easier way to get over the hump. If you'd rather eat in your room, that's fine. I'll tell them you were too tired to—"

I was already shaking my head. "No. You're not telling them the human was too tired to get out of bed and leave her room."

He opened the door of the suite and dropped my bags off in the living area. "You choose. I'll handle the details either way."

I didn't want to be difficult. I just couldn't seem to stop myself right now. I didn't want to be here. I was sick of being the human in a group that viewed me as weak just for being born what I was. I was tired of being an anomaly. I was tired of this new world and what I was becoming.

"Someone's being a big baby today," Jaysa said, sitting in the suite's chair.

I glared her way. She was part of the reason I was running on empty and the last person who should be casting judgment.

"What time is dinner?" I asked Kicks.

"Eight." He glanced toward the chair I'd glared at.

"Any particular attire?" I asked, trying to pull his attention back to me.

"We're not formal. Show up however you want."

"We'll be there." I dropped down onto the couch, barely taking in the décor, which was very Victorian and cozy.

"If you need me, just give me a holler. Someone will know where I am."

He hesitated to leave, as if he knew I was at the very end of my rope and he thought I might go crazy if left to my own devices. “You’re good?”

I nodded, trying to muster up a smile.

He left, slowly, closing the door behind him.

I sank even deeper into the couch, letting my eyes close. It was the first time I’d been out of Groza’s pack since the incident. I hadn’t realized until now how draining it had been to wait for someone to show up at any minute and start trouble.

It was as if that threat being removed paralyzed me for a while. I didn’t move again until it was seven thirty. The only reason I got up then was the novelty of being able to take a boiling-hot shower. It was too much to let pass. It was such a luxury that I had a hard time getting out.

I’d just finished pulling on jeans, a sweater, and some boots when Charlie came running into the suite, Magnum following him only a few steps in.

“Did you have a good time?” It was obvious Charlie had from how wide the smile on his face was.

“Yes. Can I play again after dinner? We’re going to have a tournament.”

“I have to make sure it’s okay,” I said. The guys were being good sports, but there had to be a limit to how much they’d want a kid around.

“It’s good. We invited him and already made teams,” Magnum said, hovering by the door as if he wasn’t sure what to do. “Want me to walk you to dinner?”

I thought to the first time I’d walked into Groza’s pack, trailing in the back, walking next to Buddie as if I were with him. There were so many layers of how that day now haunted me, and I wouldn’t knowingly make any of those mistakes again.

“No. We’re good, but thank you. I need another minute or so.” I’d walk in on my own, not leaning on anyone for support.

He gave me rough instructions on where to go. I went and made a thing out of brushing my hair again before leaving, just in case Charlie felt the need to share what I had to do. After a respectable enough time had passed, I headed out.

Kicks was sitting in the middle of a long table in the boutique hotel’s dining room. There were twenty or so more faces at the table. As I scanned them now, some of them seemed slightly familiar. I realized I’d seen flashes of them here and there at Groza’s pack.

As opposed to the greeting I’d gotten at Groza’s, though, I didn’t feel the

same underlying hostility. Perhaps I was giving them too much credit because I was walking in here as a guide. Groza's pack had changed their tune too as soon as they saw me as a benefit.

Charlie was next to me, bouncing. To him, we were walking into a group of future playmates.

Kicks motioned to the two open seats to his left.

"How late can I stay up?" Charlie asked, nearly skipping beside me on the way to our seats.

"I don't know. We'll have to ask our hosts. I don't want you to keep them up all night." I tried to calm down his expectations, although I wasn't sure if that was possible.

"Can I stay up as long as they do? Please, please, please!"

"Within reason," I said while I took my seat, trying to take in this new pack.

"What's considered reason?" Charlie asked, truly confused.

"Eat first, and then we'll figure it out." I loved him, and I was glad he was so happy to be here. But right now, I wished he had an off button, or at least a speed setting.

Kicks started introductions around the table, which was already laden with food. I nodded, knowing I wouldn't be able to remember most of the names.

"This looks amazing." I hadn't seen a spread like this since before Death Day.

"Thanks," said a pink-haired woman named Evangeline.

"Evangeline was a chef before the end," Kicks said.

"I'm still a chef." Her slight shrug said it all. "I just have fewer people to cook for and typically more archaic instruments with which to do it." The tattoo of two knives crossing each other on her cleavage seemed much less intimidating now.

"So you coming over to the dark side?" the guy on the other side of Charlie asked me. "That's what the other packs call us. The dark side." He let out a laugh.

His name was Crackers, and there was no forgetting him. He had a mohawk, a row of tragus piercings, and tattoos that covered every inch of visible flesh except for his face.

I glanced at Charlie, worried he'd have overheard about our moving and would be looking at me in panic. He was too busy eyeing up a dessert spread

on a table nearby, and probably plotting how to get there before he ate.

“We’re just visiting,” I said to Crackers.

“Yeah. We just came to play games,” Charlie said.

So much for not paying attention. The kid listened to everything.

“We’re pretty fun here, unlike some packs. Of course, I’m not talking about *your* pack,” Crackers said with a wink over Charlie’s head.

“Of course not. Couldn’t imagine why you would be.” I grabbed the glass of wine that had been poured for me and took a larger sip than was probably smart.

There was laughing down the other end of the table. There was no denying that the feel here was much different than back home, if I could call that place home. This was closer to the feel I’d gotten when it was just the small pack of us, when we first started out from New York.

One side of the table was shit-talking about the game tournament they were planning for tonight. I found myself more interested in asking Evangeline about her restaurant. I could taste the love of cooking in her food, but even if I’d never tasted anything else she made, I could see it in the mourning she had as she spoke of the place.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love cooking for the pack, but I don’t know...” She gave me a small, bittersweet smile that spoke volumes.

“I understand,” I said, sounding a bit mournful myself.

“We all do,” Kicks added.

She didn’t just miss her restaurant. I didn’t just miss going for a slice of pizza or getting my nails done. We missed the world as it had been. We missed what was supposed to be our reality, our future, the plans we’d made. We missed how easy life had been. I’d moaned and groaned over the stupidest things back then, and now? I was happy if I woke up to a full stack of wood to load the stove.

“Piper, Crackers said we could get in some practice rounds before the tournament. Can I go?” Charlie asked.

I looked over at Crackers. “You sure you don’t mind?”

“No. I gotta warm up.” He wiggled his fingers. It dawned on me that this wasn’t solely for Charlie’s benefit.

“Okay, well, send him up to the room whenever you get tired.”

He smiled as they got up. “Don’t worry. It’s all good.”

“We playing?” Tico said from the other side, looking as eager as Charlie seemed.

Another couple of guys got up and followed them out.

The guys had just exited with Charlie when the sound of steps echoed through the place. Not normal steps, but the loud, booming kind that only I could hear. I scanned the crowd, trying to figure out who she was coming for. Everyone *looked* fine, but the footsteps persisted, a harbinger of something dark on its way. Forget waiting around—I had to get out of here.

Death was coming, and every time she looked at me, she seemed to become more and more interested in me. My life was already brimming with enough problems without having Death around.

The second I stirred in my seat, Kicks shifted in his, turning toward me. He'd been deep in conversation with his people most of the night, seeming oblivious to me, or so I'd thought.

He reached for my hand, but I jerked it back fast—not meaning to insult him, but it was better than killing him.

He wasn't the only one who noticed. Evangeline averted her eyes quickly, but I'd caught the look.

I went to move, but Kicks now stood in my way, his stare asking me what was wrong.

Was I white as a ghost or something? Did I have the deer-in-the-headlights look? Either way, he always seemed to sense when I was even slightly off.

"I wanted to go get a sweater in the room," I said.

Gasps and shouts broke through the hum of conversation in the room. One of the pack was lying dead on the ground, his head rolling a few feet away from his body. I couldn't remember his name, and I'd be too speechless to say it anyway.

Kicks immediately took a step toward his guy, but then he froze and looked back at me. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he were piecing together my sudden need to leave with the death.

We stared at each other for a moment that seemed to stretch forever. The entire room had swarmed over to their fallen pack member, and gasps and cries came from that area.

Kicks finally turned from me to go to his pack mate. I slipped out, keeping my eyes on the ground, knowing what would come next. If I dared look, I knew I'd already see her in the room. I hurried my steps, getting to the suite and hoping it was far enough away for her to not follow.

I curled up on the suite's sitting room couch, a blanket draped over me, unable to get the chill to leave my bones. A silly part of me had wondered if leaving the other pack, getting away from where I first saw her, would get rid of the issue altogether. But it was becoming clear this wasn't going to go away.

Now I was hiding up here, afraid to return to the dining room to look at those people, as if they'd somehow know. Kicks had.

He'd ask questions. Would he somehow blame me for what happened? I should've gone to bed, pretended I was sleeping. Would that be believable? No. But it might buy me until morning.

Or not. No, probably not. Not with Kicks. He'd come in and question me. Sleeping or not.

The door swung open to the suite, and my every muscle fiber tensed. He paused by the door for a moment and then made his way over to the table along the wall. It took a few seconds of his sitting there before I looked up again and met his gaze, knowing there would be an onslaught of questions.

"Drink?"

"Sure." It was a brilliant idea. I should've poured myself one an hour ago. I hadn't even realized there was a bar here.

He walked over and handed me the glass, then took a seat on the other side, facing me and sipping his own drink.

"What happened?" I asked, not only to throw the scent off me but because I was genuinely concerned.

He took a long sip, his thoughts seeming to go off and away from here, before he finally said, "Major, the guy who died, was throwing up a sword and demonstrating a parlor trick he'd done a thousand times. He tripped while doing it. His sword was always razor sharp. Took his head right off. It was a freak accident." He wasn't looking at me when he added, "I can't remember how many times he's done that. Now I'm going to have to tell his mate..." He shook his head and then turned his attention back to me. "We'll bring his body back in Arkansas so she can see him buried there on pack grounds."

I nodded. As much as I felt for him, I was hoping that would be the last of the questions for the night, but that was a long shot.

"How did you know?" he asked, disabusing me of that illusion fast enough.

He wasn't accusing me of anything, but knowledge of that kind was a

slippery slope. How I had known might be more damning. What if he thought I'd had a hand in this accident somehow? I wasn't sure how I was going to explain any of it without freaking him out. Moving here hadn't exactly been in my plans, but neither had the apocalypse, Charlie becoming a shifter, or anything that had happened in the last several months. I didn't want to close a door that might end up being my escape hatch.

"I didn't know that was going to happen. Just that something might, but not to who or what exactly." I sipped, being careful not to drink too much. I needed to take the edge off but not blur it so much that I lost my wits.

"I've met some guides. They never anticipated death." His movements stilled, and it felt like time stopped as he waited for my reply.

"Jaysa said that all guides are different and she couldn't know how it would..." The words were out before my brain caught up with what I'd just implied. She'd died before I became guide. It was widely known that I'd been as surprised as everyone else. When had this conversation with Jaysa taken place prior to her death? "Or maybe I heard that somewhere else. I don't know."

I could see from the lines on his forehead. He wasn't buying my attempt to clean that up.

"Jaysa spoke to you about guides before she passed on?" He dipped his head, emphasizing how strange that was. "It seems odd she'd discuss anything about being a guide, since you didn't know she'd passed on her gift to you until after she was dead." He took another sip of his drink, never moving his eyes from me.

"I think she might've said it in passing during a conversation we had *before* she died. She'd mentioned guides were all different."

His nostrils flared slightly, as if he could smell the lie. I was fairly certain he couldn't do that, but smell the nerves? The tension? Yes, that was possible. *Guess* that I was lying? He'd definitely done that.

He got up from the couch. I wasn't sure if he was going to accept my lie and let it go, or demand an answer. I watched his back as he made his way to the table, putting his glass down.

He turned back to me. "I don't know what the change is doing to you. If you want to talk about it, you can. If you don't want to, I understand that too. Your choice."

He went to the door. "I'm leaving in the morning but I'll be back in a couple of days. You'll be fine here. Crackers and Evangeline take care of

things while I'm gone, and they know that no matter what happens or who shows up, you aren't to be touched. I told Magnum to shadow Charlie."

I nodded. With that, he left.

Chapter Nineteen

“CAN we go have breakfast downstairs? Everyone says Evangeline makes the very best French toast ever, with lots of cinnamon, and there’s tons of syrup.”

“Everyone” must be all his gaming buddies last night.

“Sure,” I said, yawning as I forced my body to get moving. He was getting up earlier and earlier every day. I’d set my alarm for around dawn to make sure he didn’t get up and go wandering around the hotel without me.

The door to Kicks’ suite was closed as I glanced down the hall. I had a feeling he was long gone. I was now in a hotel with a new pack, alone with Charlie.

We made our way down to the dining room. There was a large breakfast buffet laid out along the side wall. People were coming and going, and most nodded and smiled as they saw me. It was hard not to wonder again if the difference in reception was the pack or my status as a guide.

“There’s my partner,” Crackers said, walking over and offering Charlie a fist bump. Charlie returned it, beaming back at him.

Crackers nodded to me, smiling.

“Sorry about your loss last night,” I said, wishing I could remember the guy’s name. I’d been so consumed with my Death issues that everything else had fallen away.

He leaned his head to the side slightly and then said, “Yeah, we’re all going to miss Majors. I can’t tell you how many times I told him to stop with that trick. We’ll have a service for him once we get back home.”

Magnum walked in the room a few seconds later, beelining it to us as if

he'd been searching and just found his target.

"Don't talk about Majors in front of Magnum. It took us hours to calm him down."

I nodded.

"We playing?" Magnum asked, reaching us.

"Yeah, we're going to have another tournament. You in?" Crackers asked Charlie. "I mean, as long as your sister says it's okay," he added, as if belatedly remembering me.

"Can I go?" Charlie asked, staring up at me as if he'd die on the spot if I said no.

"You sure?" I asked Crackers. They had to be doing this for Charlie. They couldn't possibly always play this much, could they?

As if Crackers could read my mind, he said, "Our setup back home isn't this good. We're making the most out of our trip, right, Magnum?" He slapped Magnum's arm.

Magnum grinned like he was another kid, set to play all day.

"As long as it doesn't put you out," I said.

We were only going to be here a few days. How many brain cells could this kill?

They all choked down their food and rushed off. I picked at a croissant for a few minutes before taking it with me to wander the small hotel. There wasn't a lot to see, so I ventured outside shortly after.

A man on a backhoe slowed down in front of me. "This whole block is cleared and scoured. Feel free to roam the shops, but don't go beyond the barricades," he yelled over the loud hum of the machinery.

I gave him a wave and thanked him, even though I was pretty sure he couldn't hear me.

I strolled the small street, stopping to browse in a bookstore, and then a boutique, where I picked up a few things for me and Charlie. There was a small travel agency that had maps of everywhere, and I plotted out the distance to Arkansas from here, just in case...

The light started to fade, forcing me back to the glow of the hotel. I tracked down Charlie in the makeshift game room, eating with the guys as they continued playing in between bites. I wasn't sure how they could spend so many hours doing this, but it was only for a few days. Charlie might never get to play video games again. If he wanted to play nonstop for the next forty-eight, I was going to let him have this last memory of something closer

to the life we'd lost.

I grabbed one of the sandwiches piled up on a tray and pretended to be excited about the game. The second Charlie seemed to have his fill of an audience, I made my break for it.

I wandered around the hotel again, wondering what I was going to do with myself for days. I had no wood to gather, no meals to cook. There was no surviving that had to be done at all.

I settled into a tall-backed chair in front of a lit fireplace in a cozy little nook. I'd cracked open a book I'd found on gardening when someone walked over.

"How are you doing? Are you getting settled in?"

The girl who approached me didn't look much older than I did, not that it meant much with the way shifters aged. There was something cheery about her bright blond hair and cornflower-blue eyes.

I closed my book. "Blanca, right?"

"Yes. How's it going?"

"Pretty good. Walked the shops a bit and checked out the area."

"The shops are a little sparse, but not bad." She pointed down the hall. "I was just heading to my room to make a cup of tea. Want to come join me? I'd love some company."

It was pitch black outside. My ghosts were all gone, and sitting alone in a room for the rest of the night didn't sound entertaining to me either. "Okay. Thank you."

She was on the second floor, her room looking like a miniature of my setup—same décor but a bit more condensed. She had an electric kettle set up in the corner and waved to the loveseat.

"I got the kettle at a big-box store on our way here," she said. "Kicks promised he'd get us electricity wherever we landed. I came because I'm good with herbs and medicines. Shifters don't get sick often, but it's good to have me on trips." She smiled at me over her shoulder before going back to fixing the tea.

"That's great. I'd love to know more about medicinal herbs."

"I'd teach you what I know, but I'm not sure how it'll work, you know, for different people."

For humans, she meant. Yeah, that could be a problem. She handed me a mug and then went back to fixing hers.

"Do you like it? It's my own blend. I brought it with me from Arkansas. I

always travel with my own tea.” She glanced back at me.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t tried it yet.”

I lifted the mug to my lips, barely getting a drop in before Death popped up in front of me. No loud steps, no warning. She leaned forward and hissed in my face. I jerked back, splashing the tea and burning my hand.

“Are you all right?” Blanca asked. She grabbed a towel, blotting at my hand where I’d spilled the tea.

I took the towel from her, finishing. “Sorry. Long day. My hands are just a little shaky, I guess.”

Blanca was staring at me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Death was right beside me, staring as well. She looked at the tea, and then back at me, and shook her head.

“I’m fine. Really.”

A strange feeling caused a tingling on my lips, followed by a numbing. Death was still staring at me. She was warning me. Blanca had poisoned the tea.

“Your tea is delicious.” I brought the mug closer to my lips, pretending to take another sip, angling the mug so she couldn’t see I didn’t take any in. “What kind is it?”

“It’s a peppermint brew I make.” She settled into the chair next to me, watching me drink.

Why would she want to kill me? I barely knew her, or any of these people. Could Groza be involved? Who else wanted me dead? It would be easier for me to die here—less suspicion on her when the pack found out. It would look like Kicks was behind it.

I tried to act as normal as I could. I had to get out of there without drinking the tea and keep her from realizing I knew she had tried to poison me.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but do you have a touch more sugar?”

“Sure,” she said.

As soon as she got up and turned her back, I dumped out half of my tea in the fake potted plant in the corner.

She came back with the sugar, and I put another spoonful in my cup. She was eyeing up the amount left in my cup while I did.

“Oh, I better get back to the room. They’ll be bringing Charlie back soon. Plus, I’m getting pretty tired. Thank you for the tea.” It would be easier for her. She wouldn’t want me to die in her room anyway. And if she tried to

stop me, would I kill her? Yes. If I could figure out how I did it.

