



THE LONE WOLF'S
**REJECTED
MATE**

CATE C. WELLS

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THE FIVE PACKS: BOOK THREE

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MARI, FOUR YEARS AGO

“Holy shit.” Kennedy drops her hoe. “The witch is a cougar.”

“No, she’s not. I’ve seen her wolf,” Annie says, squinting up from where she’s squatting in a furrow, patting soil around a rhubarb plant. She follows the direction of Kennedy’s gaze, and her eyes widen. “Whoa. Is that Darragh Ryan?”

I freeze where I’m standing in between the handles of the red wheelbarrow. My mouth goes dry, and my heart begins to thump like a woodpecker.

It *is* Darragh Ryan, and he’s not wearing a shirt. His worn, faded jeans are so low on his hips, you can not only see the muscles cutting an arrow from his hips into his waistband, but I swear, you can make out a dark thatch of hair on the taut, tanned skin above his zipper.

I lick my suddenly parched lips.

Is that the last stop on his happy trail or his wolf’s fur? It’s hard to tell from over here, especially since he’s got a hairy chest. He definitely doesn’t wax for definition like the younger males in the pack.

He’s standing on the top step to the crone’s cottage, surveying the horizon in the distance, shoulders stiff, sipping from a tiny china cup that looks ridiculous in his huge, rough hands.

“Damn, Abertha’s still got game,” Kennedy says under her breath as she scoops up her hoe and attacks the dirt again with

a satisfied thwack.

For some reason, my stomach curdles. “He’s probably just visiting.”

“At six in the morning?” Kennedy snorts. “He’s pre-gaming for his walk of shame.”

“Yeah, he was visiting all right.” Annie’s brown eyes twinkle, banishing her usual shyness. “Visiting her vagina.”

Kennedy smirks. “Saying hey howdy to the hoo-ha.”

“Calling on her coochie.” Annie softly fakes an English accent and lets the corners of her mouth sneak into a small smile.

“Shut up,” I hiss. “He can hear us.”

I don’t know why my face is on fire. Usually, I’d be quick with a “high-fiving her downtown” or “saying good day to her goodies”—it’s just too easy—but I can *feel* him standing there on the creaky porch, barefooted, his wild, snarled hair falling out of the world’s messiest man bun.

He’s way too old for a man bun, mid-thirties at least, but he’s hot enough to carry it off. Well, as hot as a grungy, hungover, sketchy lone wolf can be. As far back as I can remember, he’s never lived with the rest of the pack, but he does come around sometimes to talk to our alpha, Killian, or drop off a kill at the lodge.

He noticed me once about a year ago. I was up in my favorite tree, reclining against the trunk with my legs stretched along a branch, pretending to read but really scrolling on my phone, when he came along the trail on the ridge above our cabin. From his vantage point, he could totally look down and see the phone hidden in the book.

He stared for a few long seconds, and I thought for sure he was going to bust me. You know, females can’t be trusted with phones—we might forget to start dinner or join the revolution or something. But he didn’t, he just got really stiff and glowery and hotfooted it away. I was sweating bullets for the next day or so, though.

He has to see the three of us now. The garden is only a few yards away. He's ignoring us, but he's tense. All he's doing is holding a wee teacup by its dainty handle, but his muscles are bunching like he's priming for a fight, his shoulders flexing, biceps bulging, abs tensing into sharp ridges.

I swallow, barely. My throat is so tight.

Is he embarrassed he got busted banging the crone? The idea makes me queasy, but not because Abertha's older. She's super-hot for fifty or sixty or however old she is, and regardless, I'm not a hater. It's because—

I don't know why. He's just acting weird. Unmated males usually act like King Shit of Turd Mountain when a female's dumb or desperate enough to let him mount her for fun. They strut and preen around camp; some won't even shower for a few days just to make sure everyone knows.

I subtly sniff the air. It's early spring, so there are tons of my favorite scents—tilled earth, fresh air, yesterday's rain. It doesn't smell like sex, but there is a strange muskiness coming from his direction. If I had to say, I'd call it a combination of bark, leaves, sunshine, and warm horse's mane. It's an outdoorsy smell, and it makes my belly flip and my spine tingle at the base in a weird, unfamiliar way. Kind of like I have to pee, but I don't.

I step closer to the wheelbarrow as if I can hide myself behind it. Unlike Kennedy and Annie, who are wearing long jean skirts and button-down shirts like normal lone females, I'm gardening in a gauzy, pale pink sundress, floppy straw hat, and army green rubber boots. With my big ol' blonde ringlets, I don't really blend into the background. I'm a whole mood.

Darragh's not looking at me, though. His eyes are glued to the foothills in the west. He's got a very rugged profile. His jawline is as sharp as an axe blade despite the beard threaded with gray. It's like all his features were carved from rock—his high cheekbones, his straight nose, his proud forehead, everything except his lips.

His lips look soft.

My fingers itch.

I have the sudden urge to touch his mouth, and that's so freaking weird. He's old enough to be my father even though he's way younger than my dad was. Folks my dad's age grew up in the dens. Darragh's too young for that, but he's definitely from the generations messed up in the head from coming up under Declan Kelly, our last alpha.

Older packmates don't get human references or jokes or the concept of "chill." The males don't talk to females unless they want to mount them, and they're obsessed with patrolling the pack territory, hunting, and the shifter fight circuit, exclusively and in that order.

Apparently, Darragh Ryan does talk to females. Older, powerful witchy females. God, my stomach doesn't like that. When I think of him and Abertha even drinking tea together, the flips and tingles begin to flop and slosh. Good thing I don't eat breakfast.

Kennedy sidles up beside me and pretends to hack at a row she's already dug. "What's he doing?"

"Watching the sunrise?" I hazard a guess.

"The sun's already up, and he's facing west."

"I don't know. Enjoying a cuppa?" He's not sipping anymore. He's just holding the cup midair in a death grip.

"It's coffee," Kennedy says. "Well, mostly. Coffee and hair of the dog."

"You can smell that?"

Kennedy wrinkles her nose. "You can't?"

I draw in a breath. My lungs fill with that earthy, horsey, straw-in-sunshine smell. It swells in my chest, and suddenly, my eyes prickle like I'm about to cry, and my breasts grow heavy. I cross my arms to cover my nipples as they bead into hard points. Kennedy's eyes narrow.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

“Can we just change the subject? He can definitely hear us, you know.”

“He’s not acting like it.”

“Maybe because *he* has chill.” I’m aware I’m being salty with my best friend, and I don’t want to be, but it’s like I went from zero to PMS in sixty seconds. Even my wolf is being weird. If I like to play princess, she’s a genuine, pure-bred grand duchess—snoot in the air and prancing—but right now, she’s growling in the back of her throat and baring her tiny, pointy teeth.

She doesn’t like Darragh Ryan on that porch.

I press my open hand to my breastbone. My heart drums a beat against my palm.

Oh, shit.

No fucking way.

This cannot be what I think it is.

Darragh Ryan is a grown-ass man. A *man-sized* man. And he’s all mysterious with a past and issues and a possible friends-with-benefits arrangements with a witch. I cannot handle that. I’ve never even let a male kiss me.

Does he even have a cabin? I know he lives by himself somewhere up in the foothills. Does he have a den? He looks like he lives in a den.

I can’t live out in the middle of nowhere. I have shoes. And I cannot—I *will* not—live without baths. Or electricity.

Blood roars in my ears. Annie and Kennedy are whispering back and forth, but I can’t hear what they’re saying. All I can do is stare at Darragh Ryan with bugged out eyes.

Fate has to be playing a joke. My aesthetic is delicate, sweet, romantic, cottagecore. His aesthetic is—the pants I wore all last week are fine. No shirt, no shoes, no problem. Haircuts are for the weak. I kill things with my bare hands in human form. I’ve been through hell and seen the other side.

Tingles race across my skin as my stomach drops. When does it end?

Since the day I was born, Fate hasn't once made it easy for me. I keep my head down and my mouth shut like a good unprotected female, but still, it's like I've got a target on my back. When I was a baby, my father went moon mad and tried to kill me because he thought I wasn't his.

My mom became a shell of herself after he was put down until one night, during a full moon run, she leapt off the bluff at the river's bend when there was no way she could make the far bank, not with a wolf as wasted and weak as hers.

I was shuffled from family to family until I landed with Una in the lone female's cabin, and I kind of curled into a ball and gave up on life for a while. Well, I wanted to hide in bed, but Una insisted on herding Annie, Kennedy, and I up to Abertha's cottage all the time, slapping trowels in our hands and making us dig and weed and hunt mushrooms in the woods. And then she got into bees—

I'm a good wolf, and Una saved my life when my father attacked me as a baby, so of course I helped, but I'd still rather have been under the covers. Then, one day, Una bought us phones.

And phones have the internet.

And the internet has *everything*, and they will ship it to you, or the humans at the farmers' market in Chapel Bell, which is close enough.

So, yeah, the world is cold and lonely and ugly, but I can buy pink dresses and fairy lights and big-ass hats like fancy ladies wear at horse races. I might be stuck in the kitchen, in the cabin as far away from the pack as possible, in a pack where I couldn't matter less, but Killian Kelly missed the message about the internet. I can go wherever I want, talk to anyone, *be* anyone, anytime, day or night.

I do not care that I have to dig in the mud and mess around with bees to pay for it. I look cute in rubber boots, herbs and flowers are my jam, and I've got good company.

But here's Fate, lobbing another one at me. Darragh Ryan. He was more or less my current age when I was born.

I force myself to ignore the butterflies drunk driving bumper cars in my belly, and I take him in.

My mate.

I draw in a deep breath, and his peculiar scent seeps into my veins, flows all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes, and disconnects the part of my brain that's freaking out over how my body is going haywire.

He smells like the most picturesque barn on the most pleasant day with the bluest sky and puffiest white clouds ever. And for an older guy, he is freaking *hot as shit*. Ignore the hair and beard, the rough hands, and the wolfishness. His eyes are amazing, dark brown ringed with copper and gold, and they crinkle at the corners, like he's spent a lot of time in the glaring sun.

He's as ripped as Killian Kelly and his lieutenants, but maybe because he's from that hardened generation—or because he lives alone in the woods—he doesn't have that cocky swagger. He exudes pure grown man confidence as he hangs out on the crone's front porch looking hungover, uptight as hell, and inexplicably frozen with fascination by the view to the west.

I follow his gaze just to make sure I'm not missing anything, like maybe a flying saucer, but there's nothing but scenic wilderness. Is he ignoring me on purpose?

Does he feel it, too? The strange gathering, seeking sensation under his breastbone?

He might be pretending I'm not right here, but he's not bailing, and he definitely has the look of an animal about to bolt, albeit a dangerous, terrifying, muscle-bound apex predator even bigger than a wolf. Like a tiger. Or a grizzled lion with a wild ol' mane. And a little ol' teacup.

I guess he realizes he's been holding the cup like one of those living statues because he finally shakes himself, sets it on the railing, and shoves his hands in his pockets. His thighs

are so thick that he doesn't have a lot of room, so he kind of wedges the fingers in. I've never seen a man look less casual.

I rub the place in the center of my chest where the bond is sprouting like weeds through a sidewalk crack.

Maybe this could be okay. He's not completely feral. People are wary of him, but the few times I've seen him around camp, no one shits themselves or runs away or anything. They just make way for him. And the males my age do go on and on about what a great hunter he is. Hunting is good. I like meat as much as the next girl.

I shoot a glance at Kennedy where she's gone back to hacking at a stubborn clump of dirt, roots, and stones. If I'd said "I like meat" out loud, she would've definitely come back with "that's what she said."

What else do I know about Darragh? There are whispers about something that happened when he was young that made him vow to never live with the pack. Something to do with Declan Kelly. There are a lot of whispered, vague rumors about those times, but no one ever comes out and tells the whole story. Shifters are superstitious. They don't like to talk about evil in case the words call it back.

And there are the warnings about his wolf. If you're ever alone in the foothills and you see golden eyes glowing in the dark, run like the devil is on your heels. But who's alone in the foothills at night? Not me, that's for sure.

I figured it was some ghost story to scare us females into staying on pack territory. We don't go wandering the wilderness, though. We go to Chapel Bell during broad daylight to do capitalism. We're not about getting in touch with nature, we're about getting paid.

I refocus. What else have I heard about Darragh Ryan?

My cheeks blaze. Haisley Byrne and her crew make jokes about getting fucked like an animal, but with them, you can never tell if they're talking out of their asses or not. Haisley claims she and Killian bang like pots and pans, but if that's true, she must suck at it. He doesn't even get someone to bring

her a folding chair so she can sit next to him at dinner in the lodge. She's got to stand up there on the dais beside him like a potted plant.

What's it like to get fucked like an animal?

My eyes fall helplessly to the crotch of his jeans. There's a bulge. A freaking huge bulge. It's created a gap between his waistband and his tight abs. Yeah. That's not wolf fur. It's happy trail.

My cheeks burst into flame.

"Mari," Annie hisses from where she's squatting. "You're staring."

I squeeze my eyes shut, my hands flying up to cover them like a little kid. Shit. Not cool. I fling my arms back to my side, summon some remnant of chill. Now he's looking over here. Right at me.

My entire body goes nuts. I break out in sweat—big, dripping beads down my back—and start to shake. I fold my arms close to my chest, shove my hands between my biceps and boobs, and grit my teeth to stop them from clattering. With absolutely no direction from me, my hip cocks like Haisley's does when she's posing next to Killian at dinner, and my lips peel back in a smile that can only look like a chimpanzee's fear grimace.

Annie gapes up at me. Kennedy visibly winces with secondhand embarrassment.

I clear my throat. Annie leans forward. Kennedy tilts her head. On the porch, Darragh's muscles clench impossibly tighter as if he's bracing himself. They all wait for me to say something.

I don't know any words. They've all vanished from my memory, and even if I knew any, my throat is squeezing shut.

Darragh's beautiful, brown and gold, albeit bloodshot, eyes drill into mine, and I'm struck with a bolt as sudden and shocking as the late summer lightning that burns the air and sears black spots across your field of vision. My lungs seize

mid-inhale. I stop breathing oxygen, my body continuing to pump blood on sheer adrenaline.

My wolf howls with excitement and launches herself at the border between us. I stumble. The front door of Abertha's cottage creaks.

Annie and Kennedy suck in breaths in unison.

The screen door hits the wall with a sharp crack, and the witch emerges.

Her thin form is draped in a flowing turquoise kaftan, her long silver hair matted to the side of her head, an oversized coffee mug in her hand that reads *hocus pocus, this witch needs coffee to focus*. A cigarette dangles from her mouth.

She squints over at me.

She glances back at Darragh.

Her eyebrows rise to her hairline.

“Shi-it,” she drawls. “Didn’t see that one coming.” Her cigarette bobs, but it doesn’t fall from her lips.

My wolf surges forward, snarling, saliva flying as she slams herself against the barrier that separates us, claws scrabbling, teeth gnashing. I squeeze every muscle in my body, clutch my arms against my chest, trying with all my might to hold her in, to stop myself from combusting into a wolf gone completely mad with jealousy.

Girlfriend does not care that there’s no sex in the air. She wants witch’s blood.

While I’m literally holding myself together, Darragh Ryan raises his eyes to the distance again, furrows his brow, grunts unintelligibly, and without a backwards glance, strides off across the clearing, past the bee yard, and disappears into the woods.

My heart drops like a stone, and my wolf freezes mid-frenzy.

Kennedy’s hoe hits the ground again with a thud. A crow caws high in an oak tree.

For a long moment, the witch, my wolf, and I size each other up. Magic crackles in the air. I sniff the breeze. Darragh's scent is fading. From the direction of the witch's cottage, I smell coffee. Beer. Whiskey. Pot. No sex, I point out to my wolf. Grudgingly, she shakes out her bristled fur and stalks back to her corner.

Kennedy, Annie, and I exhale in unison.

The witch raises her hand in an awkward wave. "Planting rhubarb, eh, girls?" she says.

"Yes, ma'am," Kennedy answers her.

Annie ducks her head and hunches her shoulders. The familiar stench of Annie's chronic fear mixes with the odor of stale liquor and smoke. I sneeze.

"Where's Una?" Abertha asks.

"In the greenhouse." Kennedy and I work it out so Una gets the standing-in-place jobs 'cause of her leg. Una wouldn't go along with it if she knew what we were doing, but Kennedy and I can be pretty slick when we want to be.

Una's our leader, but she's that Declan Kelly generation, too. She's tough and brave, but still, she's obviously traumatized and has to work at not being scared of her own shadow.

"Anything you need from me?" Abertha says. She's looking straight at me now, one elegantly arched eyebrow raised. I drop my gaze, and my face burns.

Kennedy waits for me to answer, but when I don't, she says on our behalf, "No, ma'am."

"Well, uh, keep it down out here." Abertha takes a drag of her cigarette, and without exhaling, chases it with a big gulp of coffee. She considers us for another minute as smoke curls from her nostrils like a dragon, and then she shuffles back inside. The screen door thuds shut.

Kennedy widens her eyes at me as she sweeps her hoe up. I snatch a rhubarb plant from the wheelbarrow. "Ready for

another one?" I ask Annie, my voice squeaking, weirdly bright and pitchy.

Annie holds out a trembling hand. I slap a rhubarb in it. Annie has hair trigger nerves, and she has a fear response to basically anyone who outranks us. It'll take her at least an hour to chill out. Until then, it's best to keep her busy.