She stared at me for a second. I wasn't sure what she saw, but she said, "Of course."

I stood, feeling woozy, and instead of fighting it, I wobbled slightly. If she thought I'd drop before I made it to my room, she'd be more likely to let me leave.

"Are you all right?"

"I think the day is just wearing me thin, but I'm okay."

She watched me leave, smiling. Instead of it feeling warm, it was like getting stabbed by a shard of ice.

Chapter Twenty

I EXITED BLANCA'S ROOM, adrenaline surging through me. It might've been one of the only things keeping me on my feet. The influence of whatever she'd fed me was coursing through my body, weakening me. If I went back to my room and got in a cold shower, I might be okay, but I'd be alone. What if it got worse?

If I sought out help and chose someone in cahoots with her, then I'd be dead. Leaving without Charlie was out of the question, and I couldn't safely get him away from here like this. He was probably safe either way. Groza had never made an attempt on him. No one wanted him dead. Taking him out of here now might put him in jeopardy. I had more faith in Magnum than myself in my current condition.

I walked down the hall, feeling fuzzier than normal, as if I was seeing and hearing everything through a thick glass wall, but not so bad I couldn't fake it. If just the small amount on my lips had been enough to throw me this far off, how dead did they think they could make me?

I made it to the first floor, deciding the best bet might be to find a place to hide where no one would look for me. But then I was alone again. What if I went and found a group? Odds were they weren't all in on this plot to kill me, right? Whoever was wouldn't try to kill me in front of witnesses.

There were noises coming from down the hall. I leaned a shoulder on the wall, taking a second. I couldn't stay here, though. If I didn't do something, Blanca might search me out and try to finish the job.

I just needed to close my eyes for a second. I'd regroup and gather enough energy to make it down the hall.

“Keep moving.” The voice boomed in my head.

I jerked my eyes open to find Death standing in front of me. Her dark eyes were fixated on mine and her skin glowed eerily.

“Are you here for me? Am I going to die?”

“No. There is much death directed toward you, but you are not dying—yet.” She stared at me, looking over every inch of me again. “But you need to keep moving. He’ll be here soon.”

Even in my dazed state, somehow I knew she was speaking of Kicks.

“He’s not coming—”

“Yes. He is.” Her tone was too commanding to argue with.

She slowly lifted a finger toward me, as if she were unsure of whether to touch me but wanted to. I didn’t move. I stopped breathing, squeezing my eyes closed, afraid of what was going to come. My heart pounded, palms sweating, as acid welled up, burning my throat.

Something grazed my cheek for a fleeting moment. There was a soft gasp and then it was gone.

I slowly opened my eyes.

Death was still there, staring at me. “You should not be, but you are.”

“I didn’t do it,” I blurted out, not knowing what else to say. Ever since I’d killed Groza’s goons, I’d known intrinsically there was something unnatural about what I’d become. Now I had Death confirming it.

She had her hand raised, as if she wanted to touch me again.

“I don’t know. It was done to me.” I stared at her, my brain so muddled that the fear was slightly dulled. Did she know what had been done to me? I was feeling so dull-witted that I toyed with asking her, throwing caution to the wind. Before I could, her head whipped to the side, unnaturally fast and at an angle that wasn’t natural. Then she was gone.

The loud rumbling of a motorcycle overpowered the distant hum of voices. Had Death been right? Was Kicks back?

I stumbled slightly as I edged closer toward the lobby. My eyes blurred as I finally reached it, trying to find Kicks.

Someone said, “Looks like she might’ve had a glass too many.”

I didn’t know who it was, but I laughed weakly, feeding into their assumptions. I spotted Kicks as he was walking over to me, no humor on his face.

His hands went to my waist, steadying me. “What’s wrong with you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. But I think I forgot which room I’m in. Can

you help me find it?”

There was more soft laughter around us.

“Yeah, Kicks, help the little lady find her way,” someone else said, and the laughter grew a little louder.

Kicks’ head jerked toward them and suddenly all was silent.

“Sorry,” someone said, the only noise coming from them.

I wobbled into Kicks slightly, and he wrapped an arm around my waist, hoisting me up into his arms and heading to the stairs.

“What happened? You didn’t drink anything. I’d smell it.”

“I’m fine. I might’ve gotten something a little bad, but not enough.”

“What are you talking about? What does that mean, a little bad?” His tone was growing deeper.

“Just get me back to the room and check on Charlie and don’t let anyone near us until I feel better tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes, resting my head on his shoulder, knowing the only reason I was trusting him this much was because I was out of it. Otherwise I’d be on guard, but it was hard when my head was this fuzzy. It hadn’t gotten worse, though. Death had said she wasn’t here for me. I’d survive.

He took the stairs at a jog, even with me in his arms, then walked past my suite to his. Another door opened and closed, and the next thing I knew, he was placing me on his bed.

He smoothed his hands over my head and then throat, pausing at my veins. It was a soothing contact I hadn’t realized I needed so much.

He grazed his mouth over mine, slipping his tongue between my lips as I gasped, opening my eyes.

He scanned my face for clues. “What did you have? I can taste it.”

“I might’ve gotten a little bit of poison, I think, but not much. I’m going to be fine. I know.” He probably thought I was speaking out of delirium, and there was no way to let him know that Death told me. He’d really think I was drugged to the gills then.

“I need you to check on Charlie. He’s playing games, and I don’t want him left alone.” I went to sit up.

He pressed my shoulders back down. “What do you mean, you might’ve gotten a little poison? Who the hell gave you poison?”

“Check Charlie,” I said, pushing at him. My kid was more important than answers to Kicks’ questions right now.

He lifted the phone by the bed. “The kid with you? Good. Keep him there

and bring him to his room personally, and then stay there with him. Let him stay up all night if he wants. Also reach out to Evangeline and tell her I need her up here.”

He hung up the phone as I squinted. “He’s with Crackers and Magnum. No one will get near him. Now what happened?” He touched me again, alternating between my throat and my wrists, as if he were trying to track my vitals.

“I’m not sure exactly, but Blanca offered me tea.”

He froze for a second before grabbing the phone again.

“Send Jo Jo to Blanca’s room and search it for poison. Keep Blanca isolated. Don’t let her out of your sight.” His chest rose, and I could hear his intake of breath. “Then send someone to go look for her.”

He hung the phone up with a clank. “She took off a little while ago, saying she was going for a run. She had a bag with her, though.”

There was a knock at the bedroom door. “Don’t get out of this bed,” he said as he went to answer it.

He had more faith in me than I had. Now that I knew Blanca was gone and Charlie was being looked after, good luck trying to get me out of this bed.

“I heard,” Evangeline said as she stepped into the room and headed to me. She reached out, feeling my pulse and skin, then staring into my eyes. “She looks okay. I’d just keep an eye on her.”

“What do you think Blanca gave her?” Kicks asked, coming to sit on the other side of the bed.

“I have no idea. I know food. Not poisons. Blanca is the one we ask,” Evangeline said. “I told you I never liked her.”

“I didn’t either, but she served a purpose.”

“Well, look how well that turned out,” Evangeline said, gesturing toward me.

“Okay, if you can’t offer any more help, go handle things for me,” he said, motioning to the door.

“You don’t want me to stay with her and let you go?” Evangeline looked at him as if I weren’t the only one drugged.

“If that’s what I wanted, I would’ve said it.” He was off the bed, ushering her out. “Shout if you need me,” he said as he shut the door on her.

He was back beside me and unbuttoning my flannel.

“What are you doing?”

“Your heart is slower than I’d like. You’re taking a cold shower,” he said, stripping off my shirt and then moving to my boots.

“I’m okay. I *know* I’m okay.” Death had told me I wasn’t dying, but it wasn’t like I could share that. Even as fuzzy as I was, I knew that wasn’t the thing to say.

“Well, I don’t know you’re okay, so we’re taking a cold shower.”

He dragged off my pants and then stripped down to nothing himself.

“You’re taking one with me?” The question came out as a squeak.

“You can barely stand, so yes, I’m getting in with you. Unless you want me to dunk you in a cold bath?”

“No bath.” That sounded even worse than the cold shower. I watched as he finished stripping. How was it possible for a man to even look like him? He was perfect, everywhere. And I meant *everywhere*.

“Stop looking at me like that. I don’t fuck drugged women, unless I do the drugging.”

I squinted.

“That was a joke. Clearly you’re too dull-witted right now to know, which confirms that I can’t fuck you. So, like I said, stop looking at me like that.”

I swallowed, realizing I had indeed still been looking at his body. Not just looking, but about to drool as he stood there, naked and perfect, silky, tan skin rippling over hard muscles and—

My Lord, did this drug act like an aphrodisiac too?

“You need to stop,” he said, his voice nearly vibrating.

“Huh?”

“Stop thinking what you’re thinking. It’s going to make it uncomfortable.”

It was hard to push the thoughts away as he picked me up again, carrying me into the bathroom against his naked chest.

The water was already running as we stepped under, and the frigid cold washed away every dirty, thirsty thought I had. I shrieked, trying to squirm out of his arms, but he held me tight, standing under the water with me.

“I’m awake. I’m definitely awake,” I said, gasping.

He stood there for another few seconds before we stepped out. He grabbed a towel, wrapping it around me.

He placed me on the bed and gave me a vigorous toweling-off that a horse would have appreciated. When my skin was rosy, he grabbed one of his

shirts and tugged it over my head.

“I’m surprised you’re letting me wear anything. Might take the chill out of my bones.”

“The shirt’s for me,” he said.

I wished he’d put a shirt on for me, but he didn’t. He climbed into bed with no clothes on and then tucked me in alongside him. Didn’t I deserve some kind of barricade too?

“Put your head on my chest. It’ll help your heart sync to mine.”

I pushed upward, awareness creeping back in and making me leery about all this contact. The last thing I needed to do was kill him.

“I’m telling you, I’m—”

He wrapped his arm around my waist and tugged me into his side again. In this position, it was almost impossible not to lay my head on his chest.

“For the record, this might be overkill. I’m not dying.”

“Do you want to sleep?” he asked.

I turned to look at his expression. He was all sharp angles and determination. Knowing how dug in he got on a good day, this was a losing battle.

“Fine. I guess I’ll lay my head on your chest. No problem.” Considering how much he’d already touched me tonight, if I was going to kill him, it probably would’ve already happened. I was probably too drained to kill anyone after the poison.

I felt like I didn’t just lie against him, but molded to him. It was probably because my body was so weak, but it felt like my curves fit perfectly along his length.

He began stroking my back in a gentle, hypnotizing way, pulling the tension from my body. He’d dimmed the lights at some point, and the moonlight spilled in the room, as if he’d planned that as well.

“Blanca must have formed some kind of tie to Groza. I can’t see another cause for her to do this.” Kicks’ voice was soft, as if he were musing aloud.

“The only way Groza will leave me alone is if I’m dead.” Even leaving hadn’t seemed to stop her. The realization felt like a weight that was nearly too heavy to bear pressing down on me.

“Or she is,” he said, tensing his arm around me. “The way I see it, you either have to kill her or take yourself off the table.”

I felt myself beginning to tense as well. “Groza might not be my alpha, but a lot of those people, they’re my pack. They look to me for comfort.

They'd never forgive me."

"They won't be your pack if you're dead." His voice softened, as if he hadn't wanted to say the words. His hand began to run along my back again. "The smoothest way to become a member of my pack is if you become my mate. They'll accept that easier. It might be your only choice. Groza is going to call you out for what happened, evidence or not. She's going to force your hand, but she can't do that if we're mated."

"Why not?" I tilted my head back, watching him.

"Because a mate to an alpha is considered untouchable. She'd have to have hard proof you did anything, and she can't get that. I made sure of it."

"Plus you'd get a guide for your pack." There might have been the barest hint of bitterness in my statement.

Our gazes locked, and I broke eye contact first. Somehow it was easier to lie like this against him if we weren't looking at each other. Then I couldn't seem to stop myself from looking at his mouth. He shifted underneath me, as if I weren't alone in the awareness.

"Yes, I'd get a guide for my pack. It's not the worst deal there is. It would give Charlie stability in a pack that isn't trying to kill the only parent he has. Mothers have married for less."

But they'd definitely married for more, like love—not that that seemed to count at all.

"Are there divorces—like, in a year or two, could we go our own ways?"

"There's been separations, but I'm not open to that." His arm tightened around me.

"Because you'd lose your guide. You want me to agree to this like it was an actual mating or marriage?"

"Yes. I think it's better for the stability of the pack, and I don't believe in marrying more than once."

I never would've pegged Kicks as the old-fashioned type, but there it was.

"But what if I want... I don't know—*more*?"

"I can offer *more*, if that's what you mean. We're attracted to each other, and I'm not comfortable with you stepping out of the marriage."

That hadn't been the *more* I was referring to, but I guessed it didn't hurt to know I wasn't signing up for none of the benefits.

"I need to think about it."

"I don't see that you have a lot of options."

“Well, I need to think about it anyway. I’d never really daydreamed of a proposal that was ‘marry me so you don’t have to murder someone.’”

“Lots of things have happened that we never dreamed of.”

“Why are you even back? You were supposed to be gone for days.”

“From the moment I left, I had a bad feeling I couldn’t shake. When I get a gut check like that, I don’t ignore it. I’m getting that feeling about your situation. You’ve got to make a move—if not for you, then so you’re around for Charlie.”

Chapter Twenty-One

KICKS LEANED his shoulder on the doorframe of my suite. “You’re sure you want to go back today?”

It was the first time we’d been alone since the aftermath of the incident. I’d seen him at meals, but other than that, he’d been missing. I didn’t know if he was out searching for Blanca, who had completely disappeared, or if he was giving me some space to think.

“I’ve been here three days. If I don’t go back, everyone will think I’m not coming back.”

“And that’s bad because...?” He grinned.

“I’m just not ready to make that choice.” Not for me, and definitely not for Charlie. I wanted to be beyond positive it was the right move before I uprooted him again. Leaving NYC had been an easy choice. Leaving a pack he’d gotten settled in that had resources? That wasn’t a slam dunk, even if the alpha wanted me dead. After all, there still might be a way to work things out, and every option had to be exhausted.

I was doing a last visual sweep around the suite, making sure I wasn’t leaving anything behind, when Kicks said, “While you’re thinking it over, keep in mind that Duncan didn’t fight for you. If he’s playing into your decision, you need to know that.”

I didn’t ask him what he meant, because I knew, or at least suspected. It was unclear how much information Kicks got from his sources in our pack, but I was afraid it was more than I wanted to know.

Luckily, he picked up our bags and headed into the hall, not looking to drag out a conversation I didn’t want to really have with anyone.

We headed down to the lobby, where Charlie was saying goodbye to his game buddies.

“You ready?” I asked, watching a little too intently.

“Yeah. We can come back, right?”

“Yes, we’ll come back to visit.”

He grinned up at me, as if he were perfectly content to go home. He reached for my hand. I grabbed his shoulder instead, feeling better about having the buffer of clothes in between us.

Kicks looked at my hand and then met my gaze.

“What?” I asked, with no lack of attitude in my tone.

Kicks shook his head but let it go. He should see how crazy he’d get if he accidentally killed some people just by touch. How many people’s hands would he be grabbing after that? He was lucky he was still alive, considering he’d forced me to sleep practically on top of him.

He tossed my bags in the back of an ATV, and before long we were pulling up in front of the gates.

I hopped out, grabbing mine and Charlie’s bags before Kicks could.

“Should I be taking a hint?” he asked.

“If you don’t mind, it might make my entrance a little less...dramatic?”

He nodded, as if he wasn’t sure he was on board. Still, he didn’t make a move as we walked toward the gates.

“I’ll be around soon,” he said, leaning on the ATV, hanging back.

“Thanks,” I said.

As Charlie and I walked through the town, I noted how the members of the pack would look at us, then scan the surroundings in search of Kicks, before returning their gazes to us and smiling.

There was no wood on the porch. That was the first thing I spotted. Second? Lingered across the street were my new goons. Ludo and Kipp. They used to be the second string, but it appeared they’d been promoted. I glared their way, and they smiled.

I hustled Charlie into the cottage. The cupboards were open, the shelves all bare. They’d wiped out all our supplies while we were gone.

“Where’s all our stuff?” Charlie asked, his voice smaller as he peeked inside the cabinets.

“I threw it out before we left because it was going bad. We’re going to the roast tonight anyway, and then getting fresh food tomorrow.” I rubbed his head and then jerked my hand away, sick to my stomach.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, watching me.

He was just a little kid, and yet he seemed to feel every fluctuation of my mood and take it on as his own.

“Just a bellyache for a second. Must’ve been all that French toast I wouldn’t stop eating this morning. I’m good, though.” I was better because he looked fine. I had to be more careful. I couldn’t take risks like that.

I spotted Buddie through the window heading to the cottage. “Why don’t you go run next door and tell the guys we were back?”

“Okay.” He ran to the door.

“Come right back if they’re busy!”

The door was shut before I finished yelling.

I’d just finished closing all the cabinets when the door opened. I thought it was going to be Charlie, with Buddie in tow.

Then I heard Duncan’s voice. “I noticed your wood is gone. I’ll tell the guys to stop taking yours when they run low. It’s ridiculous that they keep doing that.”

That was where he thought it all went? Or that was what he wanted to believe, because it was easier than acknowledging his mate was a psychopath? Most likely the latter.

I used to think Duncan saw so much, but he had an uncanny ability to go blind at the most convenient times. If or when things got bad—and they looked as if they were going to—would he step in and help me? He had in the past, but it hadn’t really cost him anything. Now the price might be steep, and I wasn’t confident he’d pay it.

“It’s fine,” I said.

I moved around the kitchen, straightening up the crumbs and mess the goons had left when they carried out all my food, doing my best to ignore Duncan’s presence. I used to berate myself for always trying to catch a glimpse of him in the distance. On some level, I’d liked being in the same pack, even if we weren’t together. It had given me some false sense of solace. I’d never felt quite as alone.

But realizing how he’d repeatedly let me down, and was still letting me down, was bringing me nothing but pain. I saw him and remembered the foolish kisses, how I’d craved his touch, all while never measuring up to what he expected in a mate, which was a shifter, with a sprinkle of insanity and lots of vindictiveness. No, I’d never match up to his current mate. The ups and downs of the Duncan ride were giving me motion sickness, and I was

ready to hop off for good.

“How was your trip?” His voice was so rough it sounded like it had been run through with a chainsaw.

I turned, throwing my rag down on the counter. “Stop coming around. You damned well shouldn’t want to talk to me, and if you can’t tell your mate you’re here, clearly it’s not a great idea.”

He took a step toward me. “I’m trying to make the best of a bad situation. I worry about you.”

“If it was so bad, you shouldn’t have chosen to be with her.” I crossed my arms, hating him right now, hating the conversation, and yet part of me felt relief at getting those words out.

“Groza wouldn’t help change Charlie unless I agreed. I did it for you and him,” he said, taking another step that closed the gap between us.

I felt like I’d been jerked physically in his direction, but Kicks’ words still haunted me, so much so they were like a physical barrier between Duncan and me.

“Did you fight with her about it?” I asked.

“There was no talking to her.”

“But did you even mention a different agreement? Try to negotiate a different deal?”

His silence was answer enough.

“So you just agreed?”

He stood there, not speaking a word in his defense. There was the truth. He hadn’t fought for me for a second. He’d rolled over.

“I was saving Charlie.”

He came another step closer. Soon he’d be right beside me if I didn’t stop him. I would stop him, too, because the fear of how he might truly feel was now confirmed. It didn’t just feel like a wall in between us anymore, but an immovable mountain.

How had Kicks known? Had he heard some gossip? Had he figured it out because that was how he would’ve felt? I couldn’t even think of that right now. I had to take one betrayal, one gigantic hit, at a time.

“You were saving Charlie, and for that I will be eternally grateful. On a level you probably can’t even fathom, saving him will always make me love you to some degree.” I took a deep, shuddering breath, knowing I had to get the rest of this out or I’d always regret it. “But in the end, you didn’t put up a fight or even suggest a different outcome because you didn’t think it would

be that bad, did you? You thought maybe it would be for the best for you, and the pack, to be with her, not me, as your mate.”

“You need to understand, I didn’t think they’d ever accept you. I was wrong. I made the worst mistake of my life.”

Sure. That was how he felt now that things had changed so much. Now that I had other options.

“What if I’d never become the guide? Would it have been a mistake then too?”

“How can I answer questions about a situation that isn’t reality?”

“I can. Nothing could’ve changed how I felt about you.”

“You didn’t have anything to lose. I did.”

“Yeah, I guess losing my heart really doesn’t count for much. It’s time for you to go.”

“So you’re going to go be with Kicks? Is that the situation?”

“I’ll let you know what I decide to do when I’m ready. Now, if you won’t go, I will.”

I moved to walk around him and out of the house, and he reached out to grab my arm. I yanked it back out of his way, my movements quicker than normal. I wasn’t sure if it was some new change about to set in or desperation, since in my heart, I still never wanted to hurt Duncan.

Either way, it seemed to surprise him as well. I used it to my advantage.

“I wouldn’t touch me if I were you.” I could see him weighing my words, but I didn’t bother to wait around for the verdict. I left him in my cottage alone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“NIGHT, PIPER.” Charlie walked over to me, hugging me.

I tried to hug him back without letting my hands touch him.

He backed away from me, a little frown on his face. “Piper, do you not love me like you used to?”

I knelt down, fighting the urge to pull him to me as my eyes burned. “Why would you say that? I love you more than I love myself, and that will never change.”

“You don’t hug me like you used to,” he said, his eyes glassy.

“You’re right, but it’s not because of you. My hands have been feeling weird lately.” My chest was feeling weird too, like it was going to shrivel up and die if I couldn’t make him feel better.

“Weird how?”

“Just *sensitive*. They’ll get better, though, and it has nothing to do with you. Look, I’ll just hug you even more with my arms, okay?”

I pulled him to me, still conscious of touching him with any part of my hands, and squeezed him with my forearms. “See? I love you so much I could squeeze you to death.”

He giggled in my ear, helping soothe the pain his words had built in my chest.

I let him go. “You believe me?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Okay, then go up to bed. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

Widow Herbert appeared as Charlie’s feet hit the stairs. “Children are resilient. He’ll be okay,” she said.

For some reason, her being here, saying that, made it impossible to hold on to the tears. Worse, all I wanted to do was to hug *her*, and I couldn't, because her body wasn't really here. It made what Charlie said sting even worse.

I dragged an arm over my face, trying to keep some composure about me. "Where've you been?" I asked, trying to not sound accusatory.

"I can visit, but this isn't really where I'm meant to be."

No, it wouldn't be. Jaysa? *Her* I could see being stuck, maybe even happy wandering this world. Widow Herbert would want to move on to better things.

"Will you keep visiting?" Maybe it was selfish to want to keep dragging her back here, but I felt like someone drowning. I didn't know who to lean on, who to trust.

She walked closer to me, looking as if she would've laid her hand on my shoulder if she could've. "Yes. I'll come back."

Even as she was telling me, I was afraid to let her go. What if she left and couldn't get back?

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what's the right move. Do I stay here? Do I uproot him again?" I slumped into a chair, dropping my head into my hand, hoping she'd tell me what to do, because I was at a loss.

Her face dropped as she said, "I can't make that choice for you."

"Will you stay with me for a few minutes?" I asked, pushing a chair toward her, even though she had no corporeal form. Still, the presence of her spirit was more than I could've hoped for at this point.

I wasn't sure if ghosts slept, but mine didn't. Jaysa had been sitting in the chair in my bedroom for hours. Seeing her pensive like this wasn't helping me sleep. She kept staring at me and yet didn't speak.

I sat up in bed. "Whatever it is, just say it." It couldn't be worse than wondering why she kept staring at me like this.

She took a few minutes, looking down at her hands, before she finally began talking.

"Widow Herbert and I had a chat today, and she thinks you should be told of some things."

The fact that my dead spirit friend had obviously lectured my other ghost companion didn't bode well at all. I wanted to groan but was afraid it would stop her from talking. Clearly this was something I needed to know.

“Normally power transfers happen right before the moment of death,” Jaysa said, sounding younger and more unsure of herself than ever. “I knew how to do that, how it was supposed to work, but I went about things in an unconventional way. Plus, I failed to consider that you weren’t a shifter. The transfer wasn’t as fast as it should’ve been. It should’ve happened in a couple of seconds, quick and easy, like handing off a calling card. But that’s not how this happened. I initiated the transfer, but as I was preparing to pass on, nothing about it felt smooth and easy. It felt like an industrial shop vac sucking me dry, and it wouldn’t let go, even as I was moving on.” She looked up at me for a split second, and then at the floor, as if dreading to maintain eye contact.

“What exactly does that mean?” That I was whispering was a testament to the amount of dread building at the possibility of anyone else hearing this. As what she said settled in, I wanted to scream until the guys were at my stoop, wondering what was wrong.

“I don’t know. I think you might’ve pulled in some other—*matter*.” She was fidgeting. Not only was my ghost an insomniac, but now she couldn’t sit still in the chair she wasn’t really sitting on.

“What the...” *Stay calm*. If I lost it, she was going to bolt, and it wasn’t like I could follow her.

Calm, calm, calm.

Yeah, I could repeat that a hundred times in my head and it wouldn’t matter. The only thing that was keeping me from lunging across the room and choking her was that she didn’t really have a body. I couldn’t kill her because she was already dead, so I might as well get some answers.

“Jaysa, what exactly are you trying to say to me? Whatever it is, it’s okay.” I spoke to her like she was Charlie, hoping she’d buy the act that I didn’t want to murder her.

She shrugged. “This is a little embarrassing, so I guess I hesitated to tell you, but I wasn’t always the best person. There might’ve been a moment of touch-and-go there before I crossed over where things could’ve swung either way.”

Did she think that hadn’t been obvious? That we’d all thought she was some paragon of shifter society and would be sent right to whatever heaven might exist?

“Well, that’s all done with now, isn’t it? What is the issue?”

“The whole shop vac thing—I was sort of in a gray area when it was

happening.”

Every time I thought I was being too harsh in my opinions of her, she proved me wrong.

“So this gray area, when I was sucking in energy like a—a shop vac? Was it light gray, medium gray? Or are we talking closer to really damned dark gray?”

“I don’t know if I’d say *really* dark. But perhaps darker than medium dark?”

Was she saying...? No. I had to be mistaking this somehow. Had to be.

“Did you crank me full of hell magic? Tell me you didn’t. Please, say I’m misunderstanding.” I got out of bed, closing in on her, determined to hold her deathly ghost form here until I got answers.

“I don’t know.” She flung her hands up. “You’re the one that sucked it all up, too. I told you, it’s not my fault it didn’t work out. I was trying to do something *good*, for the record.” She started pacing the small room.

“Oh, yeah, unleashing the powers of hell through me was a fantastic plan. How good of you.”

“I told you, it wasn’t a *plan*. If your stupid body could’ve taken on my magic like a normal shifter, then this wouldn’t have happened. It’s your fault too.”

“No, it’s not. I didn’t do this to me,” I said, my voice rising. “How did you even manage to keep yourself out of hell, anyway? What bowling ball did you find in the last second to tip the scales?”

“I’d rather not say. It’s personal.”

“I rather you did, since you’re the one that got me in this mess.”

“Well, trust me, I’m paying you back.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” She moved to the window, giving me her back.

The details were all coming together in my mind, and pointing to one possible scenario. It made more sense than anything thus far.

“You’re not here because you *want* to help me as you put it. You’re here because you *have* to be. You have to help me, don’t you?” If I could’ve grabbed her, I would’ve whipped her around and pinned her until she answered.

“Yeah, well, what if I am?”

Now it made more sense. After the mess she’d gotten me into, it was hard not to feel a little satisfaction over the fact that she was stuck here with me.

“How long are you here for?”

“I don’t know,” she snapped.

I didn’t care if she bit my head off. “Is there a day or a goal or something?”

“*I. Don’t. Know.* I wasn’t exactly in a position to push, if you catch my drift.” She spun, squinting as she said, “I don’t even know why I tried to talk to you. I knew it was a mistake. That you’d twist it to my fault.”

She was gone again, and it was a good thing. I’d been ready to test out my hell hands on a ghost.

I collapsed on the bed, realizing things might be even worse than I’d feared.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“DO YOU SMELL THAT?” Charlie tilted his head back as he sniffed the air, like he was trying to pick up some scent on the wind.

I shifted the flour bag to my other hip, trying to juggle some jars in my hands. “No, but you already have better senses than I do. What do you smell?”

It was crazy how the differences were already showing up in him. He was always warm, almost never wanting a coat, and he was getting up earlier and earlier, as if his body was synching to a new schedule. I used to have to wake him up, but now it was a coin toss whether he’d be waiting in the kitchen for me or jumping into bed and waking me up.

“It smells like when you burn dinner,” he said, looking around and unaware of the slight.

Wait until he got a little bigger and tried to cook on a wood stove. It wasn’t like there were temperature controls.

“Maybe they’re roasting something up early. Sometimes they like to use the one that does everything really slow.” I didn’t relish going to the roast tonight, but that did make things a touch better.

“No. That has a different smell.”

Whatever was alarming Charlie was spreading through the rest of the pack. People were nudging each other, pointing west. They picked up their pace, as if they could tell where it was coming from.

Looking toward the direction everyone was pointing at and heading, I saw a plume of smoke rising from right about where my cottage should be.

No, Groza wouldn’t. It would be insanity.

I tried to pick up my pace, still juggling the supplies until I turned the corner. My cottage, the place I'd tried to make a home for Charlie and me, was burning to the ground.

I let out a small cry. It wasn't even pain I was feeling. No, I was almost devoid of anything but shock for a second.

"Piper?" Charlie was crying, grabbing on to my jacket, his lower lip trembling.

I tried to rein in the explosion of emotions that rocked me as I saw what this was going to do to him.

"It's okay. It'll be okay. They'll put out the fire and then we'll fix it," I said, still edging closer.

Charlie's face was now covered in tears. He didn't believe a word I said. As we got closer, it was hard to argue that I was right. The cottage was going to be a hill of ashes soon. I'd never seen such an all-encompassing blaze. Everyone was gathered around, just watching it burn to the ground.

I stopped at the edge of the crowd, just staring at the blaze in front of me.

"It was too late to save it," Buddie said, coming to stand beside us.

I didn't know who else was there. I didn't care as I watched the best home we'd had since Death Day go up in flames.

Charlie was hugging my waist, and I knew I should get him out of here, but I couldn't move. All I could do was watch the flames eat away the life we'd started to rebuild.

"Charlie, come on. Come with me," Buddie said.

"Yeah, Charlie, we've got something cool to show you," Trevor said. I hadn't even realized he was here, although where else would he be? The whole pack was watching my home burn down.

Slowly I felt Charlie letting go of me as they lured him away from the fire, as I should've done.

"That's what happens when you leave a wooden broom leaning against a burning stove," Groza said.

"I didn't leave the broom on the stove," I shot back. She wanted the whole pack to think this was my fault, when it was her goons.

She was actively trying to not smile. I could see her fighting it as she said, "Gillian saw it. She thought she smelled smoke and looked in the window. The broom burned a trail right up the wall. She called for help, but it was too late. Old wood like this goes up like kindling."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to get you in trouble," Gillian said, coming

over.

“It’s not your fault that this happened,” Groza said, laying a comforting hand on her arm. “Piper has been warned about this in the past. This is on her.”

Gillian might’ve seen a broom, but I hadn’t been the one to leave it there—not that anyone would believe me. It was the perfect thing to use against me because I had done it before, for a few seconds in front of Duncan. Groza had to have found out about that from him.

“We’ll find somewhere else for you to go, even though we have people bunking up with each other. We’ll do what we have to. I can only hope you’ll be more careful with the next place. If the trees and other cottages had been closer, you could’ve burned down this entire village, so I do hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

The entire pack listened as she handed down this lecture, and there was nothing to do but take it. Duncan walked over, surely having heard all of it.

My gut told me to let it go, not to bother denying it to him. I could see the way he ran his gaze over me, as if he really thought this was my fault. It wasn’t a harsh look, more like he was pitying me. That was too much to stomach.

“Duncan, I—”

“It’s loud here. Follow me.”

He nodded off across the way. I followed him after only a quick glance over at Groza, who for once didn’t seem to care that he wanted a private word with me. Why would she? She had him convinced I was an idiot.

“Duncan, I know we have our problems, but please believe me. I didn’t leave the broom there. I wouldn’t have been that careless,” I said, trying to keep my voice low enough that the entire pack wouldn’t hear me.

“Look, I know you would never do it on purpose. But accidents happen.” I was still too speechless to reply when he added, “No one will hold this against you.”

He was so blind that he didn’t see what Groza had done. That her goons were constantly setting me up.

“I’m telling you, I didn’t leave the broom there. I need you to believe me. It matters.” I was in a pack where most of the people wanted me only because of some superstitious need. There were two alphas, one trying to off me and the other trying to keep me neatly in my place. If I lost the confidence of Duncan, what did I have left here? How was I going to wake up every day

when absolutely no one had my back?

“Sometimes we do things without realizing it.”

“But I—”

“Piper, it happened. Maybe Charlie did it. I’ve seen him playing with the broom, pretending it was a dragon.”

“He won’t go near the wood stove. He knows he’s not allowed to.”

He was shaking his head before I finished speaking. I might as well be talking to a mountain, as much as I was going to move him.

“Look, I know what you’re trying to imply, but there is one thing Groza wouldn’t do, and that’s burn down her village. It’s done. It doesn’t matter how it happened.”

He could say that because everyone in the pack revered him. He’d never had to prove himself. When he said something, it was automatically skewed toward unquestioning truth. That wasn’t my reality, and he was a point in case.

“Can’t you even give it a few seconds’ thought that it was her people? Maybe she burned the cottage down to drive me out? But you can’t see it. You dismiss it out of hand.”

“Everyone here is her people. She would never put this place in jeopardy. I know you two don’t get along, but she wouldn’t do that. You need to let it go.”

Everyone was looking at me, listening. Not a single one of them believed me. I could see it in the way they stared, as if I were showing my colors but continuing to deny it and not own up to my mistake. I might be the guide, but I was also a young human, and that didn’t rank high around here.

“You know, you’re right. Let’s just let it go. It’s done.”

I walked away from him, closer to the cottage. Thick black smoke filled the air, making me want to choke. It had been my home, Charlie’s home, and it was gone. When the last of the embers died out, I’d go and see what I could gather of our things, and then...

I wasn’t sure. Go with Kicks? All the reasons I’d said no to him were still there. But for now, I had to regroup, and I couldn’t waste my energy on someone who wouldn’t take any of my thoughts into consideration.

I walked back to the cottage, where almost the entire pack all gathered around, watching it burn, taking turns looking at me as well.

I didn’t know what to do. Where to go.

Groza walked over again a few minutes later, doing her victory lap.

“We’re packed in pretty tight, but Gillian has graciously offered you the spare bed in her daughter’s room. Duncan and I will take Charlie to our place.”

“No. He stays with me.” I’d kill her here on the spot before I’d let her take Charlie.

“Her and Charlie are going to take my bedroom,” Rastin said. “I’ve already made plans to bunk elsewhere.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded, as if to say not to worry about it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“MY TRAIN IS GONE,” Charlie said.

“I’ll find you a new one.” I was going through bags of clothing that Buddie had brought me a few minutes ago, trying to figure out where to put it. Rastin had told me I could use his bureau, but it felt strange to shove our things in there.

They didn’t even feel like our things, but other than what we’d had on our backs, it was all we had now.

“Where am I going to get a train like that? Duncan gave it to me. I’ve never seen one like that before. It was special.” Charlie was sitting on Rastin’s bed, staring at me as if it would be a true miracle to get another one of those trains.

“I’ll find you a train,” I said, trying to be patient. It should’ve been easier, but everything was a struggle right now.

“I know a good place filled with nothing but trains. I’ll bring you there,” Kicks said from the door.

I whipped my head to him, feeling as if the tension coursing through my body had decreased a hair. At least he was someone who wanted to keep me alive and who didn’t hold Groza as his first priority.

It was impossible for him to have not seen the blackened cottage next door, or what was left of it. Even if he’d been blind, the entire area stank of smoke.

“Headed over because I saw the plume. Wanted to make sure everything was okay.” He cleared his throat, giving me a pointed look.

“They say it was from a broom leaning on the wood stove.” Might as well

head it off, because the gossip mill would make sure he heard.

He shook his head, as if it were too ridiculous to even comment upon, and gave me a pointed look. “You’re lucky you weren’t in there sleeping whatever started it.”

I’d known that *I told you so* was coming. I’d give him this one. He deserved it. Plus, it was nice to not have to convince someone that I hadn’t started it.

“Wanted to see if you needed a place to go.” His brows rose, as if maybe I was finally ready to make the sane choice.