Kennedy's still staring at me. She catches my eyes and tilts her head in a question. I give her a quick shake of the head. She shrugs a shoulder and lifts her hoe high overhead, swinging it into the overturned dirt with bloodthirsty zest.

We're all back to work when Annie stammers, apropos of nothing, "Th-they s-say Darragh Ryan's wolf will rip out your throat and then tear your limbs from your body and leave them stacked in a pile like f-firewood."

Kennedy and I freeze mid-motion.

"He doesn't even eat the m-meat," she whispers, and then once more, so low it's almost inaudible. "He doesn't even eat the meat."



KENNEDY and I don't get the chance to talk alone until past midnight when the light goes off under Una's door, and Annie's bedframe finally stops creaking from her nightly tossing and turning.

We're sitting in the dark living room, side-by-side on the sofa, doing our usual thing. Kennedy is playing some shoot-'em-up game with human teenagers online. I'm scrolling on my phone, putting things into shopping carts and taking other stuff out.

Kennedy's cross-legged in baggy athletic shorts, a generic white T-shirt, and the retro red-and-blue striped tube socks I bought her. Her chin-length, silky straight hair keeps falling in her face, causing her to miss shots, and every time, she cusses and blows the strands out of her eyes. God forbid she get a

barrette and clip it back. If I offer her one of mine, she acts like I want to hand her a snake.

I tell her that her disdain for girly shit is internalized misogyny, and she says she'd rather shave her head bald than wear a butterfly in it, so we're at an impasse. No skin off my teeth. She's the one shooting wide and losing out to some foul-mouthed thirteen-year-old.

"So are we going to talk about earlier?" Kennedy says as she taps and jiggles the buttons on her controller. Her eyes remain riveted on the screen. If Killian Kelly and his lieutenants knew we have a game system, they'd lose their minds. I'm not sure how it's a corrupting influence, but the older males have really messed up ideas about lone females.

If you have a father or a brother, you can basically wear what you want, do what you want, sit at an actual table at meals. If you're on your own like we are, you can't show any skin—including, like, ankles or elbows—you can't leave pack territory because no one will escort you, and you have to stay hidden in the kitchen or the laundry shack.

So, yeah, maybe I get it. I bet the males think *Call of Duty* will give us ideas. Maybe they're right. Lord knows I've wanted to shoot my way out of here a few times.

"Well?" Kennedy elbows me without missing a tippity-tap.

I look up from my phone, drop my head back to the sofa cushion, and sigh gustily as I stare at the ceiling. "He's my mate."

"Shut the fuck up." That freezes her fingers for a second. On screen, blood and brain matter splash across the screen.

"Yup," I say.

"Darragh Ryan?"

"Yeah."

"Shit, girl, I heard he doesn't even eat the *meat*." Kennedy looks at me, wide-eyed. I look at her. We hold it together for exactly one second before we both explode in hysterical guffaws.

“Shut up, shut up.” I smoosh my hand over her mouth.

“You shut up,” she mumbles and licks my palm. I squeal, snatching my hand back and wiping it on my pink silk pajama shorts. “Damn, girl. He’s old as shit.”

“He’s only, like, thirty-five. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, max.”

“Where does he even live?”

“In the woods?” That’s what they say, anyway.

“You can’t live in the woods.” There’s not an ounce of uncertainty in her voice, and she’s right. I like *stuff* too much. Fashion. Accessories. *Décor*.

“He’ll probably move down here into camp.” That’s how it goes. The mated male finagles a cabin somehow, and the female builds her nest there.

Males are super intense about territory. They like to keep all the females, even the ones with the protection of male family, in the buildings clustered at the center of the acreage that used to be a human wilderness education camp for kids but is now home to the illustrious Quarry Pack, legends in their own minds.

“I don’t want you to move out,” Kennedy says, her face falling.

“Me neither.”

We’re quiet and sad for a moment, and then Kennedy yips like she’s just remembered something. “Oh, shit! Your wolf! Does this mean that she’s ready to come out?”

Kennedy hops onto her knees and faces me, peering into my eyes like I’m an aquarium, and my wolf is swimming around in there.

“Let’s go for a run!” She bounces up and down, swaying the couch cushions, and my ringlet curls swing into my eyes. “We can hunt!”

My wolf perks her ears. She’s listening. I poke around, trying to feel whether there’s some kind of psychic tear in the

barrier that's kept her inside me all these years. I have no idea how this part works.

Everyone knows that once you recognize your mate, your wolf comes out. That's the order of things, but it's not like the older packmates give us a timeline or explicit directions or anything. Una would have told us if she knew, but her wolf hasn't come yet, so she doesn't know either. Your mate is supposed to be there and see you through it.

My heart twinges a little. Did Darragh really have to bail like that? I get that it came out of nowhere, and I needed to process, too, but aren't males supposed to take charge in these situations, especially older males?

Kennedy's wolf rumbles in her chest with anticipation, cutting off my train of thought. "Is she ready to come out?"

"I don't know. I think she's interested, but she's not making any moves." I prod at my breastbone as if that'll nudge her forward.

Kennedy's been shifting since she was thirteen. She was actually born in Salt Mountain. When she shifted one random full moon, no mate in sight, and her wolf turned out to be a big-ass *male*, her parents freaked and traded her to Quarry Pack. We're not sure for what. She jokes that her parents gave Quarry Pack a carton of cigarettes and a slab of venison to take her off their hands.

That's why Kennedy and I are so tight. Annie and Una know what losing your parents feels like, too, but at the end of the day, they were loved. Kennedy and I—not so much. We were both lucky to make it away from our fathers alive.

"The moon is almost full." Kennedy bends over the back of the couch and peeks out the curtains. "Let's go outside."

We're not supposed to, not alone after curfew. "What if we get caught?"

"We won't. I can smell them coming a mile away."

"I don't know—" Isn't shifting something I'm supposed to do with my mate for the first time?

“Come on. YOLO.” Kennedy grins at me. I taught her YOLO.

Well, isn't my mate supposed to be around? You snooze, you lose, right? I hop to my feet. “Okay. Let's do this.”

Kennedy whoops. I dash back to my bedroom for slippers, and by the time I'm back in the living room, the front door is open, and she's gone. I bound after her.

She didn't go far. She's standing in the middle of the path leading to our cabin, nose quivering as she sniffs the wind. Her sense of smell is the best of all of us since she's shifted.

“This way,” she says, and we head away from the commons, up the rolling hills that lead toward the western boundary of pack territory. A few yards up the path, she cuts away into the woods, winding around mossy trees and thorn patches, down a shallow gulch, and into a small glade by an oxbow creek so narrow no one bothered to give it a name.

The gibbous moon casts everything in a ghostly blue. A cool night breeze rustles the leaves newly budded on the high branches above us. Although it's an hour past sunset, there's a strange daylight scent lingering in the air, and it stirs the excitement in my belly.

We stand, facing each other, grinning. These are not the first shenanigans Kennedy and I have embarked upon. I shove away the strange, new, reaching feeling anchored near my heart, and Kennedy and I grin at each other, partners in crime.

“Can you feel her?” she asks.

I close my eyes and focus inward. My wolf is on her feet, alert, listening, watching. “Yeah. What do I do?”

Kennedy blushes. “Uh, so, I usually take my clothes off.” She clears her throat. “You don't have to, but if you don't, you'll ruin them.” She thinks a second. “Well, I guess it depends on the size of your wolf, and like, if your pants have elastic.”

My pajama shorts have a stretchy waistband, but the silk cami doesn't have much give. I peel off my top and bottoms and set them on the cleanest exposed root I can find before I

toe off my marabou slippers. The feathers are wet and matted with dew. Probably not the best choice of footwear.

When I hustle back to the middle of the clearing, Kennedy has shucked her clothes, too. She's still smiling, and it's so wild to see her happy and excited. She's definitely the sarcastic, emo one in our little family. She's kind of made crabby and bitter her life philosophy.

"You are so stoked." I grin back at her.

"We're going for a run, baby," she says, clapping her hands together.

Not for the first time, it occurs to me how freaking awful it must be for her when she shifts. She can't run with the pack. Not with how narrow-minded and backwards our males, and females, can be. Una sets her up with a rental out past Chapel Bell for the full moon so she can run in peace, but it has to be lonely as hell. Wolves run in packs. That's our whole thing.

Nothing pisses Kennedy off more than pity, though, so I keep my feelings off my face.

"Okay, what do I do?" I shake out my arms.

"Uh." Kennedy grimaces. "You, uh, *shift*."

"Like, *how*?"

She opens her mouth to explain. I take a deep breath. I'm so ready for this.

She blows out a breath and screws up her face. "You just kind of *do*."

"I just do?"

She shrugs. "Here. I'll show you."

She cracks her neck, does a quick quad stretch with both legs, and then that weird, shifter-life thing happens when your eyes and your brain lose sync, and one moment, your best friend has arms and legs and a face, and then there's a glitch in the matrix, and he's a big-ass wolf with a silky black pelt, his head cocked like *okay, your turn*.

"You know that didn't help at all, right?" I say.

Kennedy's pointy ear flicks. I sigh and shake my arms out again. I want this. The rest of it—Darragh and mates and nests and all of that—I don't know if I'm ready for that quite yet. But *this*, I want. I want to run free for the first time in my life.

I squeeze my eyes shut and reach deep inside. My wolf is there, so close.

"Come on," I mutter, and I don't know what to do next, so I just *want* as hard as I can, focusing with all my effort on her royal highness, the dainty wolf standing expectantly at the border between us, waiting on tenterhooks—waiting for what?

I draw in a deep breath, expanding my lungs to capacity with night air, filling myself to the brim with the mustiness of changing leaves and the tang of a distant woodstove, and then the wind shifts, and suddenly, I'm surrounded by the scent of broad daylight. Rolling lawns, bursting bulbs, mellow sunlight streaming through antique wavy glass.

My wolf comes alive. She leaps for the source of that scent. My bones crack. I scream.

The pain is *bright*. My muscles rip, joints pop, arteries sever, and in the same instant, I'm knitted into another shape, lower, horizontal instead of vertical, tuned into an entirely new and different frequency.

Vaguely, I hear a strange baying from an indistinguishable distance and direction, and I raise my voice to call to the wolf making the sound, but there aren't words in my mouth, there's only a wild and joyful howl.

Kennedy trots to where I've collapsed in the wet grass and noses my flank, urging me to my feet, adding her howl to the one in the distance, inviting me to run. Oh, yes. I want to run.

I stagger to my feet. No, my *paws*. My white paws. I'm white. Silvery white. I look up—and up—at Kennedy looming above me. And I'm *small*.

That's fine. Small is okay. Small is quick.

I yip and nip Kennedy low on the flank, and zip off into the trees, dart at the shadowy insects spooked airborne at our approach, snap my sharp teeth at crickets and katydids, swipe

my fangs with my long tongue, all pain forgotten in the wall of sensation that is the world at night.

The moon is high, conjuring shadows between every tree, in every knoll, under every bush. In every shadow, there's a mysterious rustling or enticing scent or quick, slight movement, all of which my wolf wants to chase or attack or sink her teeth into, she's not sure which, how about all three, simultaneously—she would if she could. She's unleashed. She's a hyperactive ball of fur and boundless enthusiasm.

She darts and races, slides down moss-slick banks, loses her footing and rolls, yips and bays, while Kennedy's wolf trots at her side, tongue lolling in companionable happiness.

My wolf seriously lacks coordination, but she's so low to the ground, she doesn't skid far when she loses her footing. She's also tireless. For hours, she zooms along on prancing paws, following Kennedy's periodic nudges in a different direction when he senses something he doesn't like.

The whole time, the scent of warm afternoon teases my wolf's nose, and even though the world at night is scary, and even though she's small, she's not the least bit hesitant or afraid.

My wolf investigates every critter and nook and cranny, and she'd probably keep going, except when the horizon begins to lighten in the east, Kennedy's wolf becomes insistent that we return home, herding her back toward our cabin.

She complies, unhappily, but fully aware that Kennedy's wolf could sit on her and squash her into a little wolf patty. When we get home, Kennedy shifts back to her human skin as she bounds up the stairs. My wolf lingers outside on the path.

"Don't be long, Mari's wolf," Kennedy says over her shoulder before slipping through the door. "You don't want to run into anyone. You're kind of a pipsqueak."

My wolf doesn't take offense. She doesn't really register the words, more the idea that Kennedy wants her to come in for her own safety. She's not quite ready, though, and she's not

at all worried about the threat of being alone. It's strange. I'm always uneasy alone.

My wolf stretches in the middle of the path, lowering her chest to the ground and lifting her rump in the air, enjoying the lengthening of her spine and reveling in all the wolf scents compacted into the dirt. She closes her eyes and inhales.

Her nose twitches. Out of nowhere, she catches the scent of mid-day sunlight, and she sneezes. She lifts her head, scanning the trees dotting the hillside, still cast in shadows.

My wolf and I notice him at the same time. Darragh Ryan. He's close, only a few feet away, standing on the edge of the path. Somehow, he snuck up on us unawares.

He looks the same as he did at Abertha's cottage. Those are definitely the same jeans. Still no shirt and no shoes. The only difference is that sometime between then and now, he combed and cut his hair. He definitely didn't have Cheryl do it. It looks like he did it himself.

His brown eyes blaze with gold in the gray pre-dawn as he stands, stiff and broad, frozen in place. A shiver of warning zips down my spine.

My wolf doesn't seem to feel the danger in the air. She yips a greeting, and without hesitation, she trots right on over to him. His jaw clenches. She plops onto her butt at his feet, right on top of his bare toes, and gazes up, tongue lolling, luxuriating in his scent and the heat from his human skin, a low whine emanating from the back of her throat.

For a moment, he doesn't move, his muscles somehow tensing even tighter. My wolf noses his calf and nips at the denim. And then, on an exhale, he lets himself go "at ease" and sinks into a crouch, awkwardly offering her a loose fist to sniff. She yips with delight, snuffling his hand, licking his knuckles, and then she straight up rolls onto her back.

Legs splayed.

Tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

Oh dear God. She's asking for belly rubs. He looks like he might bolt at any second, like this is the strangest interaction

he's ever had and he's never seen a bitch on her back before, and my wolf is wriggling in the dirt, batting his hand with her snout in the direction of her smooth white belly.

He sighs and the corners of his lips curve the slightest bit. "Is this what you want?" he asks.

He scratches the exactly right place, the exact right way. My wolf spreads her legs—all the way open, no shame—and rumbles her complete satisfaction. If I was combustible, I'd explode into a million tiny pieces from the embarrassment.

Close your legs. Close your legs. I plead with her, but she's on another plane.

She's not the least bit worried about exposing her belly to him—mate or no, he's a big, scary stranger—all she cares about is that he keeps scratching. With his nails. Right there. Over a scooch. Yeah, that's the spot. Her low growl sounds exactly like a purr.

His fingers slow way too soon, and my wolf whines from the depths of her soul as he gives her belly a last pat.

"Time to go inside, princess," he says. His deep voice is rusty. From lack of use or is he still hungover? It takes a hell of a lot for a shifter to get drunk. I don't smell liquor on his breath, only on his unwashed jeans.

"Come on." He scoops my wolf up as he rises to his feet, cradling her tight to his warm, broad chest.

She nuzzles her snout into the crook of his arm. Impossibly, she's even more blissed out than when she was getting scratches. She breathes him in, loving how she can feel his steady heartbeat against her flank. It's such a weird feeling—like we've been at sea our whole life, and we're feeling firm ground underneath our feet for the very first time.

My brain is still catching up when he opens the door and gently sets my wolf down on her dainty paws just inside. She turns to go after him, but before she can even lift a paw, he says, "No. Stay."

Then he shuts the door and his feet sound on the steps.

My wolf blinks at the closed door and pads over to scratch the wood. She whines, confused. She doesn't understand why he left, so she waits for him.

Minutes tick by, but he doesn't come back. Eventually, she kind of gives up, lays down, and retreats, relinquishing our body. After another wave of exquisite pain and cracking bone, I'm lying naked on the rag rug in the living room.

Kennedy pads down the hallway, toothbrush in her mouth, and tosses me a white T-shirt. "The key is don't forget your clothes," she mumbles around the handle of the brush. "Or if you do, remember where you left them."

If she smells Darragh, she doesn't say anything. She's really good about privacy.

I tug on the T-shirt, stagger to my aching legs, say goodnight, and go lie down for the hour or two before we have to be at the lodge to start prepping breakfast.

As I lie under the pale-pink canopy that hangs from a hoop above my bed, I admire the fairy lights I've strung across the ceiling and let my mind wander.

How should I feel? Abandoned? Rejected? Protected? Insulted to be treated like a pup?

Mates aren't supposed to leave each other once they find each other, not until the female's knocked up. Darragh's walked away from me twice.

But then again, mates are supposed to do a lot of things. They're supposed to back each other up come hell or high water, but look at my parents. In the most likely scenario, Declan Kelly raped my mother while she was pregnant with me, and my father decided that she was a dirty cheater because that was easier than confronting his alpha. Then, to hide the shame of it all, he tried to kill me. Not Declan Kelly. Me, the baby.

Mates are supposed to be together forever, soulmates, right? But I can list at least a half dozen people off the top of my head who are either stepping out on each other or strictly-for-heat. Liam. Rowan. Haisley. Dermot. Rían. Dierdre.

I'm not going to panic because Darragh Ryan, the pack hermit, isn't doing things the way you're supposed to. He gives a good belly rub, and somehow, his presence helped my wolf come out. That's two points in his favor. Plus, he's hot, he smells good, and I'm kind of into the older male thing. Shifters aren't like humans. We get stronger as we age until we hit late, late life, so Darragh actually has more bulk than most males in the pack.

And apparently, I'm into muscle. Biology must be changing my tastes. All the guys I have pinned on my vision board are more shy and soulful types.

I'm okay with taking it slow for now. My skin's definitely a little sensitive, and my nipples are hard and achy like it's mid-winter, but it's nothing I can't handle. Maybe the joke will be on Fate for once. Maybe if I give it time and don't panic, everything will turn out all right.

I give it a whole two days of radio silence—not a single hide nor hair of Darragh Ryan around camp—before I decide to take matters into my own hands.

“Do you think he’s in there?” I whisper to Kennedy’s wolf, nodding toward the rickety structure in the clearing below.

He snorts an affirmative.

“It looks abandoned.” The shelter tilts slightly starboard, and the branches woven into a roof have grown a lush blanket of moss. A cluster of mushrooms sprout from the peak. It’s picturesque in an ominous fairy-tale-witch-with-an-oven kind of way.

Kennedy’s wolf paws the dirt. He’s anxious to bail. He doesn’t like being around other males, especially those higher up in the hierarchy. Darragh might not quite be *pack*, but he still ranks. You can smell it on him.

“You can go,” I tell the wolf. Before we set out, we decided I would talk to Darragh alone. Even though I’m quaking on the inside, I know I’ll be safe with him. Mates can’t hurt each other.

Kennedy’s wolf growls low in his throat. I stop myself from giving him a reassuring pat. He’s got too much dignity to accept it.

“I’ll be fine. Go catch rabbits. Darragh will bring me home.”

Or maybe he'll want me to stay. My cheeks, already flushed from the trek up here, blaze. Excitement stirs in my belly, even though I don't really want to go inside the shack. It looks like a strong wind would blow it over, but then again, those roof mushrooms look very healthy. To get so big, they must've weathered more than a few storms.

"It's cool." I smooth what's left of my periwinkle tulle skirt after the prickly bushes get to it and begin to pick my way down the slight incline to the mossy clearing. "He's my mate. It'll be fine."

I bet he doesn't have indoor plumbing in a shack like that, but I hope to hell he has water. I emptied my bottle a way back. Darragh's place was a lot further than I'd thought.

It's a good thing I brought Kennedy for her nose because the vague directions I got from Old Noreen at breakfast would've never been enough. We're at least three miles from Quarry Pack camp, and this place is tucked in a hollow surrounded by a thick stand of sycamores and tall pines.

At least it's shady. As Kennedy trots off, I take a moment and fan my face. I've looked better. During the hike, I sweated my ringlets into a wild dandelion fluff and discovered that my new whimsical sheer white blouse sucks. The elastic in the puff sleeves cuts into my upper arms, and the fabric doesn't wick or breathe—it's sealed my perspiration against my skin like a rubber suit, and yet, my pits are somehow wet.

I've definitely felt prettier, but I don't need to worry about that. Mates find each other irresistible, and besides, I've decided that I dress for myself, not for the male gaze.

That's what I'm telling myself as my heart thumps faster and I try in vain to smooth my curls. I pause a few feet outside of the opening that serves as a door. Darragh must have scented our approach and heard us at least a quarter mile away. I'm not the stealthiest hiker. I'm kind of surprised he didn't come out to greet us. This entire clearing carries his scent, so my human nose is blind to his exact location, but Kennedy's wolf thinks he's inside, so he's inside.

Do I knock?

I should knock.

What do I knock on? There isn't a door, just an opening where the wall doesn't go all the way to the corner. I'm getting more freaked out the longer I stand here, so I clear my throat, take a deep, steadying breath, and step out of the sunshine and into the gloom.

A wolf's snarl erupts from the shadows across the room. I yelp and jump backwards, stumbling so I hit the wall instead of toppling outside.

The snarling rises, and my heart slams against my ribs. The sound isn't a warning or a threat, it's the clamor of a raging wolf attack, only somewhat muffled by the thick muscles of Darragh's chest.

Is his wolf going to tear out of his skin and eat me?

Instantly, I become prey and freeze, plastering myself against the rough boards. My chafed thighs clench and I fight the sudden, overwhelming urge to piss myself. The thump in my chest turns into a pounding. My wolf whines and cowers in a far corner of my insides.

"Hi," I whimper. "I'm so sorry."

As my eyes adjust to the gloom, I make out Darragh standing by a rudimentary fireplace, as far as he can get from me in the cramped shack. His muscles are tensed like he's priming for a fight, his wolf's vicious snarling rattling his ribs, his body angled and his gaze averted so that he's not looking at me. He's glaring with a desperate intensity at the packed dirt floor, hands balled into fists, veins popping on his forearms.

He darts a glance at me out of the corner of his eyes, and my breath catches. His irises are wild—a hypnotic bronze and golden swirl. Somehow, despite the clanging of every one of my survival instincts, my chest bursts with a strange warmth, almost a glow. I've never seen eyes like his before.

"I didn't knock because, uh—" I toss a glance at the opening directly beside me. "No door."

How can I feel absolutely terrified and like a complete idiot at the same time?

He doesn't move, doesn't say anything. He stands there, hulked out, while his wolf snarls and growls like he's trying to chew his way out of his chest.

My wolf trembles, her head bowed, her throat bared. My mouth is bone dry with thirst and fear, and my skin is still clammy with sweat.

What do I do?

Excuse myself and inch back out the door? Sink down the wall so I'm lower, so I make a smaller target, so I'm less of a threat? He can't possibly be afraid of me. He's a foot taller and at least seventy pounds of pure muscle heavier than me. My brain is fritzing from the adrenaline.

"Can I go?" I ask, my voice somehow both raspy and breathy. I sound five years old.

His wolf's snarling swells, and his chest vibrates. That would be a firm no.

He's shirtless again today, and he's still rocking yesterday's jeans. At least I didn't catch him with his pants off.

Like when I was marching my dumb butt down into this hostage situation, an unfamiliar heat blooms in my cheeks, and a squirmy feeling erupts in my lower belly. I'm scared, but I'm also something else. Something weird and new and reckless.

"Okay. I'm not going anywhere. See?" I raise my palms in a sign of submission.

His wolf's snarl crescendos and ebbs to more of a menacing rumble. My wolf sneaks a peek upward with rounded eyes.

"I-I'm sorry I just showed up." I clear my throat as I lower my hands. "I didn't, uh, know how to call you or anything."

I glance around the shack. Dude definitely does not have a phone. He's off the grid.

Darragh doesn't answer, but he does seem to break himself free of the fight he was having with his wolf. He scrubs his face, tugs his beard, and relaxes his shoulders. Slowly, with great deliberation, he turns and looks at me. His eyes blaze

gold in the dimness. I feel like he wants to eat me. My belly swirls.

“The black wolf brought you?” he asks.

“Who? What? Oh, yeah. Kennedy. He brought me. Yeah.” I wipe my sweaty palms on my skirt. Tulle is not absorbent at all. I must smell like a dripping wet mop. I twitch my nose, trying to catch a whiff.

Darragh’s wolf lets loose another round of mad snarling, and Darragh tenses again, bracing himself like he’s holding his wolf back from rushing into battle with me. I immediately break eye contact and bare my neck. Sooner than before, he masters him. I spend the time quaking in my white patent leather Docs, effectively treed against a wall made of rotten wood.

This was not my best idea.

I tried to wait patiently in camp for him to come back, but when he didn’t show up, and the heat flashes came more and more frequently, I got itchy. And then restless. Then crabby. Bitchy. Frantic. Finally, I burst out in hysterical tears when I accidentally dropped a bowl of blackberries on the floor and stepped on some by accident. That’s when Kennedy said she’d take me to Darragh’s if I pulled my damn self together.

Thank Fate that Kennedy’s wolf is off chasing rabbits now. If he heard the sound Darragh’s wolf is making right now, there would be a very short and one-sided fight. The smart move when a wolf sounds as bloodthirsty and moon mad as Darragh’s is to bare the neck, but Kennedy’s wolf is both a dumbass and a badass. He’d take his chances, and he’d get torn apart.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Darragh’s wolf could take Kennedy’s. He sounds like a mega-beast. Like an alpha. Is that why he’s so riled? Because he smells another male on me?

Shit. I didn’t think about that. Darragh seemed chill with Kennedy and me going for a run together the other night. Still, everyone knows that mates who haven’t done it yet get hella

possessive, that the scent of competition can even push them into rut.

I need to clarify the situation. “Kennedy and I are just friends. Best friends. I mean, we love each other, but not in that way. Like siblings. Or like, Army buddies in the movies.” Oh, God. He’s not saying anything, just clenching that sharp jaw, so I keep rambling. “We’ve known each other for years. We’re roommates. With Annie and Una. In the lone female cabin.”

He doesn’t say anything, but at least his wolf’s snarls have subsided again into a persistent rumble. Should I try to make my escape? I inch sideways.

Instantly, his wolf’s rumble swells to a booming growl, rolling over me like a wave, triggering another jolt of adrenaline followed by a wave of neck-tickling heat. The muscles in Darragh’s neck strain ’til they look like they’re gonna burst. I ease back to the exact spot where I was, lining my feet up with the boot prints I’d made in his dirt floor.

But what if that was a “get the hell out of here, bitch,” not a “get back where you were” growl?

“Uh, should I go?” I squeak. “I could come back some other time? When it’s good for you?”

By the dark flush on his face, Darragh’s wrestling his wolf back down, and when the growls are low enough for him to speak again, he says, “You aren’t supposed to leave camp without an escort.”

I blink. “I had an escort. Kennedy.”

His strong brow furrows. “It’s not safe.”

I didn’t smell anything more dangerous than a possum the entire way here. “Kennedy’s wolf is really tough.”

Darragh’s wolf snarls. I snap my mouth shut.

God, my back itches. Sweat is still dripping down my spine, and it’s driving me nuts because I’m too scared to scratch it. My nose tingles. I’m going to cry. This is not how I

saw this going. I feel like I'm being called on the carpet by the teacher, but I never got in trouble back at Moon Lake school.

I sniffle. Darragh's brow creases more deeply. Alarm flashes across his face.

His nostrils flare as he draws in a deep, bracing breath, and he forces his muscles to slowly, deliberately unflex.

"You should sit," he finally grinds out.

My gaze darts around the place, looking for a chair. There's the primitive stacked stone fireplace he's looming next to. A battered trunk. A ragged sleeping bag with a soot-stained kerosene lantern on the floor next to it. A book. It's upside down, so I can't tell what it is, but it's been through the war, too.

And there's a huge freaking sword propped against a wall. It's rusty—God, I hope that's rust—and dented and the blade is nicked in places, but not in a way that makes it seem old—in a way that makes it seem well-used.

What does he kill with a sword? He's a freaking wolf. He has claws.

Oh, there's also an almost empty bottle of whiskey lying on its side in the middle of the floor, a few inches from me. Without thinking, I reach out with my foot and toe the glass, spinning it to point in his direction. The scrape on the weathered wood is painfully loud.

Darragh's wolf doesn't seem to mind that move. His rumble stays at the same level, clearly a threat, but more of a "that's right, I'm the alpha here" rather than "I am imminently going to eat you."

My wolf's fear eases a little more at the same time a new worry rises in my thinking, human brain.

I can't live here. *There is no chair.*

And, much more importantly, there's no bathroom. If there is, it's an outhouse, and nope. No way. I need indoor plumbing, and you are never going to catch me sitting bare-

assed over a ditch in the ground like I don't know for a fact that spiders and snakes live in holes.

I don't want to get knotted for the first time in here either. There's no door.

I can't really wrap my brain around the whole physical act of mating, let alone doing it with *this* male with *that* wolf inside him. For sure, I can't make a nest out of an Army surplus bedroll from the '80s and whatever is in that trunk. I'm really going to get naked in this place? With a guy I don't know at all?

I mean, the mysteriousness is kind of hot. What *does* he even do with that sword and what *is* in that trunk? Do I want to know?

Regardless, he doesn't seem to want me here at all.

Another wave of panic rises inside me, turning my parched mouth so dry that my throat feels like the sides are sticking together.

My hands fly to my chest, one clutching the other, pressing against the clammy skin above the neckline of the world's worst, clingy, itchy blouse. It's instinct, but as my heartbeat thumps against my palm, I realize that I've reached for the bond, just like the other mated females do when they get stressed out.

At least I think the bond is what I'm feeling—it's not unlike indigestion. It kind of burns and kind of feels stuck in there like if I hacked hard enough, I might be able to cough it up. Despite all that, it's not a *bad* feeling. Just intrusive.

Focusing on it, though, is weirdly calming. My wolf is mellowing out now. She's scooted her butt back up to our boundary, listening to Darragh's wolf rumble like he's a meditation app as she idly licks her coat.

I don't like it when we're on different frequencies like this. It makes me feel unbalanced. I'm pretty sure she's the one who's reading the situation wrong, though. Neither Darragh nor his wolf has done anything the least bit reassuring. I mean, where am I even supposed to sit?

Darragh seems to realize that the second that I think it. He scrubs his neck and actually seems a bit abashed. “Uh, you can sit on the bedroll.”

I press closer against the wall.

His back stiffens. “Or, uh, on the trunk.”

He’s laser focused on my hands pressing over the bond. Or rather, the place where I’m smooshing my own boobs. I’ve got a lot up top. I can’t do one without doing the other.

I force myself to lower my arms casually to my side. The awkward tension between Darragh and me grinds on, but my fear begins to recede, too. He’s not making a move toward me, he’s dialed the snarling down, and my wolf has completely reevaluated her first impression of his wolf. She wants to see him in his fur.

I do not.

I take a few steadying breaths and the constriction in my chest eases. Contrary to what you’d expect, it smells nice in here. Well, that’s not exactly accurate. It reeks of old woodsmoke, metal, dirt, and dried blood, but there’s a good smell, too, a flipside to the bad ones—campfire, freshly-churned earth, and pennies warm from your hand.

The scent is coming from Darragh, and it’s disorienting because it’s a complete contrast to his psycho-loner-who-lives-in-the-woods vibe. It smells like what happy childhoods must.

He’s not staring at the floor anymore. He’s tracking what I’m looking at with those molten metal eyes. Because I have no game, I feel compelled to thrust my shoulders back and cock a hip like I’m just low-key hanging out against the wall of his dank wilderness shelter.

My wolf watches this unfold from her catbird seat, fascinated by it all—me posing over here, him looming over there, both of us grasping for something to say while his wolf rumbles in the background like rolling thunder.

I cough again. “Sorry if I, uh, interrupted you.”

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Oh. Um. Good.”

“You need food,” he says, and I’m not sure if it’s a question or not.

My stomach is a whirling, twirling dance party. Food is the last thing on my mind. Besides, he doesn’t have a fridge or pantry or stove. There’s not even a cauldron hanging in his fireplace like at Abertha’s place. Where does he cook?

“No, thank you,” I say.

“There are apples.” He bursts into movement. Inside, my wolf skitters backward with a yip. He stops and then moves with more caution to a basket I hadn’t noticed by the fireplace. He takes out a small red apple. I’m fairly sure they’re from the trees at Abertha’s.

My wolf grumbles.

He holds it up and jerks his chin. He wants me to catch it. I cup my hands and pray. I’m not coordinated, and I was always garbage at Human Sport at the Moon Lake school.

He pitches it and it lands softly in my palms.

“I’m not hungry,” I mumble under my breath. I don’t want his friends-with-benefits fruit.

“Eat it,” he says. It’s not quite a command, but it’s not a suggestion, either. I imagine an elder might say “eat it” like that to a pup. I feel squirmy. He might be older than me, and I might be young, but I’m not a pup. I never really was. I’ve been looking out for myself since long before my mom bailed into the river.

I polish the apple on my tattered skirt for something to do. Tulle’s not going to clean anything.

Darragh watches me, and the squirmy feeling grows stronger until I can’t take it anymore, so I take careful, slow steps to sit on the trunk. Darragh backs up so he remains as far from me as the shack allows.

I clear my throat. Clearly, he’s not going to address the elephant in the room. “I came up here because I thought we should talk about it. You know, the whole mate thing.”

Even though there's just the two of us, well four, if you count our wolves, my face still burns. This is the most excruciating encounter I've ever had with anyone in my entire life.

I wait. He stares at me like I'm a venomous snake that's plopped itself on his only piece of furniture and asked to have a heart-to-heart about his feelings.

All of a sudden, a horrible thought pops into my head. "You feel it, don't you? That we're mates?"

Without hesitation, he jerks a sharp nod.

My lungs unfreeze, and I can breathe again. There's never been a case of a male not recognizing his mate, but if it were going to happen, with my luck, it'd happen to me.

"I guess you're as surprised as I am, eh?" I try to smile, but again, I think I'm giving toothy chimpanzee.

He shuts his eyes for a moment, and it's strange, the difference it makes when those dark brown eyes with the blazing gold outlines aren't boring into me. He looks less scary. More like any other guy from the pack, maybe more built, a little hairier and rough around the edges, but a Quarry Pack male.

"I'm Mari," I offer.

"I know," he says. His wolf's rumbling makes his voice vibrate.

For a moment, I think we've got a conversation started, but the seconds tick by, and we lapse into silence. I look around the room again, but I saw it all the first time—fireplace, trunk, sleeping bag, lantern, book, whiskey bottle, rusty sword.