“No. Not yet.” The last thing I was going to do was run out of here, tail between my legs. Not only was I staying here, I’d march right into that roast tonight with my head high, because even if no one else believed it, I hadn’t burned down the cottage. If they didn’t believe me, they could all go to hell. If it wasn’t for Charlie needing a pack, I’d leave the whole lot of them, go find a little house somewhere completely abandoned, and call it a day on shifters and humans alike. *That* was my mood right now.

“They’re doing a game tournament tonight,” Kicks said, giving Charlie a nudge and a knowing smirk.

“Is Crackers there? Magnum?” It was the first time in hours he didn’t look like he was on the verge of tears.

Kicks nodded.

Charlie’s head swiveled to me. “Can I go? Please?”

Tonight wasn’t going to be pleasant by any standards. If I could save Charlie from having to go with me, get away from the charred view of his cottage, it was probably for the best.

“You’re sure?” I asked Kicks, afraid he’d just put them up to this for Charlie’s sake.

“Positive.”

I almost believed it to be true. The older male shifters didn’t seem to mind having the younger kids around. No, the way they smiled and laughed with Charlie was way too genuine, not as if they were making the best of babysitting duty.

“You’ll bring him back in the morning, though, right?”

Charlie jumped up and down.

Kicks walked in and knelt beside me where I’d gone back to rifling through the bag. “Yes—unless you want to come with me now? I’ve got a suite waiting for you.”

I kept my eyes on the bag, trying not to focus on how close he was or how good he smelled.

“No. I’m fine here, at least for now.” I’d take it day by day going forward.

“Don’t mistake standing your ground for standing on quicksand to make a point to people who don’t matter.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything that would encourage more talk about it. There was nothing to say. I might be smack dab in the middle of quicksand, but I was making a last stand, no matter how unstable the ground under me was.

“What’s that mean?” Charlie asked.

“Nothing. Kicks likes to say silly things.”

I walked into the roast, wishing I’d taken a shot of something strong before I left. With all the looks coming my way, holding my head up was a little harder than anticipated.

Groza turned to me, and there was a flash of surprise on her expression as our gazes locked across the clearing. In that split second, her guard dropped and there was nothing more obvious than the burning hate that was eating her up. It showed in her eyes, the line of her mouth, the tense grip on her mug. When she looked at me, all she thought of was killing me. One way or another, she was going to do it. It might not have worked the last two times, but there would be more attacks, and they’d keep coming until I was dead.

Any attempt at rationalizing that she’d only sent out her goons to scare me, or that Blanca wasn’t *really* trying to poison me, was smashed to smithereens in that second. I’d known she hated me, but that was the look of someone who didn’t just want me dead out of convenience—she wanted me tortured before I went.

She turned from me, getting herself under control, but not before her eyes shot to a spot over my shoulder.

I turned to see Kicks walking over to join me. He smiled his charming smile, the one that could melt all the ladies, but there was a coldness in his gaze as he scanned the crowd.

I resented the gush of relief that coursed through me, which battled with

my need to stand on my own.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Charlie?”

“Charlie’s having a good time with the guys, but I thought I would be more useful here.” He stopped beside me with a finality that gave me the sense he wouldn’t be mingling much.

I didn’t bother protesting. I didn’t have the luxury of chasing away the only friendly face I could see. Even the parts of the pack that wanted me there were still looking at me like they didn’t know how could I be so careless, so reckless. I could see the thoughts, the condemnations: *Just another human, after all.*

Kicks’ hand was at my back, the tension almost pulsing through, as he leaned toward me. “I’m trying to wrap my head around this situation, and why you’re allowing it to continue when it could have dire consequences, which today has proven. Yet here you are.”

I wanted to argue the point, tell him how wrong he was or at least deny it, but how could I? Not when Groza was there, staring as she was. She’d burned down the cottage I was living in, and no one had even *tried* to back me up when I said it wasn’t my fault. The situation was untenable, but what did I do? Some of these people relied on me. Panicked when I wasn’t here. Charlie had just settled in again. How did I pull him from here, his friends, the little stability he had?

“I...” I shook my head, knowing none of that was going to sound logical after the last turn of events.

Kicks wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling us away from the curious eyes and behind the nearest building. To everyone watching, it looked as if we were sneaking away to mess around. That would’ve been so much easier than the truth. We were about to have it out, and I had no answers for him.

“This can’t continue,” he said.

He was right, everything he said was the truth, but making a break wasn’t as easy as he wanted it to be. How many places would I drag Charlie away from? How much upheaval could he sustain before I scarred him for life? “I’ll know when it’s time.”

“Anything short of now makes me doubt your judgment. I can’t be here every minute, and she *will* kill you.”

“I’m not asking you to babysit me. This isn’t your problem.” I moved to walk around him, having no other argument.

He blocked my path. "I've decided it is."

"Then that's *your* issue." I pushed him, knowing on some level that I was venting all my anger and frustration in his direction. I didn't mean to, but it was bubbling over, and I couldn't afford to let it loose where I wanted to direct it.

He stepped back. "You're right. It's my issue."

There was something about those words, that tone, that should've given me a warning. If I were smarter, I would've heeded it, but he wasn't the only one that was on edge and ready for a fight. My adrenaline was acting like blinders in that moment, and I could only see what was coming right at me.

I walked past him, back into the group, who seemed to all be waiting for my return.

Kicks didn't follow right away. I wasn't sure where he'd gone to, but I was alone, and I could actually see the tension smoothing out in the concerned faces of the pack. They might not be overjoyed with me at the moment, but that didn't mean they wanted Kicks to take me away. I was their guide, and they were like kids with a toy.

I was sipping on some ale, deciding how long I had to suffer through this night, now alone, when Kicks walked back.

"I thought you left," I asked, my tone not quite apologetic, but close. Or maybe it was relief in my voice.

"I almost did. Then I decided one of us had to do the sane thing." He was staring at me so intently that it felt like the entire crowd had disappeared. Kicks was about to go rogue, and I wasn't sure I could stop him.

He dipped his head close to my ear and whispered so softly that even shifters would find it impossible to hear. To onlookers, it appeared more like an intimate moment.

"You're not thinking logically anymore. You're operating out of fear, and that's going to get you killed. I'm not going to let that happen, and no one is going to stop me. Not even you."

His words hit me like the red flag they were, and I lost the ability to speak as reality hit me harder than someone slamming a rock into my skull. My words were swallowed by fear. What was he going to do?

Before my mouth had a chance to catch up to my head, Kicks had a hand at the small of my back, steering me toward a picnic table. He took my mug of beer and put it down before hoisting me up on top of the table. He leapt up to join me.

“Hey, all, listen up. I’ve got an announcement to share,” he yelled into the crowd.

Kicks pulled me into his side. The crowd that had already begun turning toward us now looked as panic-stricken as I felt. We all knew some version of what was about to come. I should have jumped off the table, made a joke of it, but I didn’t. I stood there, letting him put on this show, knowing what the finale would be.

“I wanted to announce to everyone that Piper has agreed to be my mate.” Kicks lifted me up and swung me around as if this were a celebration. Or maybe it was to distract from the shock on my face. There was expecting something and then hearing it, seeing it, experiencing it.

There were only a handful of cheers, and those from a few of Kicks’ pack at the edge of the clearing. They hadn’t been here earlier. Had he expected trouble? There was definitely a lack of smiles. No well wishes to be heard. I looked out on a crowd who appeared stunned, and that looked to be wearing off quickly, as foreheads began to furrow.

Then the calls began.

“Is she leaving?”

“What does that mean?”

“She’s going?”

“She’ll be residing wherever I am,” Kicks said. “She’s my mate. Now, if you’ll excuse us, it’s been a long night, and we’ve got a lot of planning to do.”

I hadn’t put a face to most of the questions, and I didn’t want to try. I let them blur, taking the easy path. There were a few faces I couldn’t seem to avoid. Duncan was looking at me like I’d ripped his heart out of his chest. The guys were watching on almost as if they’d resigned themselves to this ending, sad but accepting the inevitable.

“I gave you my favorite French press and everything,” Gillian said as we walked past her.

“Gillian, I’m not...”

She walked away, her hand up, as if she couldn’t bear to hear another word.

“They’ll adjust,” Kicks said, wrapping his arm around me.

He was steering me through the crowd, while my head was still wrapping around what he’d done, when I found myself in front of Groza and Duncan.

“Congratulations,” she said, not appearing as happy as I’d expect her to

be. She'd just rid herself of me. She should be doing cartwheels.

Duncan merely nodded, staring at me like I'd somehow wronged *him*.

"Thank you," Kicks said. "We don't see a reason to linger around here, so Piper will be moving in with me tonight. There's no reason to put out the guys."

Duncan nodded again, seeming speechless.

"Understandable," Groza said.

"Just so we're clear," Kicks said, "Piper and Charlie are my family now, with all that that entails. Everyone knows how protective I am of my pack, so it'll come to no one's surprise that I'll be even more so of my mate, and Charlie, who will be my son." There was an edge to his voice. He wasn't exactly calling Groza out, but he was drawing a thick red line a mile wide.

"Are you implying something?" Duncan took a step closer, finally finding his voice.

"Implying? No. I can't imagine why you would take that as an implication. I'm flat-out stating that if someone messes with Piper, they're going to deal with me."

Duncan took another step toward him, and Groza reached out, laying a hand on his arm.

"Don't let her hold you back," Kicks said, smiling as if he'd enjoy the altercation.

"Duncan, let it be," Groza said.

"Probably for the best, considering how it ended last time," Kicks said.

Well, that just confirmed the bad blood I'd already sensed.

Kicks nodded to his pack members as we walked away from the gathering.

"I can't believe you did that," I said, walking toward the gates. It wasn't like I had anything worth packing after the fire.

"You could've stopped me, but you didn't. You wanted this. You were just mentally stuck, and it was going to get you killed," he said, following after me.

"Did you see the way everyone looked at me? Like I was ruining their lives. Whether it's true or not, they find some kind of solace with my being here, and I'm abandoning them." I didn't even bother lowering my voice as we passed the guards at the gate. Everyone would hear about the spectacle anyway. What was a little more gossip at this point?

"I find solace in your not being dead, so there you go." Kicks didn't seem

to see the point in lowering his voice either.

I searched the area around us, looking for eavesdroppers, before stopping in the road. “Duncan wouldn’t have—”

“Let her kill you? It doesn’t seem like you’re his priority.” His chest rose and fell, as if Duncan’s very name made his heart pound harder.

“Why do you say hurtful things?” I asked.

“Because I can’t keep watching you fall when he won’t catch you. Was the fire not enough of a wake-up call?”

I hated when he used logic against me. I was in no mood for it. “You still shouldn’t have done that.”

“Fine. Then don’t come. We’ll say we changed our minds and you can stay here until they kill you.”

I almost wanted to call his bluff, turn and walk back through the gates. But I had Charlie to think about, and his words earlier today kept ringing in my ears. What if we’d been sleeping when they set the place on fire? What if Charlie was with me on the next attempt to make me disappear? Even if he wasn’t, how did I leave him on his own? For what? A pack that thought so little of me anyway?

I turned and resumed walking, resigned to what I had to do. It was time to leave the pack and find a new home, yet again.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KICKS HELD the lobby door open for me, and his people, who were congregated there, stood up and started clapping. Shouts of “Congratulations!” and “Welcome to the pack!” rang around the room.

“Thank you,” I said repeatedly, smiling as if I were as happy as they were. Crackers and Magnum came in offering congratulations as well. Charlie was right behind them and came running over to me.

“Are we really staying here?” he asked.

“Yes. But we’re just down the road.”

He nodded, looking as if he were weighing having a different home with the perks of what this place had to offer.

Someone popped a bottle of champagne, and glasses were handed out. I was patted on the back so many times I thought my spine was going to break. These people didn’t know their strength.

I smiled and thanked them, going through the motions while my head was still too fried to sort out any of it.

“Thanks, everyone,” Kicks said. “We appreciate the well wishes, but it’s been a long night. I want to go get them settled in.”

“You settle them in real good!” one of the guys said, getting a good laugh from the crowd.

They were still carrying on as we walked down the hall.

“Can’t believe we’ve got ourselves a guide,” someone said.

“He sure pulled that off. I knew he was good with the ladies, but this is next level,” another said.

It was a reality check for sure. Kicks had never hidden his desire to have

a guide for his pack, but somehow it had felt like he'd been protecting me tonight. It might've been both, but I'd be foolish to think the two didn't go hand in hand, and that was probably being generous. Would he have cared if I lived if he hadn't wanted me for his pack?

"Why don't you two head up to the suite, and I'll be right there," he said, waving toward the stairs.

"Sure." I tried not to glare at him, but it was hard after that little reminder from his pack that I was just a pawn in his larger game. Yeah, I wanted to go back and shut them up too. Didn't they know they were tripping him up after he'd been playing me so smoothly?

"What did they mean?" Charlie asked as we climbed the stairs.

"They were kidding around. Sometimes people can be a little crude when they joke. Kicks has had a lot of girlfriends in the past, is all."

"But what does 'the next level' mean?" he asked, leaving no stone unturned—*ever*. Sometimes I felt like I was walking through a rock garden with this kid.

"You know how when you play games and there's different levels? Apparently, I'm the next level. That was sort of a compliment—I guess." At least, that was how I was going to try to think about it.

"I hope *I'm* next level one day." He spoke with the awe of a gamer whose greatest dream was reaching the final level.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You were born next level."

He smiled up at me, as if, because I said it, it must be true. It was like everything I said to him carried more gravity than it would on regular old Earth. Sometimes it made me afraid to speak, because what if I said the wrong thing? Just another way I could mess him up. Day-to-day childrearing felt like dancing around a land mine.

"I think this is the one." I pointed to the door of the suite we'd been in last time.

Kicks was walking down the hall toward us already. Guess telling his pack to shut the hell up didn't take very long. He smiled, then motioned to the door at the end of the hall, which was his suite. I guessed it made sense if I was his mate. I smiled at Charlie like this was all normal, even as it felt like my throat was closing and my rib cage constricting.

Had I been an idiot? Why had I let him rush us here so fast? I could've called it off, or said we'd be courting for a while. What had I done? I'd walked here of my own volition when I truly had no idea what kind of man

he was. Odds were I'd been played like a total idiot, and Charlie was going to have to take the ride with me, including the drop.

Could I go back? Groza hated me, had tried to kill me several times. Logic said we were both better off here, even if I had thrown my cards in with a manipulative psychopath.

I was barely maintaining normal breathing when Charlie glanced around and said, "They said you are mated now. Does this mean Kicks is going to be my brother? Or will he be more like my father, because you're sort of my mother?"

Now I *really* couldn't breathe, and I was supposed to answer this?

Kicks glanced at me. Whatever he saw urged him to answer for me. "You can call me whatever you want."

I took the nearest chair in the suite, which was similar to the one we'd stayed in. All the Victorian coziness was doing nothing for me right now.

"I'm going to be able to go to school and see my friends still?" Charlie asked.

"Yes. We're only a few minutes away," Kicks said as I slid even lower in the chair.

"What about my room? Am I going to have my own room? I really liked my room at the cottage, but that's gone now."

Kicks ruffled Charlie's hair the way I often did. "Not only are you going to have a room, it's going to have electricity, and we'll put in a game console. You can bring your friends over whenever you want to play, too."

"Really?" Charlie sounded as if he'd just been told there was proof of God.

I'd been lying awake in bed night after night worried sick thinking of Charlie being traumatized over moving if I decided to uproot him to come here. One gaming console later and it was all good? It was better than him crying, but I'd lost a hell of a lot of sleep for something with such an easy fix.

Kicks motioned Charlie over to the second door in the suite. "This is going to be your bedroom. We can work on making it feel more like yours tomorrow."

"Anything I want?" Charlie asked, yawning as he walked to the doorway, looking inside.

"Within reason. Piper has to be okay with it, and it can't kill you." Kicks leaned on the door, watching Charlie and being so patient with him that it was hard to imagine this was the wrong move.

Except when he eventually decided to go back to Arkansas, with us in tow.

I had to stop thinking. I'd worry about it as it came. That was all I had the energy for.

I got to my feet, eyeing Charlie's room as a short sanctuary. "Charlie, why don't you get ready for bed, okay? I'll help you get settled in."

"Do I have to?" he asked, and then yawned again.

"Yeah," I said, ushering him into the room.

"Pips?" Kicks said.

I glanced back at him.

"Don't overthink it."

"Sure," I said, trying to act as cool as him as I shut Charlie's door.

What did he mean? Don't overthink being with him, or don't overthink the situation? Didn't he realize by saying that, he'd doomed me to overthink? Didn't he know me at all by this point?

Someone had brought in some basic supplies, and I fumbled through getting Charlie ready for bed, all the while continuing to overthink things.

Charlie's eyes closed minutes after he hit the bed, but I waited just to make sure.

He was in a new room, a new bed. It had nothing to do with stalling. Zero connection.

I walked back into the sitting room with no idea what was to come.

"Do you want a drink?" Kicks asked, walking across the room toward the side bar.

"Sure."

"Bourbon?"

"Whatever you've got." I took a seat on the couch, trying not to fidget.

I'd never been a drinker, but the urge was growing as my situation declined.

He walked back over with two glasses, handing me one and settling onto the other half of the couch with his. He leaned back, sipping his drink, seeming utterly at ease. Did anything put him on edge, or did he not have that in his makeup?

"We should probably get some details out of the way," he said.

"What details did you want to discuss?" Before he could answer, I downed the bourbon.

"Would you like another before I answer?"

I did, but I still had a kid to worry about.

Kicks must have sensed my desire, because he got up and poured me another glass anyway. “No one is getting in here. You don’t have to worry.”

Screw it. I took the glass but then sipped the refill, trying to show some restraint.

“First, if we’re going to be mated, we need to live together. This is a two-bedroom suite, and since it’s the largest one, this was the best for us.”

My sip grew closer to a gulp, then another, before I said, “So I’d share a room...”

“With me.”

He waited patiently, watching to see if I had another question. I had many, but I wasn’t quite ready to ask any of them yet.

He cleared his throat. “Look, I explained to you how I felt about mating, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to force intimacy. Still, I want to at least *appear* to be committed to being together. I feel it sets a better example.”

“So you won’t sleep with anyone?”

“We need it to look real, but if it’s not, I’m not going to be celibate for the rest of my life.” He shrugged, as if that was common sense.

“You’d sleep with another woman while you’re mated to me?” My voice was a little harsher than I’d intended.

“I’d be discreet, but yes, especially if you’re saying you want it to be a mating in name only.” He stared at me as if this were all so obvious. “You can’t expect me to never have sex again.”

I wanted to jump across the couch and rip his hair out of his skull.

“You told me you didn’t want me to step out,” I said. “But *you* get to?”