"So do you hunt a lot or—"

His gaze moves to the big-ass sword leaning against the weathered gray planks of the wall.

"That's not rust, is it? That's blood?" I ask, even though it's really the last thing I want to know.

Darragh grunts.

“So is the big stack of bones out back or—” I force a smile like I’m joking, but I’m not. I’m so out of my depth that literally every thought that pops into my head is falling right out of my mouth.

Darragh cannot be my mate. I mean, I didn’t want, like, *a softboi*, but this guy sailed way past dominant and landed smack dab in the middle of cleans his teeth and butchers his meat with the same knife.

Without thinking, I unscrew my water bottle to take a sip. When nothing comes out, I try to save face by shaking the last few drops onto my cracked lips. I’m completely parched and dripping with sweat at the same time. It’s such a weird combination.

After all this time with Darragh over there and me over here, I’m not expecting him to move, so I jump out of my skin when he lets out a sudden exhale and stalks with surprising grace to squat in front of me. He looks at me expectantly. I freeze.

His brows gather, and he tilts his head. Then he leans forward, seizes my hips, and in one smooth movement, he lifts me and stands me on the floor. His hands don’t linger, but the feeling does—strong and sure and warm. My breath hitches.

He unlatches the trunk and throws it open. I catch a glimpse of its contents—books. Beautiful leather and cloth bound books with lovely gilt and rough-cut edges, at least a hundred of them. There’s also a neat stack of clothes and a gallon of water wedged in a corner.

He holds his hand out to me. “Give it here.”

I don’t respond quickly enough for him, so he tries to take the water bottle gently from my hand. I’m so slow on the uptake that I keep clutching it tight. He stands close, closer than he’s been since he rubbed my wolf’s belly. My heart gallops in my chest.

This close—he’s so *much*. Tanned and tall and muscled and rumbly, and if you disregard the untrimmed beard and bitten-to-the-quick nails—pretty. The grays threaded through

his brown hair and the lines in the corner of his eyes and the softness of his lips against the harshness of his jaw and his nose and his constantly furrowing brow— Yeah, somehow, he's pretty.

Darragh curls his fingers over mine.

My wolf skitters back from the boundary between us like her paws were zapped by lightning. My gaze darts down. His hand completely covers mine, rough and warm.

My other hand flies to press against my chest again. The bond is reaching toward him, flowing through my fingers like liquid sunshine, seeking the bond reaching for me, winding alongside it, twining, weaving together like a braid. I hold my breath. I can't believe this is happening.

My gaze darts up to meet his. I can't read his eyes. They're too gold, too—much.

He peels my fingers off my water bottle and steps back as he unscrews the top and fills it from his gallon jug. I stand there with my mouth open and a palm pressed to my chest like Old Noreen when she hears a shocking bit of scandal.

He holds the bottle up for me to take.

I blink at it. It's a twenty-one-ounce wide mouth, and it looks like a baby bottle in his hand. I feel like a kid next to him. He towers over me. Like his *shadow* totally *falls* on me. How are we going to fit?

He shakes my bottle and grunts.

I reach for it, my hand trembling so bad that I fumble it. If he hadn't still been holding it, I'd have dropped it.

My face flames.

Once I've got a firm grip, he squares his shoulders and goes back to his corner by the fireplace.

I stare dumbly at the water for a few seconds, and then my thirst hits me all at once. I unscrew the cap and gulp down half. It isn't cold, but somehow, it's the best I've ever tasted. He's staring at me, not from the corner of his eye anymore, but straight on. He looks alarmed. Or pissed.

I slow down and try to sip like a lady.

Why do I care about being ladylike in Darragh Ryan's murder shack? Patriarchy. It's the only explanation.

"Thank you," I say. It comes out breathy and soft. Eyes cast down, I dig the toe of my boot into the dirt floor.

"Where did the black wolf who brought you go?" His voice feels like river stones on your bare feet, that kind of hard and smooth at the same time. I like it.

It's easier to stare at my boots when I answer him. "Kennedy? He's out hunting. I said he could go."

"You shouldn't have come here." He's talking down to me like an elder, but he's not that old. And I'm not that young.

"I know," I tell the tops of my white patent leather Docs. "I got the message." He doesn't want me here. I guess I was supposed to wait for him to come to me. "It's just that I think we need to talk about this."

"What is there to talk about?"

Heat. Nests. Knotting. Are we going to do it here? On that bedroll? Is he going to fit? Will it hurt? What happens after? How can I have a pup? I can't have a pup. I've got my own crap I can't deal with, and honestly, it's enough of a challenge taking care of myself.

Darragh's brow raises. I guess it wasn't a rhetorical question.

I can't talk about any of that with him. To stall, I reach for the apple that fell to the bedroll and start polishing it again.

He clears his throat. "It'll be fine," he says. It does not sound like he believes what he says in the least.

The panic rolls back, sweeping away all the other feelings, and suddenly, I want to go home. I want Una and Kennedy and Annie and my things and my own space. I need to regroup.

"Can I go back now?" I ask in a low voice.

For a long moment he doesn't speak, but then he sighs. "Of course."

When he moves, he moves quickly. He grabs a pair of well-used work boots from behind the trunk and steps into them. He props his foot on the trunk and bends to tie it, tightening the laces eyelet by eyelet with a firm tug, and for some reason, I can't tear my eyes away. His thick thighs flex against the denim of his jeans, and loose strands of his newly cropped hair fall across his forehead.

My pulse kicks up again, and my belly joins the acrobatics, doing some weird upsy-daisy thing that isn't fear or anxiety, not at all. The desire to go home fades.

Darragh looks up from where he's kneeling and grimaces. The bond between us somehow lights up and sizzles, and a gush of heat rushes between my legs.

My heart lifts. My wolf isn't terrified of Darragh Ryan, and maybe my body is kind of interested, too. Maybe this hasn't been a complete disaster, just the world's most awkward meeting of mates. Every pairing can't be two people falling into each other's arms and heading to the dens to make sweet, primal love. This is the real world.

I need to roll with this better. No expectations. Let it happen.

Heartened, I take a few more sips of water and a bite of apple. Darragh growls. It sounds like approval. I flush.

"Ready?" he asks as he straightens, finished with his laces.

"Maybe I could stay a little longer. We could—" My gaze darts around. "Read? I'm into books, too. What do you like?"

Shifters aren't big readers, but those of us who are, trade. I think I'd read every book in camp at least a dozen times before Una got us phones, and I discovered ebooks.

He stares at me.

"I'm into music, too. Mostly mid-to-late-2000s indie rock and acoustic chill." A slash appears between his eyebrows. "Oh, and I'm really into gardening and crafting, of course. And aesthetics."

My gaze darts around the cramped room. There's nothing on the walls. I think Darragh's more of a function over form kind of guy.

For a second, he's speechless. I count the creases as they appear on his brow—one, two, three. I smile encouragingly. His mouth spears down.

"No," he says, suddenly gruff. "You can't stay." With no further ado, he strides toward me, and I skitter out of his way. He passes me without a glance, ducking through the opening, and gestures for me to follow him.

My whole face bursts into flame, down my neck, across my chest. The red shows through my white top.

I should *not* feel like the idiot here. He's the one with bad manners. He's the guy who lives in a hut with a sword and a whiskey bottle on the floor. Still, I do—like the biggest idiot who ever lived.

I blink, and he's already a yard down the faint trail that Kennedy and I took to get here.

I stumble after him like a dumbass.

His pace is just slow enough that he doesn't leave me behind, but too fast for me to come even with him without breaking into a jog. He winds around trees, his direction unerring, stamping down or snapping aside thorn bushes as he goes so that I can walk right over or past them.

He doesn't say a word, doesn't even look back to make sure I'm still there.

That tiny little flicker of hope I'd felt fizzles out with a hiss. For a quarter mile or so, my insides have sunk too low for me to decide on anything to say. No, my hermit mate doesn't want to read books with me or talk about the fact that Fate has stuck us together for the rest of our lives. He can't even stand me for an hour.

My cheeks burn from the exertion of trotting behind a dude with a stride twice as long as mine while fighting a brewing mess of ugly emotions.

This is what happens. Every single hand Fate deals me is shitty.

I have this daydream—maybe it’s not a daydream because I play it out in my mind every night before I fall asleep, and other times, like when I’m smoking the bees at Abertha’s or prepping dinner or using up the hot water in the shower to get back at Kennedy for eating my snacks without permission.

In this dream, I have a cozy cabin that belongs to me, and by magic, it has a hundred rooms that I’ve decorated over the years—in my boho phase and my goblincore phase—and every room is different, but the light is always hazy and soft, and the sheer curtains always flutter in a gentle breeze.

Music plays, conjured from thin air, and as I walk through my rooms, my fingers graze exquisite blown-glass sculptures and polished wood bureaus with lion’s paws for feet and all the pretty things I’ve collected from Instagram and Pinterest.

Everything is beautiful, and everything is calm, and as I walk, a male falls in step beside me. Maybe he’s wearing a black fedora and a gray wool vest, or maybe he’s in a flowy, white dress shirt with a few buttons undone, suspenders hanging at his sides, but he’s beautiful and calm, too. He takes my hand, and we continue through *our* rooms, my belly swelling, and then a pup is walking with us, clutching my hand, and then there’s another, a baby, and I carry her in a sling, cradled to my breast.

The male smiles down at me, kind eyes twinkling, and I know that I’m not alone, I’ll never be alone again, and everything is fine—perfect—and it’s going to be perfect from here on out.

It’s the exact opposite of this march from hell.

The water I finished before we’d gone a mile must have only piqued my thirst, because now, I’m *parched*. The sun’s higher, and the day has turned unseasonably warm. My blouse is slipping and sliding across my sweaty skin as my thighs slap back and forth.

And I feel so fucking *left behind*.

I can't help myself from speeding up, instinctively trying to catch up with Darragh, but he maintains a consistent twenty-foot lead at all times. Periodically, I notice what I'm doing, and I slow down out of stubbornness, and then so does he. He's doing it on purpose. He doesn't want to be anywhere near me.

His hotness makes it sting twice as bad. He moves as gracefully as a wolf, deftly navigating roots and gulches, balanced like he's got a gyroscope inside himself.

He's not all hustle and swagger like the males my age, but he doesn't show any sign of the physical carefulness that our males tend to develop when they get older, either, after they've gone too many rounds in the ring.

Has he ever even fought on the circuit? Most Quarry Pack males do. They don't let lone females watch, so I wouldn't know. Not like that's my scene anyway.

As I watch Darragh stride ahead with all the energy in the world, I trip along like I got my feet yesterday. I turn an ankle stumbling over loose rocks and accidentally step off the path he's blazing, catching my skirt on a blackberry bush.

He doesn't even look back over his shoulder when I stop to tug the tulle free, but he does stop in his tracks and stares blindly above the tree line at the shadow of Salt Mountain in the distance until I rip the fabric loose before continuing on.

What happened to sit, here's an apple, here's some water? That's gone. If he could run away, I think he would.

Every inch of my visible skin is bright pink from heat and embarrassment and hurt, and as I drag myself onward, my disappointment and humiliation does a U-turn and burrows into my dumb, soft heart.

How come no one wants me?

How come I'm so expendable? How come—when it comes to me—mothers and fathers and mates are all like “screw the biological imperative, I got issues, fuck this chick.” What is so *uncompelling* about *me*?

No. I'm not going to let that toxic bullshit stroll on into my brain and make itself at home. I'm a grown female—I'm not giving into those thoughts anymore.

How about—who even *is* this guy?

It's not like I asked him for anything. I did the mature thing; I came to talk it out. I'm not exactly thrilled about him as a mate either, but I'm not being rude about it.

My boot catches on some undergrowth, and I hop a step, but I don't let it throw me off. I plow ahead. He wants to get rid of me? Well, that's fine. I can't wait until I'm back at camp, either.

I'm going to have a shower, and then a long bubble bath, and then I'm going to toke up with Kennedy on the back porch and eat the Manchego that Una's been hiding in the back of the crisper, but before any of that, I'm going to chug a gallon of ice-cold water and forget Darragh Ryan exists.

It won't be hard.

Take away the tortured air of mystery and scary sword and cool trunk of books and awkward attempts to feed and water me, and what do you have? Not a personality. More like a mad wolf with a shack in the woods and a single pair of busted-ass blue jeans.

By the time we're in sight of the commons, I'm on his heels. He can't walk ahead unless he breaks into a jog, so he has to deal with me right behind him. His scent is thick; he's worked up a sweat power walking to keep ahead of me. He still smells delicious though, and that just makes me crankier.

The bond isn't weaving together anymore. It's a single cord, anchored under my breastbone like it's always been there. It's completely real inside me, but if I follow it out, at some point, it becomes kind of vague. Like the Saturday when Una and I drove to Chapel Bell in the fog, and we couldn't see a foot past the hood of the truck.

Maybe the bond is deformed. Maybe that's why this isn't going right.

We enter camp by the commissary, and I expect Darragh to head up toward the lone female cabin, but instead, he turns toward the cabins clustered around the commons. I'm so distracted by my sore feelings that I don't fully comprehend that he's leading me to the alpha's cabin until we're there.

Darragh leaves me on the path at the bottom of the steps while he bounds up to pound on Killian's door.

Is he seriously going to bust me for breaking the rules? Like I'm a pup, not his mate? *Asshole*.

I cross my arms and try to will my sweat to dry. Anxiety joins the rest of the weird stuff happening in my belly.

Killian throws open the door, shirtless in black sweats, a towel dangling around his thick neck. He and Darragh kind of size each other up in silence, and then Killian's gaze moves over Darragh's shoulder to take me in.

He lets out a short but displeased growl. Darragh squares himself so Killian has to lean to the side to keep scowling at me like I'm a bad wolf who took a dump on his carpet.

"If I may?" he says to Darragh, arching an eyebrow, and Darragh grudgingly steps to the side.

Killian pads out onto his porch and Darragh turns so that they're standing next to each other, glaring down at me with disapproval, Darragh with his arms folded, Killian holding onto the ends of the towel hanging around his neck.

I feel small and gross and...abandoned.

My neck bends of its own accord. For some reason, Darragh's wolf snarls at the show of submission. Challenged, Killian's wolf snarls back louder, and for a moment, both males tense as they wrestle their wolves down.

My wolf curls herself into a tiny ball of fur in a far corner.

I'm on my own.

I squeeze my hands into balls and try really hard not to cry or breathe through my nose. I guess because he's been working out, Killian reeks. Not like good clean sweat, though. Like stagnant pond scum.

“She walked out to my place,” Darragh says.

Killian’s chest rumbles with displeasure. “Alone?”

“Kennedy’s wolf led her there.”

Killian’s lips compress. “Did you kill him?” he asks like he’s asking about the weather.

My heart stutters. Would Darragh have really hurt Kennedy?

“No,” Darragh says. No elaboration. Just “no.” Killian grunts. I don’t know whether it’s approval for Darragh’s restraint or some other male thing I can’t understand.

Oh, it was really dumb to go up there. I see it now that I’m pinned in place with a crick in my neck, a headache gathering from the strain of looking up at these two males from the corner of downcast eyes.

I wish Una would walk by. She’d help somehow, or at least she’d stay close by so I wouldn’t be alone in the middle of the path, called on the carpet with everyone staring at me from behind their cabin curtains.

“You said you would watch her,” Darragh says to Killian.

My body instinctively tightens in anticipation of a fight. No one challenges the Alpha.

“Can’t watch her every second,” Killian retorts. He’s not even pissed. Not at Darragh at least. He’s glowering at me.

Darragh frowns at Killian’s answer.

“You want me to keep her locked up?” Killian asks with a toss of his shoulder.

An old fear blooms in my chest, and a vague memory—a coarse and demanding voice at our front door. Mom hustling me into the closet, shutting the door, and dragging the bureau across it. Snarls and whimpers and creaking springs. Mom letting me out, her hands shaking, and the bedroom stinking of shame, strange male, and human tobacco. Despite the hot afternoon sun, I shiver.

“No. She wouldn’t like that,” Darragh says. Who *would* like that?

“I could put her in with Cheryl,” Killian offers. “She’d keep her in line.”

Cheryl is the alpha female and Haisley’s mother. She’s mean. Since I was little, she’s always called me a baby doll, patting my cheek and pulling at my curls to make them spring. She does it hard, so it hurts.

Darragh scans my face. I’m careful not to make eye contact. “No,” he says. “That won’t work.”

I blink fast so the tears don’t come. This is existence in Quarry Pack in a nutshell. Lone females are voiceless, inconsequential *things* to be moved around like furniture. I hate this place. The crick in my neck begins to really ache.

“Well, I don’t know what you want me to do then.” Killian unwinds his towel and wipes his face and sweat-soaked hair. “I can punish her.”

Darragh growls so loud that three cabins away, a female lets out a startled shriek and a door slams. Killian’s wolf snarls back, and both males stand taller and face off, their shoulders broadening, muscles tautening.

Every fiber of my being wants to run, but with two alphas looming over me—and after this, I have no doubt that Darragh is a born alpha, too, even if he’s not the leader of any pack—my stupid instincts won’t let me do anything but cower.

It’s an awful feeling. I shake in my boots as my brain races. This has to end before I start blubbering in clear sight of every nosy packmate in camp. We’ve been standing here long enough that someone’s sure to have alerted Haisley and her crew, and I know they’re lurking somewhere, getting an eyeful so they can throw it in my face later. That’s how they keep their status, grinding the rest of us down.

“I won’t do it again.” It flies from my mouth in a burst of courage born of pure misery, and yet, I sound like a squeaking mouse.

Killian raises both eyebrows. Darragh scowls into the distance over my head.

“I won’t leave camp again. I swear. Just let me go home. I was just—” Shit. I’m talking too much. I shut my mouth, but Killian tilts his head.

“Just what? Go on,” he says like a dare. I think he’s kind of enjoying this. I’m living through one of the worst moments of my life, and he’s amused.

I hang my whole head. Please, can’t this be over? “Nothing, Alpha. I won’t do it again.”

There’s a moment of silence. I assume Darragh and Killian are exchanging meaningful glances. Then Killian barks, “Ivo!”

Footsteps sound on the porch.

“Take Mari here back to the lone females’ cabin,” he orders.

Darragh’s wolf starts a fresh racket while Ivo blithely trots down the steps. He stinks, too. I can’t help but scrunch my face. He smells like dirty dishwater left overnight.

“Come on,” Ivo says to me, and with my heart flooding with relief, I don’t even notice him take my forearm until his grip is ripped away in a whirl of flying male, unsheathing claws, and flashing fangs. There is a moment when I can’t tell Ivo, Killian, and Darragh apart—they’re a heaving mass of swinging limbs and gnashing teeth.

I fall into a low squat, wrap my arms tight around my shaking body, tuck my face to my chest, and pray that the fight doesn’t bowl into me.

For some reason, Killian doesn’t flipshift into his beast, and I’m grateful. My wolf and I are terrified of it.

I don’t see the resolution, I just come to realize after a few seconds that even though three muffled wolves are still vocalizing, the thuds of flesh impacting flesh—and the crack of bone—has stopped. The males are panting. The foul scents of dishwater and pond scum waft over to where I’m huddling in a ball. I peek up.

The three have separated and are bent over, catching their breath. There's blood. The collar of Ivo's T-shirt is torn and hanging by a thread.

"One day, man, I'm gonna convince you to go on the circuit," Killian says to Darragh, straightening and slapping him on the back. "You better take her to her cabin."

Killian hooks his arm around Ivo's neck and tries to poke him in his blackening eye as Ivo ducks his head and snaps his teeth.

"Your worries are unfounded, man," Killian says over his shoulder to Darragh. "You kicked Ivo's ass without shifting, didn't you?" He cracks himself up. Ivo is not amused, but he follows Killian back up the steps to his cabin.

"And impress upon the female that she needs to follow the rules?" Killian chuckles as he strides unworried through his cabin door, leaving Darragh and me alone in the path.

Well, alone except for all the old dams with their noses poking out from behind their curtains. I rise to my wobbly feet and smooth my shredded skirt. It feels good to be able to straighten my neck, but it's also weird. My wolf and I are both very aware now that Darragh is an alpha, but it's like he's not *our* alpha. The instinct to display deference isn't there, not like it is with Killian.

I don't know, it's confusing, and I've had enough. I'm feeling hot and thirsty again, so when Darragh grunts "come on" and leads the way up toward home, I fall in behind him. I even hang back a good length so he doesn't have to power walk, but now, for some reason, he's matching his pace to mine. He's careful to leave enough space between us, though, so he's walking in the grass instead of beside me on the path.

I feel as bad as Killian and Ivo smell. I don't have any courage or energy left. I'm just going to trudge home, keep my mouth shut, and think about showers and cold baths and ice water.

I don't expect Darragh to speak to me again after ratting me out, so I'm surprised when we clear the commons, and he

says, “Don’t leave camp again.”

I nod. I mean, I’m not going to do what he says. I live for market day in Chapel Bell. But I’m not going looking for him again. Lesson learned. Message received.

I figure we’re good, but a few yards further on, he clears his throat and says, “You didn’t have enough water.”

Yeah, I realize that.

“That bottle only holds, what, twenty-one ounces? You need forty.”

I got this bottle because it came in a cute lavender color. I wasn’t thinking about backcountry hiking.

He seems to expect a response, but I am not in the mood to “yes, sir” him. He can’t act like an elder with me. He might not want to accept it, but he’s my mate. A part of him is flowing into my chest right now. I might not be able to read it clearly, but it’s undeniably there.

We walk a few more yards, and he huffs a sigh, actually looks over at me, and says, “There are animals out there.”

We’re animals. Also, I didn’t see or smell any carnivores at all, only your garden-variety big vermin—raccoons, possums, and groundhogs.

He knits his brow. “You might not smell them, but a predator can and will encroach on our territory at any time.”

I just keep walking. We’re almost to the hill leading to home. So freaking close.

“People have disappeared,” he says.

I know. We’ve been warned about the dangers of venturing away from camp unescorted for our entire lives.

“I’m serious.” He stops in his tracks and grabs my forearm. I whimper and snatch it back. Apparently, when he dragged Ivo off me earlier, Ivo didn’t let go right away, and I got bruised. I hadn’t realized.

Darragh looks like I slapped him in the face.

“What’s wrong with your arm?” He’s staring at it like it’s a snake I’m cradling.

“Nothing. It’s just a little sore from earlier.”

“Show me.”

I rotate my forearm, hold it out toward him with my elbow still tucked tight to my side. There are faint bruises shaped like fingertips. With shifter healing, they’ll be gone in a few minutes.

He stares at them with the greatest look of baffled horror I’ve ever seen on a male.

“There’s nothing you can really do for bruises,” he says, like he’s Liam the pack mechanic telling Una that the truck we borrow to drive to town is going to need a new transmission. “You need to ice it.”

“They’ll be gone by the time I get home.” I eye the path toward the cabin meaningfully.

He frowns at my arm. I tuck it back against my belly.

“You shouldn’t have left camp,” he says. “You don’t understand what kind of threats there are outside the territory. You aren’t prepared.”

I know I’m not. I’ve never been in a fight in my life, and except for when my father tried to kill me, I’ve never been in danger, either. I feel like I should resent him talking to me like this. I’m not a pup, and I’m not dumb.

I’m not resentful, though. He’s fussing, and for some reason I cannot fathom, I kind of like it.

I stop eyeing the path, and all of a sudden, I’m not so desperate for a drink and a shower even though my skin is still so hot it heats wherever it touches—my belly where my arm is pressed, my thighs where they clench together. My breath quickens.

“I can take care of myself,” I say even though I don’t believe for a second that I can, not against whatever kind of animal he’s talking about. I just want—I want to know what he’ll say. I want him to keep fussing at me.

He growls in the back of his throat. *Him*. Not his wolf.

“You don’t know what’s out there,” he says, the gold ring around his eyes darkening to a burnished bronze.

“What’s out there?” I ask, breathless.

He takes a step to close the distance between us. He smells so good. It makes me inhale deeper, clearing my head and fuzzing it up at the same time.

“You don’t need to worry about that. It’s handled.” He’s breathing deeply, too. His broad chest rises and falls and his biceps twitch.

I want to rest my palm between his pecs, in the cleft where the bond disappears. I want to know what his chest hair feels like. It looks like it’d be soft to the touch, not crinkly like the fur Dermot and Eamon and the other older males sport. Darragh’s not as old as that crew, anyway. Even if he lived with the pack, he’d be on his own. There are not many males his age.

For the first time, it occurs to me that it must be because of Declan Kelly. When he took over the pack, he killed any male who could be a challenge to him. Darragh would’ve been an older boy when that happened, just young enough to escape the slaughter.

My blood chills. That time always seems like ancient history, but it isn’t. Just because I don’t remember much doesn’t mean those days aren’t alive in other people’s memories.

I want to ask him what it was like. I want to know what he was like when he was a pup and when he was my age.

I want to know if the bond feels the same to him right now, like sluggish honey, warm and trickly. I want to know if he wants to touch me, too. If the bruises on my arm really bother him.

I lick my dry lips. His gaze drops to follow my tongue. I’m not thirsty anymore. My mouth has grown wet. I swallow. He tracks the gulp down my throat.

“Mari,” he says. It’s the first time he’s said my name. It comes out like a request. Like he wants something.

I do, too.

“Mari, you don’t know what’s out there,” he says again, gruff desperation edging his words.

“I’m not out there. I’m here.” The need to soothe him is deep. Instinctual.

He growls low in his throat. He’s not soothed. He thinks I don’t get it. “Folks disappear, Mari. They just—” He snaps his finger. “Not our people. Not often. We’re careful. But Moon Lake. Salt Mountain—” He grimaces. “There’s something out there.”

I’ve heard this my whole life. Don’t wander off. Follow the rules. Danger lurks everywhere outside our territory.

Funny because all the bad shit that’s happened to me has happened here.

I nod, though. He’s working himself up, and it unsettles me.

He shakes his head and rubs his temple. For a second, I think he’s going to say more, but he must change his mind. He takes my elbow and urges me to continue up the path.

It’s less than a quarter mile, and he sets a brisk pace. In too short a time, he’s dropping me at the bottom of our porch stairs, stepping away, nodding at me to go on up.

I don’t want to.

He takes a few more steps back, shoving his hands in his pockets. I don’t want him to go. Not quite yet.

I hold my forearm out for him to look. “See? They’re gone.”

For a moment, his eyes flash, sunlight glinting off the gold rims, but then his face shutters and goes grim. “Don’t leave camp again. Or I’ll—”

I wait, but he doesn’t finish the threat. His tanned cheeks darken under his beard, and he jerks his chin toward the door.

“Go on,” he says. “Get inside.”

I do, a dopey mess of irritation and curiosity and hurt and excitement. A strange pulse beats between my legs. He lingers in the path for several minutes before eventually, he strides off back toward the commons. I know because I spy on him from the gap between the front curtains, and I count the seconds and the minutes it takes him to summon up the will power to go.

I take my shower, but I forgo the bath. Even though the cabin is cool—it doesn't have the best insulation—I'm hot. Not feverish exactly, but flushed and warm to the touch. I guess that's why they call it heat.

I can't settle. I repaint my nails and change into a loose flowy white top and skirt, and then I pad into the kitchen for something to eat, forget what I'm doing, and wander into the common room to plop next to Kennedy on the sofa.

She's lazing and gaming, her belly round with whatever she caught on her hunt earlier. Annie's in her usual chair, fussing with her crochet. She's teaching herself, so there's a lot of unknitting yarn and muttering under her breath.

Una's in her room, masterminding or whatever it is she does in there. She likes her privacy.

"He's back," Kennedy announces without taking her eyes off the TV screen. She means Darragh. He's come back four times so far since he left me here earlier this afternoon. He stops for a few minutes by the old groundskeeper's shed opposite our cabin and paces a while, plunging his fingers in his hair until he loses—or wins—a fight with himself and stalks off.

He really doesn't want to be my mate. That's fine. I feel ambivalent, too. He's about the opposite of the male in my daydreams. Still, he could be a little less publicly conflicted. I've got feelings. And right now, they're squishy and raw.

Kennedy's wolf is unsettled by another male infringing on his territory, so we get a warning rumble a little bit before Darragh's scent hits my nose.

Every time he swings by, he smells better. I've got my phone, and I'm scrolling, but the screen is a blur. I want to go out and confront him, put myself out of this misery, but I also want him to come knock on the door, so I'm trapped on the sofa, irritated by my own indecisiveness.

I feel like a train is rushing at me. I know that heat can come on over hours or days, weeks even. It depends on the individual. They do tell us that. Of course, Fate decided to stick me with not only the most unlikely mate, but what's shaping up to be a fast heat. When did I first feel it? Yesterday morning?

I want more time. I want to know why Darragh's wolf is crazy and why he lives up in the foothills away from the pack. I want to know what he likes to read and if he's a good male underneath the hard exterior or if he's at least a decent one. I'm not ready.

He's going to put a pup inside me. I break out into a cold sweat. I can't have a pup. When I have nightmares, I still crawl into bed with Una. Not often, but it happens.

I twist over the back of the couch and draw back the curtain an inch. He's leaning against the cinderblock building across the path, glaring daggers at our front door. He's done something with himself. Washed and combed his hair. Gotten someone to even it up and trim his beard. He's wearing different pants. They're a darker denim with no holes, no threadbare patches.

Are they brand new? I ease the window up a crack and sniff. It takes a minute to untangle the scents, but yeah, those are brand new jeans.

"What's he doing?" Kennedy asks as she smashes buttons.

"Leaning against the creepy groundskeeper's shed." I hate that place. You couldn't pay me to go inside. Kennedy says

there are spider webs in there so thick they look like cotton stuffing.

“Maybe he’s waiting for you to go out and talk to him,” Annie suggests. Kennedy and I told her about the mate thing and swore her to secrecy. She’s horrified. Darragh’s basically her worst nightmare of a male.

She probably wants me to move him along. She and her wolf get so anxious around dominant males. No doubt that’s why she’s dropping all those stitches.

“Maybe he should come over here and talk to me.” I’m playing like this is a human courtship—the shy guy who knows he’s a little too old for the girl, working up the nerve to knock on her door—but I know it’s nothing like that.

There’s no such thing as too old for shifters. Dermot’s in his fifties, and Haisley’s in her early twenties. And Darragh isn’t working up his nerve. He’s waiting for the heat to take over, for me to lose my mind, make my nest, get on all fours, and present. My stomach aches.

This is supposed to be a special time. My mother is supposed to give me a basket of familiar blankets, quilts, and pillows. My mate is supposed to guide me up to the dens if he’s traditional, or to the cabin he’s gotten us if he’s done well enough on the circuit to earn one. But I don’t have a mother, and my family’s linens were all redistributed when she died, and they fostered me out.

And Darragh doesn’t fight, so no cabin. Is he going to take me to the dens? It’s not what I dreamed of for myself, but it could be okay. I don’t quite know how to describe it, but the dens smell like *pack*. Like if we had a smell, all of us, even the ones who’ve gone before, the dens would be that scent—earth and stone and long-ago smoke. It’s not my aesthetic, but I’m Quarry Pack, too. It speaks to me.

But if Darragh takes me to the dens, what will I do for a nest?

I anxiously knead my skirt. I don’t like how it feels on my legs. I don’t like the elastic on my panties or the places where

my top brushes my breasts either, but the skirt is the worst.

“Do you guys mind if I just—?” I stand, shimmy the skirt off, and kick it away. Cool air hits my legs as Kennedy and Annie look up at me, quickly masking their surprise.

“You do you, buttercup,” Kennedy says and goes back to her game.

I collapse back on the sofa, and the upholstery feels one hundred times worse against my skin than the skirt did. I don’t want to go back to my room for pants, though. I’m glued to peeking out the window at Darragh. How can he stand so still for so long? Maybe it’s because he’s such a great hunter.

A picture pops into my head of him stalking through the dark woods, that sword at his side, silent and lethal, tracking his enemy, barefoot and bare-chested. I squirm, clenching my thighs and drawing my knees to my boobs. I feel puffy and swollen between my legs.

“This sucks,” I say quietly. “It’s so embarrassing.”

“I mean, it happens to everyone eventually,” Annie says with a gentle smile.

“Not to males.”

“They go into rut.” Annie’s eyes round. A whiff of her fear snakes into the new jeans, sunshine, and green grass scent wafting through the cracked window. “That’s worse.”

I guess she’s right, but it’s no comfort. A male in rut loses his mind and takes what he wants, regardless of whether the female has fully succumbed to her heat. It’s horrible, and females get hurt. The bond doesn’t usually survive, at least not in any functional way. That’s freaking awful, but I don’t feel any better about my body disconnecting my brain and morphing into one hundred percent horny animal.

I don’t even think my wolf likes the idea. She’s pacing nervously around inside me, jittery and tense. She wants us to go to Darragh. She thinks he’ll help.

I’m not ready for that kind of help.

I shift to rest my chin on the back of the couch, and my boobs skim the cushion. I shudder, the slight brush wracking my whole body like I was zapped by a live wire. I wrap my arms tight across my chest, hoping the pressure stops the sensation, and it's better, but my breasts still feel like ripe cantaloupes about to burst.

"This is so awkward," I mumble, my breath fogging a cloud on the glass.

"Do you want an ice pack or something?" Annie asks, concern in her voice. Annie might be as jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof, but she'll always be there for you if you're not doing so well.

"You can tell that I'm hot?" I crane my neck to look at my chest. My skin is as rosy pink as if I've run a mile.

"Your face look like a baboon's ass," Kennedy pipes up. On the TV screen, a tank explodes. She smirks.

I lay my palms against my cheeks. The heat radiates. "I wish I knew how long I had. Until—you know."

Annie and Kennedy both grimace. They get it. It's the sword hanging over all our heads. Lucky females like Haisley Byrne or Rowan Bell, with powerful fathers and brothers, are raised to look forward to their heats like it's the equivalent of a human quinceañera or something. Nothing bad could possibly happen. The males in their lives wouldn't let it.

But we don't have male relatives. There are no guardrails when our biology turns us into mindless animals. I squint at Darragh. He's casting tortured glances down the path. I bet he's going to take off again soon.

Is he going to hurt me? I mean, I know it can hurt the first time regardless, but is he going to be careful? He took a shower and changed. That's a good sign, right?

A voice in the back of my head whispers "that's a really low bar, don't you think?"

I can't take the strain anymore. I rise abruptly to my feet, snatch up my skirt, and tug it back on. Annie startles.

“Sorry,” I say.

She waves it off and digs in the chair cushion for the crochet hook she dropped.