“But it’s your *choice* not to have sex. I’d choose to have sex with you.”

His stating it so point-blank numbed my brain. “I don’t like your arrangements,” I said. It was the best I could come up with when he was telling me he wanted to sleep with me.

“Once we get settled somewhere more permanent, we could probably spread out into different bedrooms and figure out a situation that works for both of us.”

“Till then, no one does anything,” I said, wanting to lock him down.

“Fine. I can agree to that.”

Settled somewhere—like Arkansas? Would he expect me to move there? After all the moving, would one *more* move matter? Either way, I wasn’t going to think about it right now.

A couple minutes passed as we both adjusted to this new situation.

“I gathered a few things for you and left them in the bedroom,” he said nonchalantly.

I was already shaking my head. “I can sleep on the couch.”

He waved a hand toward Charlie’s room. “Are you going to tell the kid to lie, then? He’s an open book. At some point he’ll tell people that you’re sleeping on the couch.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I told people you were going to be my mate so that it would be an easier transition. Shifters don’t tend to accept movements from pack to pack well, even for a guide. They view it as disloyal.” He got up, refilling his glass and then leaning on the table there as he turned back to me. “Look, if you don’t want to do this, tell me now while we can still undo it. We’ll say we weren’t compatible and call it quits before it sets into the pack’s psyche. We can play it whatever way you want. It might be a rougher transition, but everyone will adjust. Just make a decision.”

“No.” It was a knee-jerk response, and I could see from Kicks’ expression that he was as surprised at my quick answer as I was. “I want Charlie to be secure,” I added.

Kicks nodded, looking as iffy on my explanation as I was feeling about it. It was for Charlie. This was the only time I’d ever felt sure about anything, and I was sure this was the move. If I was Kicks’ mate, everyone would view Charlie like his son, in a sense. It was just the smart thing to do.

It was.

I downed the last of my bourbon. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll go get settled in. I’m pretty tired.”

I walked in and stared at the bed. He followed me a few seconds later, walking to the other side of the room, already acting as if this were normal. How many women had he been with that he was so at ease?

Doesn’t matter, because he’s mine now.

Huh? Where had that come from? He wasn’t really mine. Well, not completely mine, but I guessed I did have a certain ownership.

He reached out and grabbed the back of his shirt, pulling it over his head and then tossing it on a nearby chair. His hands went to his pants next.

“Are you going to sleep in...” Underwear? Naked?

He froze, glancing at me as if he’d encountered an issue he’d never been faced with before.

“I’ve got some sweatpants,” he said.

I nodded, trying not to look at him as he moved toward the dresser. Shirtless was already too much. It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen him naked before. I’d lain on top of him, in fact and the vision of him was burned into my brain. Even now, I feared that thinking about it would set off a fresh wave of pheromones.

“The shower here works, right?” I edged my way into the bathroom before I could fill the room with a scent that screamed, *Take me, take me right now and anywhere you want. On the bed, the floor, the dresser, just do it.*

I turned on the shower, not even messing around with the hot water. The colder the better. I showered until I couldn’t stand it and had obliterated every thought of his perfection.

I tiptoed out, glad that I’d grabbed pajamas, and found him on the satellite phone, his hand braced on the window, sweats slung low on his hips. This was his idea of modesty? A fresh batch of hormones swelled up all over again.

“Thank you. Yes, I’ll pass on the congrats.”

I crawled into bed, pulling the blankets up almost over my head so that it would hopefully smother some of my scent.

“Maddocks wanted to congratulate us.”

“Uh huh. That’s nice.” I curled up with my back to him, wanting to wash him out of my mind. I could feel my skin burning up because just looking at him made me think of sex. Did he know? Could he smell me? That wasn’t a good thought either.

“I’m attracted to you as well. There’s no reason to be uncomfortable about it,” he said softly. “It’s just a part of life. If you’d been born a shifter, you’d know this isn’t a big deal.”

“I wouldn’t have had those thoughts if you didn’t flaunt yourself.” My tone was almost a screech, like I was a crazy person.

“Are you accusing me of dressing like I want it? Because that’s not a lie,” he said, laughter in his voice.

“Please be quiet. I’m trying to sleep.” I kept my eyes squeezed closed, wondering what the hell I’d agreed to.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE BEDROOM WAS QUIET. I opened an eye a slit, making sure the coast was clear before I sat up. I was going to start wearing eye covers so I didn't have to watch Kicks walking around the bedroom with way too much flesh for me to feast upon.

The suite was empty other than a note from Kicks that he'd be back later tonight. An immediate need to find Charlie gripped me. This place was secure. It was crawling with shifters and Blanca was gone. He was probably fine.

Yeah, it didn't matter. I needed to lay eyes on Charlie anyway.

There was some women's clothing piled on the dresser, and I threw on the first pair of jeans and sweater my hands landed on. I did the bare minimum to make myself presentable.

I headed to the game room first.

Charlie's laughter rang out into the hallway before I got to the room. There, in the midst of a bunch of huge shifters, was Charlie playing his little heart out. Breakfast plates were scattered about. The smell of bacon still clung to the air, making my stomach growl.

If we were going to live here, I was going to have to start curtailing the games a little. *Maybe*. It was hard to cut off a luxury that might go away at any moment and never come back. But he was at least going to have to go to school during the day.

I took a step toward him and then stopped, backing out instead. He was having fun with the guys, immersed in the moment. The last thing I wanted to do was rip him from his fun and drag him back to reality, especially when I

was dreading it so much. I'd talk to him about starting back at school later. That was soon enough.

I turned down the hallway, finding Crackers walking toward me.

"I need to go pick up some things from the stores. Is Charlie okay here for a while?" I said.

"Of course he is. You're both part of our pack now," he said, as if he really couldn't imagine what else we'd be doing but hanging out like this.

"Thanks." Maybe moving here wasn't the *worst* thing I could've done. It was a lot better than having Charlie watch his home burn to the ground and our things being stolen.

My stomach growled, and the smell of freshly baked bread drew me toward the dining room. There was no one there, but I followed the noises to the kitchen. Evangeline was writing notes in a book as she added ingredients to a huge pot.

"Hey," she said, looking toward me as I entered. "Sorry I missed your entry last night, but I heard congratulations are in order."

"Yes, it looks to be that way." Another pack member happy I was here. Still, it was hard to shake the doubt of whether she'd be this cheery if I hadn't come in as a guide. It didn't really matter, as I was going to make the most out of this situation.

"I'm surprised you made it as long as you did over there with Gross-a. That's what we call her around here." She reached over and cut a thick slab of crusty bread, put it on a plate, and then put a cup with some gravy beside it. "Here, try this. I'm working on a new recipe."

"This is incredible. You must've had a packed restaurant." One thing was becoming clear—we'd be eating a lot better here. The savory flavors with the thick crust of bread were like eating a piece of heaven. As much as Charlie had missed his games, *this* was like stepping back in time for me. I'd never been a true connoisseur of food until the bar had been dropped so low. This was a reason to move to this pack, if nothing else.

"I might not have my restaurant anymore, but I still enjoy cooking. And you never know, right? I mean, things could eventually get back to normal."

She was looking at me with such longing, such loss, that it was hard not to play along.

"Yeah, I mean, you never know. I know I'd line up for this," I said.

She refilled my cup and cut me another hunk of bread. It wasn't clear if this was a reward for agreeing or because I'd inhaled her food.

“What is that smell?” Another shifter, with tawny hair and big green eyes, walked in.

“Hey,” I said noncommittally, wishing I could remember his name. I was going to have to start making notes.

“It’s Piper, the new girl,” he said, grabbing a piece of the bread and going to dunk it into the pot.

Evangeline swatted his hand before he could.

“Not just some girl. *Guide*,” Evangeline corrected him, and then handed him a cup. “And you know I hate it when you dunk in the pot like it’s all for you.”

“Okay, well, welcome, new girl! Nice to have you here.” He didn’t acknowledge Evangeline’s chastising him or the scowl as she handed him a mug.

“Thanks. I appreciate the welcome. It’s a great place,” I said, watching the two of them about to come to blows when he tried to take half a loaf of bread. She wielded the wooden spoon like it was a sword.

“You’ll like Arkansas even better. We were in a really good position, having a settlement near the river. Kicks has a couple of our engineers setting up a mill to generate electricity, and the land out there is beautiful.” He was still smiling, even as he almost took a blow to his knuckles.

“Yeah, that sounds nice.” Arkansas. Was that where we’d be? It seemed so. Kicks had given me an out, and I hadn’t taken it.

“Piper, can I go scouting with the guys?” Charlie asked, popping his head into the kitchen with Magnum behind him. It seemed like the big guy was Charlie’s shadow, probably on Kicks’ orders—not that I minded.

“Scouting?” I asked. I’d barely come to grips with his being in the game room. Now he was going out?

“Don’t worry. It’s all in fun. We don’t get into too much trouble,” Crackers said, walking in next.

“They really don’t get in trouble,” Evangeline added. “It’s all good fun.”

I nodded, not a hundred percent sure I knew what scouting even meant.

Crackers lifted a loaf of bread off the counter and retreated fast.

“Hey, that’s for dinner!” Evangeline yelled at his back.

“We’ll be back tonight sometime!” Crackers yelled, hightailing it out of there with everyone else, until it was just Evangeline and me again.

“They’re such pigs. You can’t imagine how much they eat. They don’t even appreciate the food, but swallow it whole.” She was carrying on as if

this were a litany she'd spoken many times before. "Anyway, I've got a nice dinner planned for you and Kicks. I'll have someone run it up around dusk."

"No, no. I don't want to put you out."

She opened her mouth, probably about to spew some mumbo-jumbo about how newlyweds should have some time alone.

"I think it's nicer to eat with the pack and get to know you all better, since you're going to be my family." It was mostly true, and had the added perk of cutting out awkward candlelight dinners.

I hightailed it out of there before she could put up a fight, some bread in my hand, feeling as bad as the guys had just been.

All I did was try to blend with the pack at dinner. I laughed at every joke and smiled until my cheeks hurt. I was making a home here for Charlie, one way or another. He wouldn't have to worry about who hated me ever again. I'd started off on the wrong foot in Groza's pack, and I wasn't doing anything to jeopardize our situation here.

By the time we made our way up to the suite, I was ready to drop from the exertion of being so incredibly nice to everyone.

Charlie looked like he was about to drop too, but it was probably from all the games and running around he'd done today. Of the two of us, he seemed to be transitioning easier.

"Come on, Charlie. Time for bed. I want you rested enough to go to school tomorrow," I said.

"No games?" He looked at me as those were the most appalling words he'd ever heard.

"Maybe after you do your homework, but I don't want you to fall behind. You still need to know things."

His face scrunched up until a yawn stretched it back out. "Can I have friends over? Kicks said I could."

"You can ask, but they'll have to check with their parents." I was yawning myself. "Okay, go get yourself to bed," I said before I fell asleep first.

Charlie wrapped his arms around my waist. I tried to hug him back, using my forearms that were covered by my sweater.

He went into his room while I turned and caught Kicks staring at me.

"I'm heading to bed. I'm pretty tired." I acted as if he hadn't given me a look.

I scurried into the bedroom. I'd take a quick shower and hopefully be asleep before he came in and started stripping.

Kicks was already in the bedroom when I came out of the bathroom.

"What is that smell?" he asked before taking another whiff, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was smelling.

"Huh? What do you mean?" I walked toward the bed.

"That smell." He stood in front of me. "What did you do?" He leaned closer, smelling my neck.

"What do you mean?" I repeated, playing dumb.

"That smell?" His lip was curled up as if I'd rolled around in a pile of manure.

"You mean my perfume?" I asked innocently, as if that couldn't be what he was talking about. I'd gone nose blind in my determination to find a good scent, but this one couldn't be that bad. It would've cost big bucks, way more than I could've afforded, if the store hadn't been abandoned.

"I like how you smell, and you're burying it with that stuff." He leaned closer again, breathing me in, and it sent flares of awareness through me.

I would've been better off skipping the shower until tomorrow and limiting contact. If I'd been in bed with my eyes closed, this wouldn't be happening.

"I don't have the same shampoos I had at the cottage. You'll just have to adjust to a new scent anyway." And a much stronger scent, so *all* he could smell was the perfume.

"I'm not talking about the shampoo. I didn't like that either, but at least it wasn't so strong."

"You mean you like the scent of my skin?" No one had ever said that to me before. Yes, they'd complimented a scent I'd worn, but not *my* scent.

"Yes. I like how *you* smell."

Between the leaning and the compliments, it was like he was trying to arouse me.

He smirked, then laughed softly to himself. "It's not going to work anyway. Smells are layered but still there. You could go swimming in that and I'd still pick up on other scents."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, my voice going awkwardly high for some reason. As if I hadn't already been embarrassed, now my voice was declaring me a liar and caught.

"It doesn't matter. We have more important things to discuss."

He reached back and yanked his shirt over his head in one of those single-handed movements that all the hot guys seemed to do. Instead of my hormones going into overdrive, because Kicks could turn on a broken-down car with no gas, panic kicked in. It was hard to get turned on when you were paralyzed with terror. If I hadn't seen him watching me with Charlie, I might've gotten the impression he was looking for something else. Even knowing what this was about, part of my body still responded as if it *were* something else.

He stood right in front of me with all that bare flesh and said, "Touch me."

"I'm not playing this game." I crossed my arms and took a step back. This wasn't something I was going to risk, not with him. Not with anyone I didn't want to kill.

He grabbed my hands and put them flat on his chest.

I tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let me, wrapping his arms around my back so that my hands were planted on him.

"Please, you have to stop." He was immovable, and panic was choking me. "You have to stop." I shoved, but he wouldn't budge. The man was crazy, and it was going to get him killed. I waited for the worst to come, a knot in my throat and tears threatening.

"It's going to be okay," he said softly, looking at me as I fixated on his chest.

"I don't want to hurt you," I said, waiting for his flesh to change.

"I'm not afraid." He wasn't budging.

I looked up at him, my voice cracking as I said, "You don't understand. What you saw? What I did to those men? I didn't *try* to do that. It just happened. I don't have control of it." I tried to shift my forearms, but it was impossible with how close he held me to him.

"You're not going to hurt me," he said, completely confident. "That's not who you are."

"You are so damned stubborn. What if I get mad? I don't have control of it." I could feel my heart pounding now, and what if that was enough to trigger it?

"You know I'm not going to let you leave this pack now that you committed, right?" he said, smiling down at me, as calm as could be. "You're trying to make me mad, but I'm not going to let you. It's not going to work."

They'd all been right. He was crazy. Utterly, completely crazy.

“You agreed to be my mate. I gave you an out. You didn’t take it. You’re mine now.”

Those words had the exact opposite effect of what he was trying for. They didn’t anger me. They made me want to sink into him. I was his, at least as far as the packs were concerned, and it sounded as if he believed it too.

That made him mine. My pulse was growing more erratic, but it had nothing to do with fear now.

He started to caress my lower back, gliding his other hand upward until he cupped the back of my head. I shuddered, my breathing shallow, as my eyes locked with his.

He dipped his head closer to mine. It started out slow, his lips grazing mine, a feathering—a simple tasting, as if he were getting the feel of how we felt against each other’s flesh. It was such a simple moment, and it took less than a second for my entire body to feel like it was on fire.

I arched into him, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

Something happened, clicked into place between us, and it was like the earth shifted beneath us. His controlled movements turned raw, and something savage inside of me answered.

One arm wrapped around my waist and I was suddenly under him, splayed out on the bed.

The satellite phone rang on the table right beside us, its harsh beeps breaking us apart like a blast. We appraised each other as if we’d just met as the ring filled the silence caused by the shock.

I’d had boyfriends. Plenty of kisses. I’d never had such an explosion of intensity as I’d experienced with him.

The phone continued to ring.

“I’ve got to get that,” he said, and for once he looked as unsettled as I was.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“WHAT?” Kicks answered the phone while I stood there, still reeling from a kiss. That was all it had been, and I was rocked. No, that might not even be accurate. Bouldered? Mountained?

“Why?” He spoke the word the way I’d call someone a jerk. That was my first hint it wasn’t someone he liked. The fact that they hadn’t called the room phone meant it wasn’t anyone from his pack, most likely, unless they were calling from Arkansas. I had a strong hunch it was from somewhere much closer.

The amount of disgust in his voice pointed to one of two likely people.

There was a long pause while I waited for more hints.

“That doesn’t explain why you need *her*.”

Oh yes, it was definitely Groza or Duncan. I dropped onto the bed, almost not caring what they wanted beyond a mild curiosity. She’d tried to kill me. She burned down my cottage. More importantly, she’d burned down Charlie’s home. Her needs were not my priority.

“They want to speak to you,” Kicks said. “Do you want to talk to them? Your call. I’ll hang up if that’s what you want.” He hadn’t bothered to cover the phone, so they heard every word.

He obviously didn’t want me to speak to them. I didn’t actually want to either, but just in case...

“What do they want?” I asked.

“There’s some sort of problem with their pack. I’m not getting the full story, but they want us there. Technically you, but I’m not letting you go alone.”

I'd never had someone who cared if I went somewhere alone. Even my ex-boyfriends hadn't been this concerned about my welfare. Although I'd dated them prior to the end of the world, so there was that. Post-Death Day, you had a much higher chance of dying just walking down the street. Either way, it made me feel all warm and mushy inside.

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, not wanting them listening to every word I said, even if he was cool with it. I jotted down my question and held up the pad.

Do you think it's a setup?

"No. Whatever is going on, they truly believe they need you. They sound desperate." He practically spoke right into the phone so they could hear every word.

He grinned at me. I swallowed back a laugh. Was it mean? Maybe, but not as cruel as burning down someone's home.

I finally motioned to the phone and nodded. It was only a few minutes away, and what if the pack, who I still felt some loyalty to, needed me? Plus, the curiosity was driving me to find out.

Kicks didn't say anything for a few seconds, but sighed loudly enough to make everyone, including them, know exactly how he felt about the situation.

"We're coming," he said, looking at me as if to say he was honoring my choice but didn't like it.

"I really don't think Duncan would try to kill me, no matter what our issues have been." Maybe I was giving him too much credit, but there was still loyalty there, at least somewhat on my side. If nothing else, he'd gotten me out of New York, and then saved Charlie's life. No matter what happened beyond that, I would always feel indebted.

"I don't like it. After everything that's been done, that they think they can ask you for anything burns me."

He tossed the phone onto the chair, moving his body like it was a restrained coil, ready to spring.

"I'm not doing anything but hearing them out," I said, watching his tense form move around the bedroom.