“I’m going to head down to the lodge for dinner prep.” I’m a half hour early, and as a rule, we don’t show a minute earlier than we have to, but I can’t sit around in this stuffy cabin anymore. “You don’t have to come.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kennedy says. “Just let me get to a save point.”

Annie begins to wind up her yarn and stow it in her old lady knitting bag. I bang on Una’s door to tell her we’re leaving early, but she’s in the shower. She’ll meet us there. She likes to go separately anyway. She takes longer than we do because of her leg, and she gets embarrassed that we walk slow to keep pace with her.

By the time we leave for the lodge, Darragh’s gone. The shadows are just beginning to lengthen as we make our way down to the commons. Most folks live in cabins clustered at the center of camp, but Killian stuck us up on a ridge as far as he could get us from the center of action and still be within the patrolled zone of our territory.

I always wondered if he did that because he thinks we’re some kind of bad influence—which, admittedly, we are, but only to each other—or if we’re just so worthless that the pack doesn’t want to waste prime real estate on us. No reason it can’t be both. It’s demoralizing to think about, though.

Is heat making me emo? I don’t usually dwell on how bad we’ve got it in this pack. I’m all about distractions and daydreams. This mate business is bringing me down. It might be my new reality, but it sucks.

When we circle around the back of the lodge to enter the kitchens, Old Noreen is already elbows deep in peeling potatoes. I need to do something to get my brain off Darragh and heat and how I’m going to get on all fours, and he’s going to be able to see my entire hindquarters, and I don’t even know his favorite color or food or anything.

I force down a breath and wipe my sweaty palms on my skirt, shuddering at the feel of the fabric.

“Phones away,” Old Noreen calls to us, pointing to the hidey-hole behind the crockpot with her knife. “And I don’t want them going off again during service.” She narrows her rheumy eyes at Kennedy.

“It was only the once,” Kennedy mutters as she turns off her ringer.

“It was memorable. I’m not going down for you again, girl,” Noreen scowls at her affectionately and goes back to her potatoes.

Some friend that Kennedy games with rang her once during dinner. His ring tone is “Paint It Black” by The Rolling Stones. It went off while Killian was giving one of his hour-long lectures.

Eamon and Lochlan Byrne burst back here like the police, and poor Noreen was on her own since we were all standing in the dining area like idiots with trays in our hands, waiting for Killian to lose steam.

Lochlan started tossing the kitchen while Old Noreen insisted it was her making the noise. She swore she’d drifted off and started singing. Eamon said, “Oh yeah? Sing it again.”

Noreen didn’t know the words to anything except the theme songs to the sitcoms that she watches on the little TV we bought her with farmers’ market money, which she wasn’t supposed to have either.

So while Eamon and Lochlan growled at her, forcing her to bend her neck, she sang the entire opening song to *The Big Bang Theory*. She says they dropped the issue just so she’d stop.

Kennedy detours on her way to wash up to give Noreen a big bear hug. Noreen good-naturedly shakes her off, her wizened cheeks coloring.

“Peel those carrots if you want to show you’re sorry,” Noreen calls after her, but Kennedy’s already drying her hands and heading out to the floor to do set up. The males use the

lodge hall for sparring practice between meals, so we have to roll away the cafeteria-style tables and rack the folding chairs three times a day.

Kennedy has permanent dibs on setup and breakdown. She hates cooking. She doesn't think she's too good for it or anything. It's just her preference.

I don't mind meal prep, but I hate serving. I guess because of the whole blonde hair, blue eyes, big boob thing, the males hassle me more than Una, Annie, and Kennedy. That's why I take care of the elders and pups. It doesn't cut out all the nonsense, but it does cut down on a lot of it.

I grab the carrots Noreen wants peeled, and after I wash my hands, turning the faucet as cold as it goes and running the stream over my wrists for a while to cool off, I set to work. Kennedy props the back door open with a bucket, so there's air flowing, but still, my temperature is increasing by the minute.

My panties are damp, and my lips are slip-sliding with each step, and it kind of helps to squeeze my thighs together, and it kind of makes it worse.

Is Darragh coming to dinner? I feel like he has before, at least a few times, although I don't recall a particular instance specifically.

He'll probably sit with A-roster, up by Killian. That means Una will serve him.

A sharp flare of jealousy flashes to life in my chest and fizzles just as quickly. Una is like a big sister to me, and besides, she steers clear of the unmated males like the rest of us.

Haisley, Rowan, and their crew don't steer clear, though. My wolf's ears perk, and she bares a sharp incisor, a lazy growl rolling in the back of her throat. She's hot, too, wilted and splayed out on her side, her flank rising and falling like she's run a race. She does not like the idea of unmated females around Darragh.

I don't know what she could do about it. She's basically a miniature, not quite a runt, but a good percentage of her size is

white fluff. Haisley's wolf has my exact shade of fur, but she's at least four times as big. Haisley's mom might technically be the alpha female, but we all know who really keeps us in line—it's Haisley's mean, petty, ginormous she-beast.

"Mari? You're up, girl," Kennedy slaps my back on her way past me.

I blink. Crap. Noreen has already plated dinner, and it's time to serve. I was so busy freaking myself out about Darragh and females and sweating my butt off that I did all my prep work on autopilot. I dry my palms on my skirt again and take a tray.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Noreen asks as if she's noticing for the first time that I'm a bright pink, sweaty, damp mess.

"I'm good," I tell her and muster up a smile. I actually am fine—preoccupied and soggy, but holding it together—until I go through the swinging door into the lodge hall and my face collides with the most unholy of stinks.

How did I not smell this in the kitchen? It's like I was standing mere feet away from a latrine filled with zombies and sour milk, and I had no idea.

I've never felt my gorge rise before—I've only read it in books—but it rises, and I have to clamp my throat shut, or I'll spew right onto the linoleum. I don't know what would come up. When did I last eat? I had a plan for Una's Manchego, but I didn't end up following through.

I try to turn back, but Annie is right behind me, her tray rattling in her shaky grip. I have no choice but to step further into the miasma.

"What is that stink?" I hiss under my breath as she comes alongside me.

She sniffs. "The roast? Don't let Noreen hear you. She won't let you have any if she hears you talking like that."

I press a forearm to my nose and focus on balancing my wobbling tray one-handed.

Annie clings to the wall as she picks her way to the B-roster tables closer to the dais. Killian's already up there in his folding chair, manspreading in baggy athletic shorts, barking orders at two males he's called up to spar for his entertainment.

It's Fallon and Conor, a totally unfair match up. Conor's in his twenties, and Fallon's younger than me. Conor pins him round after round, and Fallon keeps barely wriggling free seconds before Ivo slaps the floor to call the match.

"See that?" Killian calls to someone at the A-roster table with glee. "It's like the pup is greased."

Whoever he spoke to doesn't answer, but my gaze follows the direction of his comment, shuddering to a halt when I notice Darragh, straight-backed and tense, in the seat of honor at the head of the A-roster table.

Rowan is crowded way closer than she needs to be at his right. She's leaning as far forward as she can while reaching for a saltshaker, her tits spilling obligingly from the neckline of her peasant blouse, but Darragh's not looking at her.

He's staring back at me. His irises have turned such a dark brown, they're almost black, except for the occasional flashes of gold like sparks off a blacksmith's hammer.

The bond is a straight line through the hall, uninterrupted by packmates and tables, strong and new and strange and *real*. Inescapably real.

A male brushes past me to get to a trash can. My stomach lurches as his stench burns my nostrils. My shoulders heave. I keep the vomit down with will power and desperation. Darragh rises to his feet.

For the first time ever that I've seen, he's wearing a shirt. A blue and green flannel. His hair is combed back neatly. I don't like it. I want it messy, falling in his face. I want to run my fingers through it. I want to pull it.

I do?

I shift, transferring the tray to my other hand. I was too hot to wear my boots, so I slipped on pink ballet flats with tiny

gold bows. I'm sliding around in them. Even my feet are sweaty.

My gaze drops so I don't meet Darragh's eyes. That would be too much, and this is already much, much too much.

I have to move forward, get to work, get through this somehow, but I'm trapped in place. I don't want to wade any deeper into the stink of my packmates, but I don't want to turn back anymore, either. My mate is here.

A sudden burst of blazing heat tears through my chest, and in that moment, a veil is ripped from my eyes. What have I been thinking? Darragh's not a stranger. He's as familiar as the paths I tread every day, as the trees standing sentinel over our territory, as the scent of sunshine.

I focus on the sweet flowing bond, and in my mind, I curl my fingers around it, and with all my might, I draw it to me.

Darragh squares his shoulders and firms his jaw. He comes to me.

He strides between the tables, every inch an alpha, packmates bending their necks out of instinct, those hungry for rank darting him challenging glances, but only out of the corners of their eyes. Females thrust their tits up, their fingers moving to fuss with their hair.

My wolf growls a threat she can't possibly back up.

Up on the dais, Killian clears his throat, compelling everyone to give him their full attention. "Listen up, numbskulls," he says as he does when he's about to launch into a lecture.

No one sees me lead Darragh through the door to the kitchen. I take him out the back, past the dumpster and the oil tank before I slow to a stop, confused. What am I doing? I shake out my top, peeling the cotton free of my clammy skin, desperate for a hit of cool air.

Darragh growls. I blink up at him. There's a full moon tonight, and it backlights him, casting his broad shoulders and chest in sharp relief. He's so big and tall and silent and still and smoldering. He looks at me like I'm a plump partridge,

and he's waiting, waiting for me to waddle into range of his claws.

I'm so freaking hot. I'm a furnace. When the breeze blowing down from the hills hits my bare calves and chest and cheeks, it feels like ice water flicked on a frying pan.

"My body feels weird," I tell him softly. "I can't think straight."

For a second, he tenses, that worried brow furrowing, and I think maybe he's going to bail, run, disappear on me, leaving me alone. Again.

But then he reaches out, grabs my hand in a strong but gentle grip, and leads me away from the others and their stench and noise. He takes me into the woods and down the cut-through that connects the lodge to the cabins on the far side of the commons. It's a quick walk in the dark. The tall trees rustle in the night wind, and Darragh's warm and bright scent combines with the bark and moss to clear my lungs.

"I-it's t-time, isn't it?" I ask him when he takes me to a tidy cabin on the outskirts of camp. He grunts.

This one's built the same as all the others, a simple one-story timber frame with a porch, but it has freshly painted green shutters and pansies in terracotta pots along the edge of the porch. I know it's used as a guest cabin, but I guess Darragh has the rank to claim it.

"It's nice," I say.

He grunts again and scrubs his neck. "Listen—" He seems to search for words. "You're really young, and—" He blows out a breath. "It'll be okay. I won't hurt you if I can help it. All right?"

Finally, he gazes down to meet my eyes.

Part of me is terrified, but it's like that part has stepped back into whatever half-world my wolf comes from. There's another me now assuming this body, a confident female, serene and secure. Of course, it'll be okay. He's my mate. This is fated. If I ever imagined things differently—a male closer to

my age, sweet words, flowers and soft music—I was wrong. This is the way it's supposed to be.

I flash him an encouraging smile and trip up the steps to the porch. I need blankets. And pillows. And I have to get rid of these damp, clinging, nasty clothes.

I fling the door open before he can reach it and stride inside, inhaling. Lemon and wax. It's been cleaned top-to-bottom recently. That's good.

A den would be better, of course. Safer. But this is safe enough. My mate is strong. His wolf is vicious. No one will dare attack us, and if they do, he'll rip out their neck. In the very far reaches of my mind, the words "he doesn't even eat the meat" echo. My wolf purrs her approval.

Yes, our mate wouldn't eat the flesh of his enemies. He'd leave it to rot as a warning to others. He'll make a good sire to our pups. I absentmindedly rub my empty belly. It aches and cramps, but that'll be over soon. Fate has done well by us for once. Our mate will take care of everything.

I quickly examine the half-bath, the cute kitchen with brand-new, stainless-steel appliances, the nook with the stacked washing machine and dryer. My mate has provided for us beyond what I could have imagined. I won't have to send the washing out to the laundry. I can just do a load whenever I want.

My wolf rumbles her delight. Our mate is clever and powerful.

In the hallway, I slide open the doors of what I assume must be a linen closet, and my heart falls. The shelves are bare.

Of course, he must've just been assigned the cabin. He wouldn't have had time to stock it. That's fine. I have things to build my nest at home.

I turn to head toward the door, but Darragh takes my hand again and gently leads me back down the hall. "Come this way," he says.

He draws me into the bedroom. On a cedar trunk, there's a tall stack of linens and pillows. I raise the corner of a comforter to my face and bury my nose in it. It smells like detergent and nothing else. It's new like Darragh's jeans. He must have bought them today, and he had them laundered so they'd be soft and fresh.

He's such a thoughtful mate. I rumble my approval and set to work. We don't have much time left.

There aren't any sheets on the brand-new mattress, so I don't have to undo anything before I get started. I put on a pad and a fitted sheet, and then I scoop up armloads of blankets and dump them in a pile in the middle. Darragh hovers by the door, watchful, tension radiating from him.

Good mate. Guarding the entrance. I yip my approval. His broad chest swells.

I go back to the trunk and pitch all the pillows, one after the other, onto the heap in the bed, and then I climb on top, wriggling into the softness and sighing.

I've never been happier or more excited, and neither has my wolf. It's a buzzy, hazy feeling, but we're both luxuriating in it, stretching and lolling, tingling with anticipation. We belong now, here, with this male. We're home.

I need my clothes off. Clothes don't belong in a nest. I peel off my top and drag down my panties and skirt in one move. There's a whiff of Darragh in the fabric, so I bunch them up and tuck them in a corner of the cocoon I'm building in a haphazard, distracted way.

I arrange piles, and then I flop back, snuggle, sniff the sheets, enjoy the glide of the silkier fabrics against my heated, sensitive skin. My nipples are pointed and dark as raspberries. I pluck them between my fingers, and streams of delicious sensation sizzle through my belly down to the folds plumping between my legs.

My fingers smooth my lips apart. They look so different than usual—rosy-red, swollen, and shiny with slick. They feel different, too, like they're throbbing. I find the nub that's

popped from its hood and circle it, strum it, make myself squirm and pant.

From his station at the door, Darragh growls.

I startle, remembering myself, and I notice a spot in the nest that isn't quite right, so I leave off playing with myself and mess up the whole arrangement and start again, certain that even though I have to fix it, I'm still doing everything perfectly right. My mate is pleased with me. He watches me with burning, gold-rimmed eyes, his cock tenting his jeans, his hands fisted at his sides.

There's a tang of salt in the air, and I know it's coming from him. The scent drives my thinking self even further back into the recesses of my mind, and I pat a few last pillows into place.

Hazily, I note that Darragh is stripping, so I roll onto my belly and prop myself up on my elbows to watch. He's the best possible male for me. His body is the kind of strong that looks tested and tried, tanned and tough, faint scars decorating his skin like random hash marks. A shifter has to be hurt very badly—or very young—to scar. My mate is a warrior.

I smile. He will be a good protector for our family. He'll never hurt us. I *know* it in my bones.

For a moment, an echo from the past casts a shadow over my happiness, but I don't reach for it, so it passes as easily as a cloud blown by the wind.

Darragh's *thing*—his cock—is standing up straight, and even though I've seen plenty before—we're shifters, we get naked—I've never *looked*. It's thick and long and vaguely threatening, but in a way that makes me rock my hips into the mattress, chasing relief for the ache I started with my fingers.

He strokes his length with his strong, rough hands, his eyes swirling so prettily. It's weird that a male so rugged and imposing and standoffish can be pretty, but he is. To me.

I want to do what he's doing. I sneak my hand under my flushed body to slip through my sopping wet folds again, finding the nub that's throbbing and flicking it like I do

sometimes late at night when everyone's asleep, or sometimes in the bathtub, quietly, so no one suspects. This feels so good. His eyes on me makes it feel sharper, more raw, more all-consuming.

Darragh's chest rumbles. I reach for him with my free hand. He comes to me immediately. My wolf and I growl in harmony, pleased and ready and brimming with squirming, gnawing excitement.

I've been waiting too long. It's past time.

Darragh kneels in my nest, and I roll over onto my back, scooching towards the headboard to make room for him. My knees fall open, and his eyes drop immediately to watch me plunge my middle finger inside my hole as I thumb my clit.

"You know what you like," he says, gruff but approvingly, and I flush with the praise. His face is hard and inscrutable, but his dick strains, and every one of his muscles is bunched impossibly tight, like he's holding himself back.

"You don't have to. It's okay," I tell him, and I know he'll understand what I mean, because the bond between us is singing, speaking tongues that I've somehow known since before I was born. This is the male made for me, designed by Fate to please and protect me. The sire of my pups. The male who'll replace the family I lost.

Everything is unfolding exactly as it's supposed to.

He reaches for me with shaking hands, running the calloused pads of his fingers down my side, over my ribs, along the crease of my hip, his touch exquisitely gentle.

"Up you go," he growls and takes me by the waist, rumbling reassurance as he turns me onto all fours, stroking my spine as I arch like a cat, raising my hips and sliding my knees apart. I look at him over my shoulder, my curls bouncing.

He's focused between my legs, brow knit, lips speared down, a sheen of sweat glistening on his beautiful chest and abs and arms.

I whine, impatient, rocking back and forth. My wolf and I are past ready, the want becoming almost a burn. An agony.

“I won’t hurt you,” he tells me again, so low that I don’t think I’m meant to hear. He notches himself at my entrance and takes a deep breath. “Say stop if you need me to stop,” he says in a stronger voice.