"They don't even deserve that." He grabbed a sweater, yanking it over his head. "You don't need to agree to anything. I don't care what the problem is—it's theirs, not yours."

"I can handle this. I'm not looking to do her any favors," I said.

“What about him?” He stopped walking and was staring at me, almost as if he were jealous. “Do you actually believe that, after everything that’s happened, your emotions won’t get in the way?”

“He’s done some things for me I won’t ever forget. If I can help him, then I probably will.”

I could see Kicks growing more rigid with my words.

Then he was across the room, wrapping an arm around my waist, pulling me into him. “I’m not letting you go in there to agree to something that’s going to get you killed to save his ass.”

His eyes were raw, the lines of his jaw tense, as if he really couldn’t bear the idea of something happening to me. I wasn’t so naïve anymore. I knew what shifters thought of humans, even ones that were elevated to guide status. He might seem different, but so had Duncan. I could never forget that I was still just a human when it came down to it.

“I know, what a shame if you lose your guide, huh? Especially after all the work you had to do to get me here.”

His jaw locked down so hard that I waited to hear teeth crack. Part of me instantly regretted my words. The sane part of me insisted on not being lured into some fairytale that would only break my heart.

“You’re right. You’re my guide now, and I won’t have them putting you in jeopardy.”

There was a possessiveness in his voice that didn’t sound businesslike at all. Although I was learning shifters could be a bit more possessive and territorial than your average human male, and that probably went even more so for alphas.

I couldn’t confuse his wanting to protect his property with actually caring.

His embrace loosened and he put space between us. I stood there for a few seconds before I went about getting ready.

We got to the pack in under a half an hour. He left the motorcycle at the gate, and we walked through.

Richie, who was at the gate, turned toward us. He flicked his gaze over me before it landed on Kicks, and he smiled. They didn’t resent Kicks. Didn’t

feel like he had run out on them. But me? I knew exactly how they felt when they looked at me, and it wasn't warm and fuzzy at the moment.

"You're here pretty late," Richie said.

"Alpha or not, when Groza calls, you come," Kicks said, laughing with him. There was no hint he would've even considered declining Groza, even though I was the only reason we were here.

We stepped onto their porch. Duncan opened the door, and we all stood silently for a few seconds as he took us in standing together, arriving at the home of him and his mate. We all seemed to need a second to digest the new reality. It felt like mine had improved, if only in perception. Duncan furrowed his brow, seeming to second that. As far as his position, there weren't too many people who seemed to envy it, but he'd made his choice.

Duncan finally nodded, waving us in and finding his words. "Thanks for coming."

He motioned toward the living room. Groza was there, standing by the window, probably having watched us arrive. I took a seat in the chair. Kicks didn't sit at all, instead walked over and stood by the chair I'd chosen, resting a hand on the back of it.

Groza took her sweet time settling onto the couch. It was like she'd forgotten in under an hour that she'd had to coerce us to come.

"Not for nothing, but you dragged us here in the middle of the night. If we could speed things up a bit...?" Kicks might've posed it like a question, but it came out as an order. If Richie at the gate could hear him now, it might be a bit of an eye-opener.

Duncan narrowed his gaze, as if he wanted to throw down over that comment but was holding back. I couldn't quite tell if it was what Kicks said, how he'd said it, or just because he was breathing.

"Someone just came down with *marbo*," Groza said.

"That is the issue that warrants our coming here in the middle of the night?" Kicks said, that edge in his tone growing sharper. "Just treat them."

"What's *marbo*?" I asked the room in general.

"What it is, is not your issue," Kicks said.

"You don't think so? You don't think your people are going to be affected?" Duncan said.

"If it does, we'll treat them as we always have," Kicks said.

"What is *marbo*?" I asked, growing louder. "You two wanted me here. Someone tell me what it is."

Duncan turned his gaze on me. “It’s a virus that affects our respiratory system and causes a type of pneumonia in us. It’s typically easy to cure, but not when you can’t find any webcap, a type of mushroom that is deadly to humans but cures marbo.”

“That stuff grows all over this area,” Kicks said, pretty much calling them liars.

“Except we can’t seem to find any of it. It’s been wiped out.” Groza glared at us, as if we’d been out picking mushrooms all day just for this occasion.

“We’re surrounded by forest here and you’re telling me there’s none to be found?” Kicks asked.

“Yes. That’s what we’re saying,” Groza shot back.

They were growing louder and louder. Soon the whole pack would know what we were talking about.

“Can we all just calmly discuss this without throwing accusations? I don’t feel like being here all night,” I said, looking around the small group of us, knowing that if this escalated, things could go wrong, and fast.

Kicks met my stare, and I could see his chest rise and fall. “Fine, let’s presume that’s true. What do you need Piper for?”

“You’ll recall the group that settled about thirty miles north of here? The three women that showed up?” Groza said.

“Yes,” I answered calmly, trying to keep this meeting under control.

“We believe they have an entire patch of it growing in the middle of their settlement,” she said.

“Then go ask them for some,” Kicks said.

“We have,” Groza said, her voice growing sharper. “They said they wanted to speak to her, or at least that’s what Lola, who seemed to be running the show, said.” Groza and Duncan both turned and stared at me.

What? Did they think I had some idea of why they wanted me? Like I was behind this?

“I can’t even begin to imagine why they’d want to talk to me. I’ve never spoken to them, ever.”

“Well, they won’t give *us* what we need. They want *you* to go collect it,” Groza said, as if spinning her web of lies once again. And who was falling for it? Duncan. I could see it in the wariness of his gaze.

I hated her. No, that was an understatement. When I saw her, my blood turned into the poison she’d tried to kill me with.

A rage filled me. I didn't care how dark this meeting turned.

Suddenly Death was in the room with us, standing beside Groza. I jerked in surprise.

Kicks rested a hand on my shoulder, physically checking in.

I looked up at him, giving a tiny shake of my head, trying to tell him I was okay. It wasn't as if I could tell him Death was standing beside Groza, eyeing her up like she were a rump roast cooked to perfection.

Death hadn't come with her booming steps that usually preceded someone dying. But when she turned her gaze from Groza to me and grinned slightly, it was all too clear. The slightest nod and Death would kill her. That was it—one sign from me, Groza would be dead, and no one would ever know why.

Death was granting me a favor. The biggest threat to my life would be dead in seconds if I chose.

“What?” Groza said. “Can't even come up with a good lie?”

Duncan was saying something to Groza, trying to get her to soften her insult. I barely paid them any attention, more concerned with the choice I had.

One. Little. Nod. That was all it would take.

I felt Kicks squeeze my shoulder, silently checking in again as he tried to figure out what was wrong with me. Duncan was watching as well, as if he too sensed something was going on beyond his awareness.

Groza carried on some more, but her words did not matter. The only thing that counted was Death, who waited for a sign.

I shook my head slightly, declining Death's offer. It wasn't because I didn't want Groza's death on my hands. After she'd tried to kill me, I wasn't sure it would be wrong to finish her off. As long as this woman was alive, she'd try to kill me, and I knew that for a certainty.

No, the problem was that being indebted to Death didn't seem like the right move. What kind of IOU would she hold after she killed my arch-nemesis? Everything had a price, and this one could be steep. I wasn't willing to risk finding out what the cost was after the deed was done.

Death shrugged, as if she didn't really care either way, and then she was gone again.

“What is the deal with her now?” Groza said. “Is she becoming deaf and mute on top of being useless?”

Duncan stepped in front of her, and I wasn't sure what he said. I didn't

care. I didn't want Duncan acting as if he needed to intervene for me. He didn't. Kicks had also edged closer, as if he were going to rip the two of them apart.

But I was free. I didn't live in her pack anymore. She held no power over me, only what I allowed. Groza didn't realize it, but I'd spared her life moments before, and even now, I could sense a weird burning in my fingers that might've turned her into a pile of gray crumbs.

I stepped forward, making sure I was the sole focal point of Groza's when I spoke. She needed to see my face, my eyes, and know that I held no fear or reverence of her. Duncan stepped back a little, as if he could feel some other force building in the room.

"If you want my help, I'd lose that look of condemnation and superiority. I don't owe you anything. I came here as a favor. To be honest, you didn't deserve to be heard out after the many things you've done."

"I haven't—"

"Stop," I said, and she did. "I'm done speaking with you. I'm going to leave now, but know this: I could've killed you tonight but I spared you. If you cross me again, I won't."

Rage flared in her eyes and she jerked her arm forward, as if she had thoughts of grabbing me but didn't.

I looked down at her hand, the one back at her side, and then met her glare.

"That might've been the best choice you've ever made."

"You can figure out your own problem." Kicks was by my side, a hand on my back, encouraging me to leave. He didn't need to put the effort out. I was leaving on my own.

Groza waited until we were nearly at the door with plenty of space between us before she said, "So much for caring about this pack. I guess that was all an act. Not to mention it's going to hit your people too, Kicks. This won't be the end of it. Wait until they get sick."

I walked out of the house, Kicks at my side. I kept forcing my feet to move toward the gate, and then out.

I stopped by the motorcycle and then froze.

"I could feel it," he said.

I didn't pretend ignorance of what he was speaking of. They'd all felt it. I'd seen it in their faces. "Did it bother you?"

"No. I was glad for it. I don't want you to ever be defenseless." He

grabbed my hand, as if making a point.

He was either insane or truly trusted I wouldn't hurt him, when I myself wasn't even sure.

I looked to where his hand wrapped around mine. "Back at the hotel, when I said—"

"It doesn't matter what you said. I know where your words came from, and it's all right."

Was it? I didn't know. There were so many things in the "didn't know" column that sometimes I felt like every decision was a coin toss.

"You ready?" he said, motioning to the bike.

"What if what they said is true? I don't want to help, but I don't know how to *not* help the others in this pack. I know these people, and what happens if it's Charlie tomorrow? We're too close. What if it spreads?"

He nodded. "Then we go. You want to go back and tell them, or you want to let them sweat it out a bit?" he asked, grinning.

"We'll tell them after. I don't want their input anyway. Although there's one thing I'm curious about. Why wouldn't Groza just go take what she wanted?" It hadn't occurred to me until now, as some of the rage dissipated from my blood.

"That's one reason I'd sure like to go talk to them," he said with a knowing look.

It certainly was interesting.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I KISSED the top of Charlie's bent head. There was still a shiver that coursed through me at touching him so freely, but if I hadn't killed Kicks last night, maybe he was right—I had more control of this thing, this death hand, than I imagined. I couldn't let my paranoia hurt Charlie.

He looked up at me and grinned. He might not have said much about how my avoidance of touching him had bothered him, but seeing his face glow now proved how much it had.

The goodwill didn't last that long, though. He dropped his pencil and leaned back in his chair, looking like he'd just remembered he was getting screwed somehow. "How long do I have to do schoolwork?"

"Till Birddog says you're done." Turned out Birddog wasn't just an enthusiastic gamer—he used to be a teacher. Since there was no way I was sending Charlie back to Groza's pack after last night, Birddog had agreed to pinch-hit for a while.

"Don't worry. I've got this covered," he said to me, and then winked at Charlie.

That might've made Charlie feel better, but it did nothing for my confidence.

Kicks was waving me on. Either way, it was going to have to do for today.

Birddog leaned toward Charlie like a co-conspirator. "We go hard for a few and I'll be able to spring you by lunch," he said softly, but loud enough he knew I'd hear.

That didn't sound too bad. Either way, I wasn't fixing this situation now,

so it was Birddog or nothing.

Kicks eyed me as I made my way outside with him. He'd brought me some leather pants and a jacket to help block the wind on the bike, and even I knew I looked sort of badass in this getup.

I got on the bike after Kicks, and he took my hands, tucking them under his jacket and against his flesh.

"It's not that long a ride, but they're going to get cold," he said.

He wasn't kidding. By the end, my cheek was planted against his back, my helmet askew, and I was trying to use his torso to block the worst of it.

We pulled up to a gated community with the sign proclaiming it to be Magnolia Hills. It looked like a fairly new development, with pretty little ranch houses spaced evenly along the lanes behind a large wrought-iron gate that was probably meant to be mostly decorative before Death Day.

A young man stepped out of the small house with a rifle in his hand.

Kicks looked at the young guy, eyed the rifle, and raised a brow, as if to say, *You better come at me with something bigger and better than that.*

"What's your business here?" the guard asked, a slight shake in his voice.

"Piper is here, per request, to see Lola," Kicks said, voice as smooth as velvet.

One day I wanted to be as cool as Kicks. Although I hadn't done so bad last night with Groza.

The young guard nodded, as if he'd been expecting us. He made a lifting motion to another guy on the inside. The second guard began pulling a rope that raised a steel bar running across the gate and then waved us in.

The first guard pointed to what looked like it used to be a community house in the center. "She'll meet you there."

They closed the gate again as soon as we rolled through, and my nerves started to jangle.

The second he cut the engine, I leaned forward instead of getting off. "We sure this isn't a trap?"

"I don't think so," he said. "They've already taken stock of our numbers. They might be a problem at some point, but this is just poking around."

I climbed off the bike, reminding myself that I wasn't exactly powerless. I could've used a little ghostly input, but I was beginning to think Widow Herbert was busy being happy and Jaysa was busy being annoyed at me after our last conversation. It hadn't gone that well, but who would imagine a ghost would hold a grudge? Although of all ghosts, she would be the one.

The woman with white-blond hair who had accompanied Lola that night at the pack's compound stepped out of the building.

"Lola will be right out to speak to you," she said politely, almost speaking like a hostess telling me my table would be ready in one moment.

I stood in silence with Kicks, scrutinizing the area around us and the building we stood in front of. There weren't too many people out and about except a few stragglers in the distance, but there was a feeling of a lot of eyes on us. It was cold, and these people weren't shifters. They'd probably try to stay indoors.

We didn't have to wait too long for Lola. She strode out the door, her long, dark hair flowing around her, looking a bit ethereal. I didn't remember her having quite this much presence when she'd shown up at the pack.

"I'm very happy to see you."

"Groza said you wanted to speak to me? That you would only give *me* the mushrooms?" I still wasn't completely sold on Groza's story. Why would this woman want to speak to me? I had nothing to offer her.

"Yes. That's true." She glanced at Kicks, who typically was the type to take center stage, before focusing solely on me again. "Can we speak alone? We'll just take a walk over by the lake," she said, pointing to the path around it.

Kicks looked at me, and I nodded. "I'll wait over there." He walked back and took a seat on his bike, which was in view of the entire path.

There was *something* off about this woman, not that I could pinpoint it. Nothing was coming across as threatening, though, either.

Lola took a step toward the lake, waiting to see if I'd come.

"What did you want to speak to me about?" I said, joining her.

I'd let her get whatever it was out of her system, appease my curiosity, and collect the mushrooms. I wasn't handing them all over to Groza, though. It wasn't like she'd give any back if Charlie or my new pack needed them.

"How did you come to be with them? You're human," she said.

My brain jolted, but I managed to keep my steps even.

"Of course I'm human. What else would I be?" I said, not answering her true question as I played dumb. I didn't think it would work, but I wasn't answering anything like that.

"Don't you realize they hate humans?" she said.

She talked and looked at me as if there was no sense in denying it. I wasn't sure what she knew, but I wasn't saying a word. Charlie was one of

those shifters she was talking about, although she hadn't gone as far as labeling them.

"I really have no idea what you're talking about," I said, lying almost with ease. How far I'd come in the last few months.

She shrugged, not seeming overly put out at my act. She didn't need it confirmed. She *knew*.

"Fine. You can keep your secrets. I understand why you would," she said, continuing along in her calm manner.

Everything was controlled about this woman, and in a way that was enviable. It was hard not to wonder what it would take to rattle her.

I continued to walk with her, not saying anything. It was clear she was the one holding all the information anyway, and I was playing catchup. I wasn't going to add to the imbalance by giving her anything else.

"I don't need you to admit you know what they are, but you should understand who you're helping. You should be aware of a few things. The people you're with, they destroyed a clinic with humans who were trying to help the human race. They killed everyone on the grounds." She looked at me, waiting for something.

I'd suspected Groza killed everyone, but now here it was, confirmed. She might be lying, but I didn't think so. Truth was, I hadn't *wanted* to know. Still, portraying the people at the clinic as total innocents was a stretch, and it didn't make Lola a saint just because she once again had too many details.

"I've heard of the clinic you're talking about. Are you so sure they were paragons of virtue? Did you know them?"

"I did know them." She looked off into the distance. "I know why you might be skeptical, but their motivations weren't quite as obvious as they might've seemed. They felt what they did was justified."

"Really? You think trying to poison people is justified?" I glanced over my shoulder, wondering how Kicks was taking all of this in.

He was leaning on his bike, watching like a hawk but not moving. He didn't look angry, either. More confused. I gave him a quick smile, wanting to keep him right where he was until she finished talking.

"You don't think being a part of the near-extinction of humankind doesn't deserve some retribution? Or did you not realize that they were involved in Death Day?"

"You're saying that they had something to do with killing off most of the world? That's not possible." Even as I was speaking, I could imagine Groza

being involved. But they'd lost so many too. No, it couldn't be all of them.

"I'm saying some of them, in connection with others, were involved. Are there some blameless? Maybe. That I can't say. But I know for a certainty that there was involvement."

"Who are you? *What* are you? Why are you even speaking to me?" I glanced again at Kicks, who was still watching but not making any gestures or movements that seemed out of place.

"We'll leave my details alone for now. I've given you enough to think about. As to why I'm talking to you? I think you can figure that out already," she said, calm while my world was getting toppled.

Had I looked for salvation from the very people who had destroyed the world?

"I'm no one's spy, if that's what you mean." I'd never be able to live with people, pretend to like them, while planning on betraying them. I'd take Charlie and leave first.

"Then don't be, but keep your eyes and ears open. There might come a point when that information will be useful." She handed me a bag. "Here are the mushrooms. They'll want to know what I said. What you tell them is your choice, but as a reciprocation for the trust I've placed in you, I'd prefer you didn't. I'm sure we'll see each other again at some point." She turned and walked away from me, back toward the community house.

I cut a line toward Kicks, taking him in like I'd never seen him before. Had he been in on it? Had he known? I couldn't reconcile the man I knew with someone who would let that happen, or worse, be involved.

But Groza...

"You all right? What did she want?"

"You didn't hear?" How was that possible? Was he testing me?

"I kept catching this buzzing noise. Couldn't make out a damn thing." He looked around as if trying to place the source of the annoyance.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I said. "Let's talk after we get out of here."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I SPENT the entire ride back to the hotel replaying Lola's words. Nothing was adding up. The shifters had lost people as well. Not as many, but still, was it possible they'd sacrificed some of their own to do this? To get rid of humans? I couldn't imagine Kicks sacrificing even one of his people. Duncan? I would've said no a few months ago, but now I wasn't so sure. He seemed to be able to twist his brain in all sorts of ways to justify what he wanted to do. I'd been so sure about Duncan and had been wrong. How could I be sure about Kicks? Or anyone, for that matter?

Then I thought of Groza. She wouldn't hesitate to kill the majority of humans, no matter what the cost.

We pulled up outside the hotel, and I still had no idea what I was going to say to Kicks, but it wasn't going to be the full truth. Until there was no doubt where his loyalties lay, without even the tiniest sliver of a doubt, I wasn't saying anything. I was certain that if my conversation with Lola came out, Groza would kill her, her sisters, and the entire community there. She'd taken out the clinic without blinking. I wouldn't have those deaths on my hands. They were already bloodier than I'd ever imagined they'd be.

I got off the bike, heading inside, already strung tight, knowing the evading I'd have to do. I wasn't trained in interrogation, and my chances of holding up to questioning weren't good. I'd spent the beginning of my life flip-flopping all over the place on what I wanted to do. Not once had being a spy or double agent entered my mind.

Kicks followed me inside, pointing in the direction of the kitchen. "There's bags in there where we can divide them," he said,

motioning to the mushrooms.

Keeping some of the mushrooms was just another indication he didn't trust Groza, but was that enough to make me trust him with what had been said? No. I was still a human, and I couldn't afford to ever forget that again.

The kitchen was empty. I'd been hoping for Evangeline's presence to help stave off the questions. Except they didn't seem to be coming. As we silently divided up the mushrooms, it became clear he was waiting for me to speak. But I didn't. I kept waiting for him to ask, but he didn't.

"That looks pretty good," he said, eyeing the two bags. We locked eyes for a couple seconds, the silence damning.

He still didn't ask.

I didn't offer. The tension in the room multiplied as it became clear exactly where we both stood at this moment without either of us saying a word.

He broke the silence first. "I'll run these upstairs and then drop the other half over at the pack. I shouldn't be gone too long." He took a step toward the door.

"Alone?" Was that story about not being able to hear my conversation with Lola nothing but a test? Was he mad at me for not speaking, or because he already knew everything that had been said?

"Did you want to come?" he asked, taking a step back and leaning on the counter. "Because if you do, they'll have questions about why Lola wanted to see you, what she wanted to talk to you about. It's pretty obvious you don't want to discuss any of it."

"You're right. I don't want to talk about it. I'm sorry." I crossed my arms, regretting having stopped him. I should've let him leave. Why did I force a confrontation if I didn't want to say anything? He was going to be angry at me, and I still wasn't going to speak. Nothing would change.

He nodded slowly, but I couldn't see a speck of rage, or even a low-burning annoyance. No, it was worse. He looked like he'd expected me to open up, tell him everything, and I hadn't.

"I understand," he said. "You don't trust me yet, and that's okay. But at some point, you're going to have to take a leap of faith. Or not." He shrugged.

As if it were just that easy to be like, *Hey, I trust you now because you took me in when you wanted a guide?* I wasn't sure what the "or not" choice entailed, but it was already making me flinch, as if he'd cursed me out.

“You act as if I’ve got every reason to open up to you.” I took a couple steps away, ready to walk out on *him* now. Yeah, he’d taken me in here, but it wasn’t as if he wasn’t getting something out of it.

He followed me, stepping in front of me when I would’ve left. “I get it. You’ve been burned, and it’s going to take you a while. I’d just thought we had gotten past that.”

“You get it, *for now*.” I should’ve known better than having this discussion. They were all the same. They wanted what they wanted, when they wanted it.

“Can you blame me for hoping this isn’t the way it will always be?” he said, getting even closer until I was looking up at him.

It didn’t *sound* as if he were going to toss me if I didn’t change.

“You didn’t mean that like an ultimatum?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

“I gave you an out to leave. You agreed to stay. Where would you get the idea I’d tell you to leave?” he asked, as if he couldn’t fathom how I’d come up with such a crazy idea.

I shrugged in response. The scars still on my heart could explain it, but I didn’t have the strength to break it down for him. That I could even compare this situation to the one I’d just been in was obviously an alien idea to him. The difference was so stark, it almost made me want to go march over to Groza and Duncan and tell them nothing, just because I could.

“Actually, I want to go with you to drop off the mushrooms.”

He watched me as if he could see the cogs and wheels in my brain spinning. He grinned slightly before he said, “Then let’s go.”

He were headed toward the lobby when Charlie came running down the hall toward us.

“Are you going to the pack? Crackers said you were probably going there.”

“Yes. I’ve got to run over for a few minutes.” I gave his shoulders a little hug as he ran into my side.

“Can I come? I haven’t seen Paz or Minks in forever. I miss them.”

“It’s fine if you want to bring him,” Kicks said. “Marbo shouldn’t affect him yet. It doesn’t typically hit children. Even if it did, with the mushrooms it’s an easy fix, and he’s going to get exposed at some point. Might be better for him to get it while we have a treatment on hand.” Kicks gave me a look as if to say, *Because we might not at some point*.

Even if those mushrooms used to be plentiful, it didn't mean they would be going forward. Anyone who'd made it through Death Day had learned a tough lesson about relying upon the status quo.

"Okay. Come on. Let's go see your friends."

We dropped Charlie off at the schoolyard, where his friends were playing. It felt a little like a throwback chicken pox party—not that his friends appeared sick the way they all took off chasing each other and laughing.

It was a nice little lift to see them playing before I walked into Groza's pit of hell.

"You answer what you want to answer and that's it," Kicks said as we walked over. "It's not your problem if they don't like it. You're not part of this pack anymore."

I didn't need the reminder. I saw it in the people we passed. They might not hate me, but they didn't like me either. Most of them had probably heard what Kicks just said too, which would spread like wildfire in the course of the day. He didn't seem to care what anyone heard. He made up his mind and that was it, as if it were easy not to care.

We stepped up onto the porch, and Duncan opened the door. He didn't hesitate this time around, just waved us in. I guessed we were all getting more comfortable with our new positions.

Kicks walked in first but went no farther than the front hall. He held out the bag. "Here's the mushrooms."

"They gave them to you. What did they want?" Duncan said, taking the bag.

"Yes, what is it that they wanted from you?" Groza said, walking out of the kitchen and toward us.

She might've had her chin up and her chest out, but she stopped just out of arm's reach of me. It was a struggle not to grin.

"Nothing. Just to talk," I said, trying to adopt Kicks' nonchalant attitude.

"*Nothing?*" Groza said, sneering.

It was a lie, and she couldn't do a damned thing about it. If I didn't want to tell her, she'd have to accept it.

"Yes. Perhaps she just didn't like you?"

Kicks laughed. Duncan seemed slightly taken back, as if not expecting the jab from me. He'd fall over if he knew the truth of it all.

"I've got a few people I wanted to check in with and then we'll be off," Kicks said to them.

The lines between our two packs felt like they were growing more entrenched as we stood there.

We'd turned to leave when Tico, one of Groza's many guards, came to the door.

He nodded in Kicks' direction but let his gaze glide over me before he turned to Duncan and Groza.

"We think we found something you're going to want to see. It might be the *remnants* of Walter, or at least his ring."

Kicks had said he'd disposed of them. *Don't panic*. They'd smell it.

"I don't know if I can stomach it," Groza said.

Stomach it? As if she were too delicate? The woman who'd ordered mass murder? This had to be an act for Duncan.

"I'll go," he said.

Kicks looked at me, and I knew he wanted to go too. He wasn't the only one of us who wanted him to go. I *needed* him to go. This was one secret I never wanted out. I lifted my hand, giving him the slightest pat on the back.

"Mind if I tag along?" Kicks said as soon as I did. "I'd be interested in what happened to him as well."

Duncan nodded. Even if he didn't want him there, it was hard to say no after we'd just dropped off the mushrooms they needed.

"I'll be back soon, but in case you want to leave before I do..." Kicks handed me the keys to the ATV we'd driven over. Yeah, there might be a high likelihood of that.

I pocketed the keys and got out of there before my pheromones tipped anyone off.

They headed out, and I followed. I'd hang around and buy Charlie a few minutes with his friends before making him leave. I'd be long gone before they came back, though. I didn't want to be anywhere around here if they came back with news of the bodies.

I made my way through the community, passing people who nodded politely but weren't looking to interact beyond that. It was strange to realize I'd made it almost full circle back to when I first arrived. It wasn't as cold a reception as then, but it had chilled considerably since I'd left.

I neared where my cottage had once stood, now a charred skeleton. I kept walking to the guys' house, remembering how I used to have coffee with Buddie in the morning and how Charlie was always running off with one of them on some excursion or another.

I knocked on their door and waited to see if anyone was home. The place looked empty, but they were always off running about somewhere. I turned and settled on their stoop, not having much else to do while I waited for Charlie.

I'd thought this place was going to be our home for the long haul. That I'd raise Charlie here with these people. That he'd be off on whatever shenanigans the guys were doing right now.

My thoughts were wandering off to where we might end up in a few years, or in twenty, when Widow Herbert's voice broke into my thoughts.

"You need to go get Charlie and get out of here," she said, appearing right in front of me. "There's something bad coming. Look!" She pointed down the street, where a crowd formed in the distance.

"What's going on?" I got up, trying to get a better view.

"Groza is gathering them, and it's for you. You need to get Charlie and get out of here."

Only issue was Charlie was in that direction.

Chapter Thirty

I SCANNED THE CROWD.

Groza stood at the front, her gaze fixed intently on me as I approached.

The guys were gone. Duncan was gone. Most importantly, Kicks was gone. This was a trap. She'd lured them away. Groza had known we'd go for the mushrooms and we'd be back. She'd been watching. Waiting.

I stopped, afraid to get any closer to the crowd forming, my brain scrambling for a way to get to Charlie.

"I know what you did, Piper, and now so will everyone else." Groza's voice boomed, cutting through the silence of the pack watching intently. A murmur rippled through the crowd, who mostly looked concerned and confused.

A knot formed in my stomach. "What are you talking about?" I said, trying to keep my voice even.

On some level, I'd been waiting for this ever since I'd killed Walter and Berman. I hadn't killed them intentionally, but it wouldn't matter, especially if they saw how they'd died.

Groza's cold eyes stared me down. "Don't play stupid. I know you killed them. I don't know what con you pulled off, but you're not the true spiritual guide. You stole Jaysa's powers and distorted her gift, twisted it somehow."

That I hadn't expected. "What in the hell are you talking about? I wasn't anywhere near Jaysa when she died. How could I have done anything of the sort?"

"You met with her shortly before she passed. Everyone knows you did, so

there's no denying it."

"So what?" I yelled back. It was one thing to go down for something I did. This? Oh no, I wasn't taking this rap.

"You poisoned her. You slipped poison into her home." Her eyes lit as she made her case against me. How long had she been planning this?

"That's bullshit, and you know it. I didn't poison anyone. Where would I have even gotten something like that?"

"Maybe Lola? How long have you known her? Did she move close for you? You're the only one she'd give the mushrooms to when all the fields around us just happened to be bare. Do you deny that?"

There were gasps in the crowd. I stood there, fumbling with what to say. She was piling up evidence, and if I was one of the pack, even I might've bought the story at this point.

"You don't have time to panic," Widow Herbert said. "You need to extricate yourself now. Groza will use this to drive you out, and it will work. These people were a suspicious lot before the end of the world. Hard times make people hold on to their beliefs even firmer."

Extricate? Yeah, great idea. Would've been even better if she could tell me how I could do that, because I wasn't seeing a real clear path through this horde that was growing larger by the minute.

"We are not a suspicious lot," Jaysa said, showing up now too.

"You are, but we don't have time to debate." Widow Herbert was on the verge of yelling. It was the first time I'd ever really heard her get like this, and it didn't help my nerves.

"What, because you say something it's true?" Jaysa said.

"Piper, you don't have time," Widow Herbert said, ignoring Jaysa. "You need to go get Charlie and leave, now, before the pitchforks are out."

How? I wanted to scream. Groza wasn't going to let me walk away that easily.

"Bring out her body," Groza said.

Her body?

"She dug up my body," Jaysa said, her voice soft.

One of Groza's goons rolled out a wheelbarrow, with a tarp covering the contents except for what looked like the top of Jaysa's head.

"That bitch dug up my body!" Jaysa yelled so loud she nearly blew out my ear, or it felt that way.

Groza ripped the tarp off Jaysa's decaying form. "You poisoned her. I got

suspicious after you left here. She never declared a successor, and yet you appear, a human, as the next guide? You stole her powers and then seduced another alpha so he'd take you to his pack before you got caught."

"You're making this all up. She's making it up," I said, appealing to the crowd.

They were all staring, some open-mouthed. But I could see the seeds taking hold. They were buying the story.

She turned to the pack. "Come, smell Jaysa's body. You can smell the poison."

"Smell the poison? She's been rotting for months. All you'll smell is a decomposing body," I yelled into the crowd, but it was over. No one was going to believe me. The only thing left was to try to figure out an escape.

"She lies. Who are you going to believe, a human or your alpha? You can sense the proof for yourself." Groza pointed at the dead body.

As soon as a few people made their way over, it was done. They nodded to each other, as if they could smell the so-called poison.

The crowd turned to me, their stares growing angrier. My fate was sealed. I backed up a few feet, wondering if I could make it to Charlie before they got me. A human being chased by a shifter, even the youngest and weakest of them? I didn't stand a chance.

Groza gestured to her goons, two burly shifters who stepped forward with rage on their faces.

"Restrain her," she ordered them.

My mind raced. If they touched me, they'd die. As threatened as I felt right now, it was a sure thing. My touch was a death sentence to anyone who dared try to harm me right now. It would prove to all here what a monster I was.

"Wait!" I shouted, taking a step back. "You don't want to touch me. It will be bad." I held my hands up, palms out, trying to not only save them but save myself.

They paused, as if sensing the truth in my words.

"Please, don't do this," I said.

"What are you doing?" Groza yelled. "Look at her! She's weak without her poisons. Grab her."

The one looked over at his friend, and it seemed as if they'd weighed Groza's words and decided they must be true.

I didn't want to kill them, but there was only one chance of getting

Charlie and me out of here. If they were going to do this, it was on them. They'd been warned. I shoved up my sleeves.

They lunged at me at the same time, reaching out and wrapping their hands around my bare arms, as I knew they would.

As soon as they touched me, I felt a burn flashing through our connections. It was stronger than it had felt the first time it happened, as if whatever darkness I carried had grown stronger.

It was proven a few seconds later—their skin turned gray almost instantly. They convulsed, their eyes wide. They died before they hit the ground.

A gasp echoed through the crowd, and that was just from the ones who could make a noise. Others didn't seem capable of even that.

I stood frozen, my hands trembling. I hadn't wanted this—I'd tried to stop them—and yet I was evil in these people's eyes.

Even Groza seemed frozen. She'd suspected something, but not quite this.

"See? She's a monster!" Her voice cut through the crowd after a few seconds of horrified silence. There was a sliver of panic in her eyes. Now that she'd seen what I could do, I terrified her.

The crowd erupted in angry shouts, rage building, but no one dared approach me. They were too scared. If I left willingly, and now, I had a chance. Once they realized they could stone me to death from afar, it was game over.

"I'm leaving, but I'm going to get my child first. If you don't like that, you'll see what I can *really* do." I stood there defiant, daring them to make a move. Let them shake in their boots. I needed them as scared as I could get them.

No one approached me. Even Groza seemed frozen and at a loss. I didn't press my luck. I had to take my moment and seize it. I turned to go get Charlie.

He'd already made his way over, standing behind me. I didn't know how much he'd heard or seen, but it had been enough to terrorize him as well. He looked back and forth between the angry mob and me, his eyes huge, tears welling up.

I went to pick him up, afraid he'd run from me, but I wasn't going to leave him here. I'd never leave him again. He clung to me, wrapping his arms around my neck.

"We're leaving." That was all I said because it was all I knew. I was

getting out of here.

I turned my back on the pack, heading toward the gates. I forced myself not to walk around them, afraid of showing any fear. I made them move out of my way. As I walked out of the gates, the sounds of chaos erupted. Groza's plan had worked to a point. She had exposed me in front of everyone, but I was still alive.

"What's happening?" Charlie asked as I carried him to the ATV. I was afraid to let go of him, terrified someone would jump out and try to grab him. I started it up but kept my hand wrapped around his arm so no one could grab him out of the vehicle.

"We have to go."

"Are we going back to the hotel?"

"No."

I couldn't go back to the hotel after what happened. The pack would probably head there first after they regrouped. I couldn't waste time stopping at the hotel for even clothing. We'd go with the clothes on our backs. I couldn't go to Lola's with Charlie, knowing how she felt about shifters. I doubted they'd be a match for Groza anyway, and it wasn't far enough away.

We were on our own. The only thing we could do was hide while I figured out what to do next. Hopefully some of those fishing lessons Buddie had given Charlie had stuck, because we'd be eating whatever we could catch.

I took a turn onto one of the roads, taking the ATV as far as I could. But once I ran out of a passable road, these tracks would be too easy to find in dirt.

"Come on," I said to Charlie, grabbing him out of the ATV and moving as fast as I could into the forest. "Charlie, I need you to help me. You need to listen for the sounds of people and tell me if you hear anything. Also if you smell anything, okay? It's really important."

"Okay," he said, clinging to me.

I moved as fast as I could, my breathing growing ragged. The daylight faded, and it got harder to walk as the cool night breeze burned my face.

I refused to cry as I kept moving. I pushed all thoughts of the people we were leaving behind out of my head. They would never understand. They would never see me as anything but a danger, a threat—a *monster*.

The moon hung low in the sky as my feet ached and my lungs burned. But I kept going.

“I can walk, Piper,” Charlie said.

I put him down but wouldn't let go of his hand as I looked around. I knelt beside him, exhausted, but there was no time. They'd be coming for us.

“Charlie, can you see really far?” I knew shifters had better sight, especially in the dark.

He nodded.

“We're going to play a game. I need you to look around and tell me if you can see anywhere we can sleep. Like a house or something. But make sure you don't see or smell any people.”

He nodded and then looked about.

“Don't worry, Piper, I'll find us somewhere safe.” He tugged at my hand, taking the lead and pulling me after him.

I was glad he couldn't see my face, or the tears welling up in my eyes.

Chapter Thirty-One

CHARLIE FOUND us a little cottage at the end of a small street. I didn't know if it was safe, but we had to stop for the night. I wasn't going to make it too much father. Tomorrow, I'd focus on finding a bike we could ride. That would help cover our scent trail.