I need him to *start*. I push back, but nothing happens. The pressure against my opening feels good, so good, but I want him inside. I growl and wriggle my knees wider, reaching behind to grip him by the base and urge him to do it. He hisses.

“Be patient,” he says and slaps my ass, not hard enough to even sting, but it sends a wave of sparkling, rolling wonderfulness crashing through me.

I mewl and mash my chest into the mattress to hike up my hips, to show him what I want him to take. A drop of my wetness tickles a path down my inner thigh. He rumbles and finally—finally—flexes his hips, pushing harder, forcing me to open for him, and I do, stretching to accommodate him, and with a jagged groan, he slides inside me, filling me near to bursting.

I squeak and tense. He freezes mid-thrust, and after a moment, he strokes my flank, shushing me even though I’m not making any noise. I’m adjusting. It’s a lot. I’m stuck. Pinned. Surrounded.

Does it hurt?

I can’t tell. It pinches where he’s entering me, but further in, it feels *amazing*, like he’s pushing something that wants to be pushed *so bad*, and I had no idea my insides could *feel* as much as my outsides, but in a different way. Blunter, but better. A delicious taking. No, a *belonging*.

“Could you, uh, move?” I ask him, realizing as I speak that I’m panting.

He growls low, and his hands stop soothing me and grasp my hips, hard, holding me in place while he carefully pulls out and plunges into me, over and over, in a steady, controlled

rhythm, and even though it feels strange, somehow too careful and too controlled, the strokes inexorably ratchet up a tension inside me, twisting me tighter and tighter like a wrung washcloth, and I begin to chase the feeling with my rocking hips.

He slips a hand between my legs and touches my clit, exactly the way I like, in firm circles. I yip and bury my head in my arms. I feel so good, surrounded by softness, my mate at my back, his fingers playing me perfectly, tingles skating up and down my limbs like a hundred burning wicks, sizzling brighter and faster until the sensation explodes in waves and waves, obliterating my mind and shattering my heart into glittering shards like diamonds.

It's *magic*.

I melt into the mattress, grinning like an idiot at a fluffy pillow in a moose-and-pine-tree pillowcase. Darragh snaps his hips against my ass again, once, twice, a third time, and then he snarls and abruptly pulls out. There's a sharp pinch as his swelling cock tears through my tender entrance. My muscles immediately seize up. My wolf alerts. Something isn't right.

I struggle to raise my head, twisting to face him, blinking to clear the fuzziness from my brain.

He's upright on his knees, his face contorted in pain, his hand clamped around the knot engorging the base of his red dick, shiny with my juices.

He didn't knot me?

He has to. Males can't stop themselves. It's shifter biology.

His face is drawn in harsh lines. He's clearly in pain, but he tightens his punishing grip, squeezing until his knuckles blanch white. Despite his stranglehold, milky stuff spurts from its bulging mushroom head, splattering warm and sticky on my butt cheek and pooling in the small of my back.

His seed is hot, and there's so much of it. It feels wrong on my cooling skin. My wolf doesn't like it either. She whines. I've been oblivious to her, but as my heartbeat and breathing

slows, pieces of reality filter back, and she's there, on her feet, frozen in shock, horrified.

The last drop of cum splats on my back. For a moment, there is a crushing silence.

Darragh's right hand drops from his still swollen, half-erect cock, and for a second, his dull brown eyes look—tired. Lost. He frowns, and as if he can't help himself, he reaches out with a trembling hand and smooths my hair. With exquisite care, he winds one of my curls around his finger. His touch tugs ever so slightly at my scalp, so I turn my head to ease the pressure, and the move bares my neck.

Instantly, his face shutters. He snatches his hand away, and his gaze darts around the room, anywhere but in my direction. Without looking at me, he grabs a sheet, messing up my nest, and wipes my back, but he picks a polyester blend, and the fabric kind of smears the cum around instead of absorbing any.

As soon as he makes two hasty passes with the sheet, he drops it on me, hops out of the nest, and grabs his pants. Quick as a wink, he's buttoning his jeans, thrusting his arms into his flannel. He still won't look at me.

Cold air hits my flushed pink body, and I shiver. It's as if he stole all the heat in the room. I force my drained limbs to move, to maneuver myself upright, to haul blankets over my shaking body to hide my nakedness. A minute ago, it had felt so natural and perfect, and now it feels like I've done something bad.

Have I?

Did I not do it right?

“Did I screw it up?” I ask because I don't have pride right now. I'm small and left behind and scared.

He doesn't answer right away. He's tying his boots.

When he finally stands, he says, “Of course not.”

His voice is distant and gruff, and he addresses the floor, not me. He backs up to the door, to the exact spot where he was standing while I built my nest, and for a second, I think

he's just going to leave, but he doesn't. He looks at me, arms rigid at his side, jaw clenched so tight that the cords in his neck pop.

Maybe he's worried that *he* screwed it up. He seemed really concerned about hurting me.

"It was, um, good," I say.

I'm too embarrassed to meet his eye, but there's a faint warmth in the bond. Maybe he needs reassurance like I do. Maybe this is all as strange to him as it is to me. A gush of compassion floods my tender heart.

"It's *all* really nice. The nest. The cabin. I'm so excited about the washer and dryer." I blink up at him and offer him a tremulous smile.

His brow knits. "What do you mean?"

"I never dreamed that I'd live in a cabin with my own laundry room. Well, laundry cubby, but still. It's awesome."

Something happens to his face. He seems to register something, and his cheeks darken under his bristly beard. His eyes harden. His spine goes ramrod straight. "You've misunderstood," he says. "This is a guest cabin."

My stomach sinks. "We're going to live at your place?"

It doesn't seem physically possible, but he stiffens even more and backs up another step until he's almost out of the bedroom and into the hall. A heavy blanket of dread descends over me.

My shoulders slump and curl forward, as if I can protect myself from what's to come, but I've never been able to keep myself safe. I've never been strong enough to stop awful things from happening, to make anyone stay.

This isn't going to be okay. It isn't going to work itself out.

"No. This—" He gestures between himself, with one foot out the door, and me, huddled in a ball on the bed. "This isn't happening. It can't— It isn't—" He hacks a cough, shaking his head back and forth like he's denying some terrible accusation.

A life sentence. “I’m not doing this.” He blows out a heavy breath. “We’re not doing this.”

But we just *did*, didn’t we?

What makes you mates? Penetration? The knot? The claiming bite? They don’t tell us anything.

He didn’t knot me. He pulled out. I honestly didn’t know males could do that with a female in heat, but what do I know? Everything I know about sex I learned from eavesdropping.

He sure didn’t bite me. He didn’t even kiss me. Is that what Haisley meant when she said he fucks like an animal? Like how an animal mounts a female and then kind of wanders off when he’s done to get something to eat?

This was supposed to be the beginning. How did it go wrong? What did I do?

My eyes burn. I’m going to cry. No, correction, I already am crying. A hot tear dribbles down my cheek. Darragh bares his teeth at me, and I’m not sure if it’s disgust or contempt or impatience, but it’s bad, and it hurts.

“You’re fine,” he tells me. “Cheryl says you can stay here tonight.”

I scrub the tears away, and now they’re hot and wet on my wrist. “Cheryl?”

“She got the place ready. Bought the sheets and stuff. She said she’ll clean up, so uh—just—” He stares over my head, I guess to avoid the secondhand embarrassment of watching me try to dash away the tears rolling down my face and dripping off my chin. “Just when you go into heat next time—tell Killian. He’ll come find me. Okay?” He waits, teeth clenched, expectant, like I’m supposed to say something.

Am I supposed to say *okay*?

It’s not okay. This isn’t *right*. You don’t just reject a mate for no reason. You don’t just nail and bail your fated fucking *mate*.

“Why?” The word is torn from my throat, jagged and raw, and I sound so damn young. So *stupid*.

He stares harder at the wall. “It’s not you. It’s just— You’re so— It won’t—” He kind of waves at me like that’s an explanation. What am I? What’s wrong with me?

He sighs and screws his eyes shut like I’m giving him a headache.

“It won’t work,” he says, opening his eyes to meet my gaze head on, so he can be sure that I see the cold determination in them, so I have no doubt that he means what he says. “We’re not going to be mates. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. The key is on the kitchen table. Cheryl said for you to drop it off to her when you’re done.”

And then, like it’s the easiest thing in the world, as if he’s put in his time and he’s finally able to escape, he turns on his heel and walks out. Just like that. Just like I’m nothing at all.

I shiver in my nest, clutching a navy comforter with white anchors to my chest, my back itching as his cum dries.

The cabin is so quiet. The only sound is my own shallow breathing.

I can't tell whether I'm hot or cold. Can you be both at the same time?

It's like gravity glitched, and my blood dropped to my feet, but my poor heart's still trying to pump, and it's sputtering like a fish on dry ground.

I've been here before.

This isn't my first time in a silent, empty cabin, my heart broken in pieces and scattered as I bleed out alone. I was a pup then, but it's carved so deep in my mind, it's not even a memory. Whenever I think about it, it's always the present, always the moment I just lived through.

I didn't know where to go that night, either. My mother was dead—she'd leapt off the bluff—and the grown-ups, in the chaos of the moment, hadn't realized that no one had taken charge of me.

The pack males were searching the river for her body, the dams herding their own pups back to their beds. The young females assigned to watch us little ones during the run were busy whispering in horror to each other. I didn't know where to go, so I went home. I crawled into my own bed and waited

for someone to come and tell me what to do. And all night long, no one came.

I'm not a pup anymore. Now is not then. This is different, even if it doesn't feel that way.

My wolf whines in distress, hyperalert and aware that something's gone terribly wrong. She doesn't understand, and she's afraid. Our mate is gone, and it doesn't make sense to her, not unless there was danger. I guess despite what the pack calls us, we've never felt unprotected before.

That's how we feel now, though, my wolf and me.

Like we're easy prey. Defenseless. And there are dangers—threats we foolishly ignored before—and they're everywhere, lurking. Ferals. Moon mad wolves. Kidnappers from the Last Pack.

My adrenaline surges. Suddenly frantic, I root around the blankets for my clothes. I find my tank top and tug it on, but I can't find my skirt or blouse, so I fish out a sheet that isn't obviously soiled with fluids and wrap it around myself like a toga. I don't waste time looking for my shoes.

We need to get to safety. My wolf shivers in a dark corner, but that's okay, I'm going to take care of us.

I race barefooted out of the cabin, avoiding the path and Darragh's scent trail that leads straight out of camp for the foothills. I take a circuitous route, cut behind the commissary and along the lawn where my drunk father punted my baby basket like a football because I was nothing to him, too.

Although the lights are out, I hurry past the lodge and stumble my way through the thick woods behind it until I reach the ridge that leads to the lone female cabin. Pricker bushes bite at my soles and ankles, but I don't let it slow me down. When I get home, I let myself in as quietly as I can manage and force my breath to calm.

The cabin is dark except for the glow of the TV screen. Kennedy jumps to her feet, dropping the controller to the coffee table with a clatter. No one else is up. Finally, I catch a

break. Like I'd been waiting to be home safe, I burst into instant hot tears again.

Kennedy's wolf rattles in her chest. "Where is he? I'll kill him," she says, her voice dropping, her wolf coming through.

"Be quiet." I snatch her by the wrist and drag her out to the porch. I don't want to wake the others. No one can know about this. Ever. I'm already a tragic tale in this pack. I don't need them to think I'm straight up cursed, and I must be, right?

Or not. Maybe I'm just a naïve, low-ranking female who no one wants beyond whatever small use I can serve.

Kennedy scans me for injuries, and her nose turns up. No doubt she smells him on me.

I have to shower. I need to burn this sheet and this stupid, little girl's cami with the stupid, little pink rosette. I don't want anyone to ever know what a stupid, naïve, oblivious little girl I was. How did I not see it coming? What did he do or say to make me think he actually wanted me? That we were going to be a family and live happily ever after?

I tear the sheet off, kick it away, and peel the cami that reeks of him over my head. Kennedy takes off her T-shirt and tosses it to me. She's got her usual black sports bra on underneath.

"What did you tell Una?" I ask.

I know Kennedy covered for me.

"I said you went to Rowan's cabin, that she wanted you to do her hair." Kennedy shrugs. It's not a good story, but I couldn't have done any better.

Rowan's technically my cousin, but we're not close like that. Our mothers were half-sisters, but Aunt Teresa always kept her distance since we were lower ranked because of my father.

After my father did what he did, everyone said my mother drove him to it by letting Declan Kelly mount her—as if she had a choice. Aunt Teresa cut us off. She didn't change her position when Mom died, either. She doubled down, talking

about how she had to admit Mom was her kin, but that *I* didn't look like any of her people, not going back for generations.

I don't look like anyone. Pale blonde hair and blue eyes are almost unheard of among shifters. They're considered human traits.

Is that why Darragh doesn't want me? Is that what he was going to say when he said "you're so—"

I'm so *what*?

"Do you need a drink or something?" Kennedy paces by the railing. Her wolf is rumbling a threat, not at me, but at whatever has upset me.

A tiny flash of something flares in my chest—not hope, not comfort, but something that hasn't quite been snuffed out by the cold and sticky black awfulness gumming up my insides. I've got a friend. I can't let go of that. I won't.

"Darragh Ryan had sex with me, but he didn't finish, and then he said he didn't want me." The story tumbles from my lips. "So I guess he just did it to break my heat, so he doesn't go into rut, and as soon as he was done, he bolted. He told me to lock up after myself and give Cheryl the key. I didn't. I left the key on the table, and I don't think I shut the door."

Actually, I'm sure I didn't. I left it wide open.

Kennedy stops mid-pace, her eyes flashing with rage on my behalf. Her wolf snarls, and she presses a fist to her chest like she has indigestion, holding him down.

"That fucking asshole." She spits on the floorboards, lip curled in contempt. Her anger somehow gives me permission, lets me break all the way down.

"What's wrong with me?" It's a busted down, broken plea, and I'd never ask anyone else, but I can say anything to Kennedy. She would never judge me, and she will always be gentle with the truth.

"Nothing," she snaps without hesitation. "There's something wrong with him. He's a fucking asshole."

“I-I don’t want to f-force someone to be my mate if they don’t want to be.”

Kennedy shakes her head. “That’s not how mates work. You get what you get, and if you don’t like it, there’s a way to go about it. You don’t just use someone so you don’t go into rut and then throw them away afterwards like trash. Males in this pack—” Her nostrils flare. “They get away with everything.”

They do.

They suck the marrow from their chicken bones and toss them on the floor when the bucket we set out is right in front of them. They mount whoever’s willing, and then they continue about their business like it never happened, except to laugh their heads off when the females end up fighting over them in the middle of the lodge.

They wear what they want, go where they want, strut around camp like five feet tall is so short that they can’t see you, and if you meet them on the path, you better step off, or you’ll get plowed over.

They take everything as if it’s their due, and when it’s their turn to do their part, their attitude is basically *make me*. And we can’t because we’re not strong enough, never strong enough.

“It’s bullshit.” My tears are ebbing, replaced by a new rush of hot, prickling, hopeless fury. “He should have to tell me why. He doesn’t get to just walk away. Bye. See you never. Lock up behind yourself. Wham, bam, thank you ma’am.”

“Yeah,” Kennedy agrees although she’s clearly puzzling over that last part. She’s not quite as into human culture as I am. Just the gaming. “There’s such a thing as common decency.”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes light up at the exact same moment a wild idea pops into my head.

“I want to make him tell me why,” I say. “I want to look him in the eye, and I want him to say it to my face.”

Back in the nest, I was naked and exposed, and my body was awash in a chemical bath that short-circuited my brain. I didn't have the wherewithal to press him, but I deserve to know what's wrong with me.

Males may outrank females, but mates are outside the hierarchy, at least in some ways. He *owes* me an explanation. Besides, like Kennedy says, there's such a thing as common decency.

"We should go as our wolves," Kennedy says, already kicking off her shorts.

"Yeah. That'll be faster." I shrug her oversized T-shirt off and lay it flat on the porch. She tosses her clothes into it, and I make quick work of tying it into a bundle. "He owes me an explanation."

"Hell, yeah, he does."

"I'm not some side chick he can do on the DL."

"I don't know what that means."

"I'm his mate. I deserve a freaking word or two before he kicks me to the curb."

"Heck yeah, you do." Kennedy is cracking her neck, more than ready to go and fight Darragh.

There's more than a little bluster in my words, and my wolf is less than stoked to come out—she wants to huddle under a bed somewhere until our mate comes back with his tail between his legs—but now that the first wave of shock and despair has worn off, I can't let it go.

I can't wash him off my skin and lie in bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, praying the melatonin works even though it never does. I can't wake up tomorrow like it's any other day, like my mate didn't fuck me 'cause he had to and then left me behind like a used condom.

That can't be my life.

I can't go about my daily work with my head hanging and just accept that Fate has it out for me, and everything is just going to be eating shit until the day I die.

“You hang back, okay?” I say, dragging my wolf out of her corner by her back legs with sheer force of will. “I need to do this myself.”

Kennedy’s obviously disappointed, but she nods, and in a move as smooth as CGI, her human body flows into a big black wolf that lopes down the stairs and up the path.

My wolf’s claws scrabble as she fights me, but I’m stronger. I want it more. She takes our skin in a spiteful cracking of bones and rending of flesh, and it hurts, but it’s layered on top of so much other pain that it’s a drop in the ocean.