There were some expired crackers in the pantry I gave Charlie for dinner. I had trouble choking down more than a couple.

We settled onto the couch together. Charlie hadn't asked where we were going. He didn't speak about what happened back at the pack. He only stared at me, and I could see the fear. I wanted to say something to him, but everything I thought of was a lie. I didn't know if it would be okay. I didn't know anything anymore.

Instead, I found some blankets and snuggled with, rubbing his head until he fell asleep.

I tucked the blankets around him, glad it wasn't as cold as it had been. There was a fireplace in the house, but it was too risky to light, sending up a smoke signal to all who might be searching for us.

I hadn't thought I'd be able to walk another step a couple hours ago, and yet now I couldn't sit still. Where would I go tomorrow? Where would I get food? I got up, pacing the living room of the small house.

Jaysa appeared, sitting at the end of the couch, by Charlie's feet.

"Why me? Why did you do this to me? You didn't even know what you were creating. I need to understand why."

Somehow the ghost looked as exhausted as I was. "I could feel a strength in you that was so much more than what you were ever going to be able to

achieve as a human. I also knew Duncan wanted you, and I didn't want Groza to have him. As long as you weren't part of the pack, he wouldn't get involved with you seriously. I thought this would change that."

"So you screwed with my life to piss off Groza?" I should've been shocked, but I wasn't. Not with her. There was a reason she was stuck here babysitting me in her afterlife.

I hadn't realized Widow Herbert had come back until she groaned behind me.

"You are just twisted," she said to Jaysa.

"It's not all bad. She was a lost mess. Now she's got a chance, at least." Jaysa waved a hand at me, as if to say, *Look what I did for her*.

I was exhausted and on the run with a child. I was not someone to claim as being "better off."

"She wasn't a lost mess," Widow Herbert said, coming to stand in front of Jaysa with her hands on her hips. "She was a twenty-year-old figuring things out. That's what twenty-year-olds do. And if Duncan wanted her enough, he would've figured it out. Look how it worked out. It just dragged out the heartache."

"If I hadn't changed her, she wouldn't be with Charlie." Jaysa pointed to my kid, and it made me want to jump into the fight.

He was sleeping on a couch, on the run. But if I started yelling at Jaysa, he would hear me.

I was so busy listening to the two of them that I didn't immediately understand why they'd stopped talking.

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

Widow Herbert pointed behind me.

"Who are you talking to?" Kicks asked, standing a few feet behind me.

His voice was soft, but the rage was loud and clear. He was furious. I knew it before I even turned and looked at him, which I slowly did. He'd let a monster into his midst, and now I was going to pay the price.

He was alone. *Please, don't let him be here to hurt me or Charlie*. I didn't want to kill Kicks, but I would. If it came down to killing him so that I'd be here to protect Charlie, there would be no choice.

"Let's go outside," I said, tilting my head toward the door. The kid was going to be scarred enough. I wouldn't have him see me kill another person.

He looked at Charlie and then nodded, motioning for me to lead the way.

Why? So he could hit me over the head with something from behind? No.

I was staying alive, one way or another. I wasn't leaving Charlie to fend for himself.

I pointed for Kicks to go first. He shook his head, as if he knew what I was thinking. It was making him even angrier. So be it. He was still going first.

He walked outside, and I followed, trying to come to terms with what I might have to do. I'd prefer he leave, but I'd do it if he forced the issue. I'd have to.

I shut the door and then positioned myself so I could see Charlie through the window, just in case this was a setup and someone tried to take my kid.

Kicks wasn't talking, but his jaw looked tense enough to crack some teeth.

I kept my arms at my sides, refusing to look intimidated.

"I don't want to do this, but if you try to kill me, I will defend myself." There. It was out. I'd given him fair warning. His death was on him now.

"Kill you? Why would I kill you?" He squinted at me, as if he didn't believe he'd heard me correctly.

"Then why are you here?" Did he not know what happened? Was that even possible?

No. He had to know. He'd tracked me down, after all.

"To drag my wayward bride back home. You made a deal, and now you think you're walking out without a word?"

"But..." He didn't know. It was the only thing that made sense. He couldn't want me to come back. Even if he did, his pack would never have me.

"But what? I told you that you had one out, and you didn't take it."

I was speechless for a few seconds. A few seconds didn't sound like a lot, but it stretched out when I had Kicks staring at me like he was about to throw me over his shoulder and march back the way he'd come. I finally got my lips to move.

"I just killed two shifters—in front of everyone. Not to mention Groza is proclaiming I poisoned Jaysa." He either hadn't heard or something was really wrong.

"I know," he said, closing in on me. "What I can't fathom is why you'd take Charlie and run instead of going to the hotel, where our people would've protected you."

"To the hotel? Because they'll want to kill me too!"

He kept closing in on me, and I found myself backing up in an effort to avoid touching him.

“Our pack doesn’t want to kill you, and even if they did, they wouldn’t touch a hair on your head without my say-so.” He had me backed against the house, clearly not worried about my touching him, even though I had my hands fisted at my sides.

“And what about the other pack down the street? You think they won’t touch me because you say so?”

“They’re lucky I found you before they did.”

He reached up, brushing his thumb across my cheek. After all of this, he still wasn’t afraid to touch me, even as I flinched at the contact, at what I could do to him.

But he was still there, healthy, and without a speck of fear in his eyes.

“You don’t care that everyone knows I’m a killer?” With Duncan, I’d felt like I was constantly fighting for approval I could never truly get. Yet Kicks was a shifter, an alpha. Why *didn’t* he care?

“You mean that you killed in self-defense? You think your way of killing is that much worse than mine? Trust me, yours is nicer.”

His eyes were on my lips a second before his mouth covered mine. It wasn’t the unleashed passion of our last kiss but something so much more intimate. It was a promise, a reassurance, and it made me glad for the wall behind me.

“I should’ve made you feel safer in our pack,” he said. “I will going forward, so something like this won’t ever happen again. You were more vulnerable out here on your own.”

Our pack. He’d said it repeatedly, as if it were really true.

I nodded, wishing it were that simple. But nothing ever was. “Even if they do accept me, I can’t stay down the street from Groza and her pack. It’ll never work. They’ll come for me.”

He rubbed my shoulders as he said, “We go back, get our things, and head to Arkansas.”

I searched his face for a lie. Was it really that simple to him? Just up and change his plans for me? “What about the reason you came here in the first place? You needed numbers, said it was better for the packs to be together.”

“Maddocks already left, and for good reason. He didn’t see a way forward with Groza. Said he’d rather stand alone with fewer numbers. I feel the same. What are numbers when they might turn against you at any

moment?”

“If I come back, I want to talk to everyone about what happened before we go to Arkansas. I’m not going through this again unless they understand what I truly am.” There were many more people in Arkansas too, but it was a start. A fresh start. If this was what I’d become, they either accepted it or we’d go our separate ways.

“*When* we get back, you can tell them whatever you want before we leave,” he said, smiling because he’d twisted my words. “You’re dead on your feet. Why don’t you get a couple of hours’ sleep with Charlie, and then we’ll head back. I’ll keep an eye out while you do.”

He gave me a little push toward the door, though I wasn’t sure how I’d be able to lie down, let alone sleep.

I settled in beside Charlie, closed my eyes, and was asleep in no time.

The sounds of people arguing outside woke me not even two hours later.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I WOKE up to muffled voices outside. Charlie was sitting up already, his eyes huge and round.

“They’re here for us,” he said.

The fear in his voice made my hands burn with that unworldly feeling, and seeing him so scared made me want to unleash it. Damn anyone who got hurt. If they’d tracked us down here to hurt us, they deserved whatever they got.

“Who’s here?” I asked. I couldn’t make out anything they were saying, only hear the tone.

“Groza and her people. Kicks is out there fighting with them.” He watched me throw on my boots.

“You stay here. I’m going to go handle it. It’ll be okay.” So much for not lying.

He grabbed me before I could get off the couch.

“Charlie, I have to go. Kicks needs backup.” I had to get out there. I couldn’t let him defend us alone. Who knew how many people were out there?

Charlie wouldn’t let go, and every second counted. After yesterday, was I truly shielding him from anything? He’d seen them come after me. He’d seen me kill. The kid could hear everything happening out there even now.

“Okay, you can come, but you stay behind me no matter what, and you listen to everything I say.”

He nodded quickly.

We walked out the door together.

There was Groza, along with twenty of her people.

Half of them were carrying torches. The others were carrying fuel containers. They'd figured I'd find a shelter to hide out in and they'd burn us alive. I could feel a rage building in me, the likes of which I'd never experienced. It made every part of me sizzle. They wanted to see something burn? I'd show them.

I walked over to stand beside Kicks, the only thing that stood between us and them.

"You're going to defend this monster?" Groza said, turning her stare on me.

"Who's calling who a monster?" Kicks replied, the insinuation clear.

"We're ending this now. You can burn with them or save yourself. The numbers are against you," Groza said. She waved a hand. "Douse them."

Her goons with the containers kept an eye on me as they fanned out. I wouldn't be able to run without getting drenched in gasoline or whatever it was they held.

"No one is touching them," Kicks said, letting out a growl so loud that everyone froze from the shock of the reverberation.

"No, let them come closer. I think that's a great idea," I said, taking a step toward Groza herself.

No one even twitched, waiting to see who'd make the next move.

Leaves and sticks crunching in the distance caught even my attention.

Buddie and Rastin appeared in the distance, approaching from behind Groza and stealing the limelight.

Would they go along with this, too? Were they here for me or her? Buddie and Rastin were no slouches, respected by many. They could swing the balance in either direction.

They reached Groza's group and continued walking until they flanked us.

"I think these numbers look a little better," Buddie said, giving me a wink.

"You might be the little sister I never wanted, but damned if I'm going to let anyone torch you," Rastin said, looking a bit put out that he was out in the middle of the night having to handle this crap. "You hear that, right?" he yelled to Groza and her people. "No one gets to torch Piper and the kid."

"You're going to go against your alpha and side with this monster too?" Groza said.

Buddie looked at us and then back at her. "That sounds about right."

“Look, it was never going to work out with us. The chemistry just wasn’t right,” Rastin said to her, not even blinking.

The odds had been iffy before, but with the two of them joining us, I could see the defeat in her eyes. Even with twenty of her men behind her, she wasn’t ready to take on the four of us.

“Fine,” Groza said. “You want it like this, then good riddance to you all. Taking up for her will come back to haunt you.”

I was the only one who got a chill from those words, but I was also the only one who knew I was stalked by ghosts and Death. I hoped she was wrong, but I wasn’t sure I’d bet on it.

“I want you out of my area,” she said.

“Not a problem. I have no intention of being around to help when you sink yourself,” Kicks replied.

With a tilt of her head, her people started to fall back, and she made sure she stayed cushioned safely in the center.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked, turning to Rastin and Buddie. They were losing their family.

“Do it?” Rastin said. “It’s done. She’d never let us go back anyway, even if we killed you.”

Kicks growled low beside me, shooting Rastin a glare.

“Hey, we just defected from our pack. A little faith here?” Rastin said.

Kicks didn’t say anything, but he gave a nod, as if accepting his point.

“I’m so sorry. What does that mean for you guys?” I asked.

“Sorry for us? You should feel sorry for him.” Buddie looked at Kicks with a grin. “We defended his pack against our own. That means we’re part of *your* pack now.”

“You’re part of his pack?” I said. Could it be true? I might be the worst person, because it was the best news I’d had in days. Buddie and Rastin were coming with us.

I glanced back at Charlie, who wasn’t old enough to have the sense to hide his smile over the news.

“*Our* pack,” Kicks corrected me. “And yes. They’re with us.” He didn’t sound overjoyed about it.

Buddie looked at Kicks. “Better than Gross-a—I *guess*.”

“Thanks,” Kicks said. “Welcome.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

EVERYONE WAS GATHERED in the dining room of the hotel, except for Magnum and Charlie, who were playing games. I didn't want Charlie to have to feel the stress of this moment with me. I didn't know what questions or reactions I'd have to field, and even though I had Kicks at my side supporting me, it might get rough. Charlie had been through so much more than he ever should've had to deal with at his age. With the way the world was, I'd only be able to shelter him so much, but I'd keep trying.

I cleared my throat, trying to start without my voice shaking, if at all possible. For the most part, people were smiling. Evangeline nodded at me, as if to say, *You got this*. Crackers was too busy stuffing his face with some culinary creation of Evangeline's to look too concerned. Still, I knew how bad the gossip must be.

Buddie and Rastin were hanging out in another corner, and I could see how they were scanning the group, picking apart their new pack members. Although when their eyes paused on Evangeline, I wasn't sure if they were so much picking her apart or trying to pick who got first dibs.

My interest in their debate didn't go unnoticed, as Buddie shot me a look that clearly said, *Get a move on it with this*.

I guessed they had bigger plans for the day. Might as well get it over with.

"I'm guessing you've all heard a good chunk of the story by now," I said. There was a murmur of acknowledgment through the room.

"First, I want everyone to know I had nothing to do with Jaysa's death. I can't prove it. I only have my word, but I didn't."

There were a few nods as they waited for me to continue.

“I did kill four different people, but all in self-defense.” I laid out the details of the first attack in the forest, leaving out the parts where of Kicks stepped in to cover up my mess. That was his information to share if he chose. I finished up explaining the last confrontation that they’d heard about, where I’d killed two more, and then added some details from the forest.

The room was utterly quiet, and I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

“Does anyone have questions?” I asked.

“You won’t turn us to gray, dusty stuff right?” Crackers said, laughing a little.

“I wasn’t planning on it. I’ve only done that to people actively trying to murder me so far.”

“Good. Because I’ve already got my death planned, and it’s Evangeline stabbing me while I’m stealing her food. I figured it’s a good way to go.”

There were a few more laughs.

“Is everyone good?” Kicks said. “Because if you have any questions or concerns, get them out. Put them on the table for discussion now, because Piper is a full part of this pack, and that’s how I expect her to be treated.”

He put his arm around me, making it crystal clear he wouldn’t accept less.

“Hey!” Buddie said from the corner, pointing at himself and Rastin.

“Yeah, them too,” Kicks said, waving a hand in their direction.

“We save someone from a fiery grave and all, you’d think we’d rate a little higher,” Rastin added under his breath.

The room erupted in more laughter, just as Rastin had probably intended.

“If that’s it, everyone get a good night’s sleep. We head out tomorrow,” Kicks said.

Magnum dropped off Charlie in the suite, and I called him over to the couch.

“Charlie, we have to go somewhere new,” I said, wrapping my arm around his little shoulders.

“I know,” he said. “I heard you talking to Kicks last night.”

“I’m sorry.” I bit my lip, forcing myself not to cry in front of him. I was petrified about what was to come, but I didn’t want him to be.

“It’s okay. I understand.”

I sat there for a few minutes, taking a little breather before I pulled him up with me. I'd put a bag in his room, similar to the pack he'd had when we left New York.

Whenever I'd moved with my mother, it was all taken out of my hands. I'd never felt any kind of control. I'd been a bystander in the choices that ruled my life.

"I thought maybe you'd want to pack yourself," I said. It wasn't much more than an illusion of control, but it was all I could give him.

He nodded. "I'll start now so I don't forget anything."

"That sounds like a great idea." I watched him walk away and begin to pull things from his drawers, already so tough for such a little kid. As proud of him as I was, it killed me inside that he had to be this strong.

I retreated into my bedroom, still trying to hold it all together.

"You're a good mother," Widow Herbert said as soon as I was alone.

"Thanks. I hope so. I don't want to screw him up." I really hoped I hadn't already.

"You're the only reason he's still alive," she said.

I nodded. It might be a true statement, but was that the end-all, be-all of parenting? Was I going to hang my hat on *well, he's still alive* when he hit eighteen? Could've died a decade ago, so I win a prize?

I'd dropped down to the floor to fill up a bag of my things when Kicks walked in the bedroom.

"That went fairly well," he said, leaning on the bureau.

"Yeah. I agree. Hope the rest of the pack back in Arkansas takes it as well."

"They will."

He deserved more of the truth. How much more, I didn't know. He'd covered up my crimes, and saved me and Charlie. Even now he was encouraging the pack to accept me when I was no longer their savior, but the monster who killed in the most unnerving of ways.

"There are some things we should probably discuss at some point." I rubbed my legs, nervous at the thought of even broaching a discussion of the people—the *things*—I'd been seeing.

"I know. It's all right. We'll get there in time."

"I'm not sure you'd be any better off for it. I'm not."

"Whatever it is, I'll handle it. It'll be okay." He leaned, reaching into his pocket. "Something came for you."

I got to my feet, almost afraid to take it. He held out a slip of paper to me. It was folded once, so anyone who'd handled it had been able to read it easily.

Piper,

Considering what's come to light, you are no longer welcome. Please do not return. I won't be able to help you if you do.

Duncan

In other words, I walked back into that community and it was a death sentence, and I shouldn't bother looking to him for help.

"I didn't want to give that to you but felt I had to," Kicks said. He grabbed my wrist, tugging me closer and plucking the note out of my hand before crumpling it up and tossing it across the room. "He's an idiot. Always was and always will be."

"What about the guys?" I asked.

"Excommunicated, from the sounds of it."

But no death sentence. Duncan had left the door open for them. At least there was a drop of loyalty there.

Kicks pulled me closer, tucking my head under his chin.

"How are you not worried anytime you touch me?" I was just thrown out of a pack for the way I killed, and yet he touched me constantly.

"I'm just not." His fingers grazed the flesh of my neck. "You might think you're a monster, but I don't."

"I've been warned you're sort of crazy. I hadn't believed it, but you're making me a convert."

"Kicks?" Crackers yelled from the sitting room.

"Yeah?"

I pulled back, knowing Crackers would be in the room in two seconds.

As if timed, he poked his head in. "We taking the stuff in the third bedroom on the second floor?"

"Some of it," Kicks said, straightening off the bureau. "I'll come show you."

Crackers nodded and was gone again.

“We leave in the morning,” Kicks said.

I nodded. “Sounds good.

He stepped toward the door.

“Kicks?”

“Yeah?”

It took me a second to get the words out, and he waited, watching me.

“I might not be ready for the leap of faith, but I’m trying.”

He grinned. “Baby steps.”

He walked out of the room, but I wasn’t alone. Death appeared in front of me, staring. I jerked, the way I always did when her unearthly appearance startled me.

She walked closer, circling me, staring.

“What is it you want from me?” I asked. It was too much on top of a long couple of days. I was done playing games. I’d rather know what she wanted than live in fear of her.

She circled me until we were face to face. Her only answer was a small smile.

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