As soon as she’s out, my wolf snaps up the bundle with her teeth and takes off after Kennedy’s. She doesn’t want to be alone in the dark so late at night. Kennedy’s wolf slows his pace so that we can keep up, and our wolves run side by side, as mismatched as two animals can be, following the trail we made the other day.

If there’s a moon, it’s covered by clouds. The air is cool and damp in our lungs, and the undergrowth slapping our forelegs is wet with gathering dew. We’re silent except for our jagged panting as we scramble up banks and around thick trunks of trees choked with ivy black in the darkness.

My wolf is scared. She wants to turn around and bolt for home, but she doesn’t dare leave the protection of Kennedy’s wolf.

It takes a quarter of the time to get to Darragh’s shack as it did when we hiked on two legs. Kennedy’s wolf is careful to approach from the north so that the wind hides our arrival. He’s giving me time in case I want to change my mind.

My wolf would be happy to turn around right now. She wants no part of this. When I call for our skin, she doesn’t hesitate to relinquish it.

She’s baffled by the fact that Darragh left us, but she’s sure he has a good reason. She thinks that we’re supposed to stay where we were put and wait for him to come back. I think she expects him to return with food, maybe a haunch of venison.

I don't really want to confront him either. I hate conflict. I'm a head down, fingers crossed kind of female, but I'm terrified that if I turn back now, this brave Mari will disappear. I'll become the female that everyone sees as a human doll with an empty head and bad luck, and I'll never be anything else in my own eyes.

Brave Mari, scared shitless with teeth chattering in a borrowed T-shirt with no panties and no shoes, is still better than the stupid, naïve doll that no one really cares about, doomed by Fate to misery and loneliness.

I suck down a deep breath and comb my fingers once through Kennedy's silky coat to calm my nerves. Even amped up with aggression, he tolerates it because he's got my back. I can't be that much of a loser if I have a friend like Kennedy. That's just facts.

I'm not the problem. *He* is.

I square my shoulders and trip down the incline to the shack, my blood pounding in my ears. I don't knock or call out. I stride straight through the door, wearing my righteous indignation like a suit of armor.

The fire is blazing in the hearth.

A huge wolf is splayed on his side in front of it, the flames glinting off his bronze coat as his flank rises and falls with the rhythm of deep sleep. I hold my breath. His wolf is freaking *huge*. His body spans almost the entire breadth of the shelter.

My wolf squeaks out the barest, terrified whine.

His wolf rouses, and there is a second frozen in time when his sleep-muddled golden eyes clock me, and I think, "That's my mate. He's beautiful."

And then his pupils snap into black slits, and with a bone-rattling snarl, he launches himself at me, flying through the air, claws unsheathed, fangs bared, murder in his eyes.

I can only track him, my eyes bulging, paralyzed as he hurtles toward me until my wolf's instincts surge forward, screeching at me to run, bolt out the door, scramble up the incline like the devil is at my heels, because he is. He's eating

up the distance between us in a single effortless bound, leaping for my throat—

I scream. His claw slices through my shirt and the soft flesh underneath like a knife through butter. Red blooms on the white cotton. My mouth opens, and before I can call for my mother, which is the word that springs onto my tongue, a solid weight checks me in the hip and I cartwheel, landing somehow sprawled across the back of a furry black beast that doesn't miss a step as he races into the trees.

It's Kennedy.

I plunge my nails deep in his thick pelt, and he darts between trunks, zigzagging like he's on fire, sending clods of dirt spraying. I hug his back, bumping and bouncing, hanging on for dear life, my face buried in black fur. An unholy howling follows us, echoing off the hills, as my heart tries to punch a hole through my chest.

My mate is trying to kill me. I'm bleeding.

I don't know how long we run. Long enough that my death grip on Kennedy's fur makes my fingers numb. The howls fade. I peek up and recognize landmarks close to camp. Physical feeling slowly returns to my body. My lungs burn. My side hurts.

Kennedy trots straight to our cabin and up onto the porch. I force myself to let go, slumping off her back into a heap on the floorboards and curling into a shrimp, squeezing my bent arm tight against the wound.

Kennedy rises, morphing from four feet to two in a fluid sequence until she's standing, wired as hell, her chest heaving, her pupils blown.

"Holy shit," she shrieks. "*Fast and the Furious*, eh? Did you see that? Did you fucking *see that?*" She stalks back and forth, raking her fingers through her sweat-soaked hair.

I didn't see anything. My eyes were screwed shut the whole time.

I'm shaking. I can't stop.

“Whew!” she howls, throwing her head back, until finally, she registers me lying at her feet. “Shit, Mari. I’ll go get the first aid kit.”

I nod. My cheek scrapes against the rough boards.

The sky is growing lighter. The sun hasn’t risen yet, but it’s on the verge. Morning animals are bustling and tweeting in the stand of maple and beech trees that surround our cabin.

It’s a perfectly peaceful beginning of a brand-new day. My new mate just came within inches of ripping my heart out with his claw. My brain is broken by the dissonance.

What do I do now?

I don’t want to move the arm I’m using as a compress to see how bad it is. It can’t be a mortal wound. I’m not faint, and the red stain on the shirt isn’t growing. The pain is bad, but I can take it.

Kennedy returns, Una on her heels. Annie hangs back, peering up and down the path with terrified eyes.

“Sweet Fate. What happened?” Una asks, rushing to lower herself beside me, hoisting her bad leg out of the way like baggage.

I catch Kennedy’s eye. I can’t begin to think of a lie, but I don’t want anyone to know. I couldn’t bear it. If it gets out—and everything gets out in this pack—I’ll end up hauled in front of Killian on his dais to explain why Darragh Ryan would reject me as his mate so vehemently that his wolf would try to disembowel me.

Kennedy doesn’t miss a beat. “We were out for a night hike. We ran into a bobcat. It was deranged. Maybe rabid.”

Una frowns. “You broke curfew?” She prods me to move my arm away from my side. “Kennedy, you know how dangerous that is.” She means we could get busted by the pack’s patrols. She knows Kennedy’s wolf is a badass.

“Yeah,” Kennedy says with a rueful smile.

“We’ll have to tell the alpha.” Una’s face blanches with distress at the prospect. “We can’t have a rabid bobcat

skulking around, especially now that it has a taste for flesh.”

“No worries. I killed it.” Kennedy squats down to watch as Una carefully unpeels the bloody shirt from my skin. “And he only got her with his claws.”

Cool air hits the wound, and I moan with pain. Una clicks her teeth.

“You’ll need stitches,” she says. “We should move you inside.”

I understand that I need to move, but the aftershock has me now. I don’t think my brain is in charge of my limbs anymore. My body is a broken husk, and my mind’s floating away like a balloon that’s slipped its string.

Darragh’s wolf seriously wanted me dead. If Kennedy had been seconds slower—

I shudder, and then I can’t stop. I shake so badly that I couldn’t unbend my legs to stand even if I could get them to follow my directions.

Una smooths my tangled curls and hums under her breath. “It’s over now, Mari. You’re safe.”

No, I’m not. What if Darragh’s wolf hunts us down? What if he’s out there now, waiting for his chance to finish me off?

“We need to get in the house,” I mumble, and despite the shivers convulsing my body, I force myself to roll onto my hands and knees. Pain stabs my side. I grab the railing while Kennedy wedges her shoulder under my armpit, and I haul myself upright. I’m so focused on getting inside that I don’t notice the new arrival until Annie gasps.

Did she materialize out of thin air? One minute the path was empty, and the next, Abertha is there, a patchwork bag slung over her shoulder, palms raised like she means no harm.

“I heard you met an animal in the woods,” she says. “I heard he got you good.” Her eyes are knowing, and her voice is knowing, and her knowing burns like salt in a wound.

Does she know why Darragh tried to kill me?

Is *she* the reason why?

I can't go toe-to-toe with her, not on a normal day, and certainly not now. I ignore her and keep shuffling toward the door, trying not to move too much or breathe too deeply. The pain stabs deep under my ribs.

"It's not that bad," I say through clenched teeth, whether to myself or the others, I don't know.

"She needs stitches," Una tells Abertha over her shoulder as she gestures for Kennedy to continue helping me into the cabin.

It hurts to move, and it hurts to remember Darragh standing on Abertha's front porch, drinking her tea. It hurts that I could care at all that he's cool with the witch after what he did. He hates me. He wants me to *die*.

He's not the first male to try to end me.

And they both fucking *failed*. I gather myself together, straighten my spine as much as the gash will let me.

Una saved me from my father eighteen years ago, and Kennedy saved me tonight by a hair's breadth. You know, maybe Fate doesn't have it out for me. Maybe she's got my back, and the real enemies are the fucked-up males in this fucked-up pack.

I don't know if it's true, but it gives me a shot of strength, so I cling to the idea. I'm not curling up on the ground again.

I let Kennedy bear my weight as she lowers me into a chair at the dining room table and backs up to let Una resume her fussing. Abertha has trailed everyone in, but she's lingering several feet away. Annie's rustling around in the kitchen, probably putting on the kettle.

Gingerly, Una rips the T-shirt the rest of the way off and peels the fabric from the drying blood, easing the scraps of cotton over my head. I cover my breasts with the arm opposite the wound. I don't want the witch to see my breasts.

I hunch my shoulders and hiss as the motion makes the torn flesh throb. How bad is it?

Steeling myself, I risk a peek down, and instantly, my stomach rolls. My side looks like a fillet of whitefish scored by a knife. Before I can stop myself, a whimper escapes my lips.

“I can take the pain away,” Abertha calls from across the room by the coffee table. “I can heal it like it never happened.”

“What’s the catch?” Kennedy asks, suspicion in her voice. She’s picked up on my antipathy toward the witch, and as always, she has my back.

In the kitchen, a dish clatters against the counter. The scent of Annie’s shock at the question wafts into the dining room. Usually, even Kennedy wouldn’t be bold enough to step to the witch, but I’m sure she’s still riding the high from our narrow escape.

“No catch for you,” Abertha says to me, ignoring Kennedy. Her expression is bland, but there’s compassion in her crinkled eyes. It makes me feel mean and dirty.

“But there’s a catch for someone?” I ask. Everyone knows that magic is never free.

“It’s already been paid,” she says.

“Give the money back.” I don’t want anything from Darragh Ryan. I want him to disappear from this pack forever. I want to forget he ever existed.

“It’s foolish to suffer when you don’t have to.” Abertha arches an eyebrow.

“Well, I guess I’m foolish then.” Tears swim in my eyes again. I just want this to be over.

“Give it here,” I say and reach for the metal first aid box. Kennedy slides it over. I fumble with the latch.

“Mari,” Una murmurs, stilling my fingers with her hand. “We’re here to help you.”

I shake her off. “I can do it myself.” I sniffle down snot as I flip the lid open and root around for sutures and thread.

The younger males like Fallon and Gael know that Annie and I sew, so sometimes when they get injured sparring, and they know Una's out, they'll slink to the backdoor to have us patch them up. Killian would lose his shit on them if he knew. He'd probably make them hand over their man card. I don't know if they're supposed to stitch themselves up, or just suck it up, but they're definitely not supposed to come to a female for comfort.

Una probably wouldn't mind us helping—I'm sure she'd help, too, if she knew—but she's more or less in charge of us, so she'd be the one to get in trouble if we were busted. If she doesn't need to be involved, we try to keep her out of our shenanigans. She's stuck her neck out far enough for us as it is.

Anyway, I've had practice. I know what I'm doing, and something inside me *needs* to do this for myself.

Una and Abertha must sense my determination because they don't push it. They're all quiet as I disinfect the skin around the jagged claw marks and take a few deep breaths to steady myself. I scoop the needle through the wound over and over until it's closed, looping the thread around the needle driver, grabbing the tail, pulling the knot tight, and snipping the ends.

It hurts like a son of a bitch, and I have to plaster my chin to my chest to see what I'm doing, so I get a monster crick in my neck.

It's bullshit that shifters heal faster than humans, that we're less susceptible to infections and human disease, but we feel pain just the same. That's Fate for you. She won't even cut you a break when it defies logic not to.

Three stitches in, my hand begins to shake. I misjudge where to prick and the suture kind of breaks through the mangled skin. The tears that never quite stopped begin to stream down my cheeks.

“Mari—” Una says. I shake my head and line the needle up again. I blink to clear my vision.

Quiet steps come to stand beside me, and tentative fingers dab my cheeks with a wadded paper napkin.

“Thanks, Annie,” I say.

She pats my forehead like a nurse, even though there are no tears there. She stays by my shoulder while I finish the job, jabbing my own flesh, breathing through the sharp, piercing pain as I tug and pull with the needle driver to tie off the ends.

When I tie off the last suture, I collapse back in the chair and examine my handiwork. The stitches are uneven. The knots are a haphazard mess. There’s no bloody, gaping gash in my side anymore, though.

Annie pads back to the kitchen and returns with a tray and tea. Una joins Kennedy and me at the table, and Annie passes out the cups and saucers. Abertha, who had been keeping a respectful distance, drops her bag on a chair and ventures over to sit with us.

I’m too exhausted to ice her out.

Annie pours. Abertha takes a small silver flask out of her brassiere and splashes whiskey in hers. She holds it up to me. I shake my head.

A trail of blood drops has beaded on the hardwood floor from the door to this table. My blood. I shiver. I can’t seem to warm up.

After she empties the pot, Annie grabs a throw from the couch and wraps it gently across my shoulders before going back to the kitchen for more hot water and a plate of cookies.

For several long minutes, the others sip and munch in silence while I keep staring at the jagged line running diagonally from my highest rib to about two inches from my belly button.

Everyone in the pack always says I look like a human doll. When I was little, Rowan and Haisley and their crew always wanted to play dress up with me. They’d put pink bows in my hair and tug my corkscrew curls so they bounced like springs. I loved it. It was attention, and they were older and cool.

Now I look like a doll that someone tried to rip in half, sewn back together by a drunk or a child. The rest of my skin is as milky smooth as it's always been, but there's a jagged, pink-edged tear, long enough that someone could shove their hand in and pull out my heart. Or the bond that's still inexplicably inside my chest, throbbing and dark and sour.

If I were a doll, I'd tear my own stuffing out.

But I'm a grown female. I reach for my tea. I dunk the bag a few times and wring it dry with its thread around the spoon. I make myself keep going, hold it together. The only way past is through. I learned that years ago.

I half-listen as the others begin to speak.

"It was a bobcat," Kennedy lies to Abertha. "Probably rabid."

Abertha glances at me, silver eyes narrowed.

I stir my tea. Click. Clack.

"If you say it was," she says.

Annie's gaze darts from me to Kennedy to Abertha. "It wasn't a bobcat? You think it was something else? A feral? Last Pack?"

"It was a bobcat," I say and blow across the tea to cool it. "It's gone now."

"There's no need to tell the alpha." Una levels her gaze at Abertha. "Kennedy's wolf killed it."

"Did he?" The corners of Abertha's mouth curve.

Annie's brow wrinkles. She knows something's going on, that we're all talking around it, and I'm sure she's torn between her anxious curiosity and her instinct to avoid anything that could be trouble.

"It's nothing to worry about." I pat her hand. "It's done."

"Is it?" Abertha skewers me with her gray witch's gaze. I don't know whether it's a challenge or a warning or a genuine question. I don't know what Darragh is to Abertha or why she's really here or why any of this happened to me.

I don't know how a male can reject his fated mate and how his wolf can try to kill her.

But I don't need to understand. I learned a long time ago that people do things that are incomprehensible, and in the end, there is nothing you can do but rely on yourself.

You have to dress yourself, tie your own shoes, make your own way to the brand-new alpha's cabin, knock on his door, and tell him your dam is dead, and you're hungry, and you don't know what you're supposed to do.

You have to sew yourself back together again.

I finish my tea, shuffle to the sink, rinse the cup, and leave it in the drain. I take a shower with my body half out of the spray, a towel over the stitches. I wash my face and go to bed. I lie there, staring at the reflection of the fairy lights in the gilded mirror that I traded a bushel of apples for at the farmers' market.

At some point, hours later when the night is nearly over, the adrenaline has seeped out of my pores, and I'm left shivering despite the thick quilt, I hear a sound. A footstep on packed dirt, so faint I know I haven't really heard it. It sounded through the bond that I'm desperately blanking.

Like a ghost, I rise from my bed and wander into the living room. He's out there. I can feel him.

With shaking hands, I turn the doorknob and step out onto the porch.

The moon is low, but it's full enough that it casts a glow over the black outlines of trees and the groundskeeper's shed and Darragh, standing in the middle of the path, arms tense at his sides, bare chested in jeans. His hair is loose and snarled. He has two black eyes, a fat lip, and a split eyebrow. Dried blood drips from his eyebrow down the side of his face.

Something reaches for me through the bond, and I turn off my ears, unfocus my eyes, refuse to listen. I let it pass in the periphery of my awareness as I stare at the space above his head.

Darragh's throat bobs. "Abertha says you're okay."

She left here and went to him. They talked about me. He *talked* to her. The cold black pit inside me yawns wider.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

The wound in my side is hot, and I guess it hurts, but I don’t even register it as pain. I can’t feel anymore. I *won’t*.

“You’re safe. He can’t—I won’t let him near you. I swear.” His voice is gritty and raw, his face bloodied, his golden eyes wild and tortured, and I don’t care. The black pit is overflowing like floodwater, like a thick fog, numbing everything.

A very calm and clear voice lists out facts in my head. *He sent Abertha to you. He didn’t come himself. Then, he talked to her about what his wolf did, and he got into a fight, and hours later, he comes to stand outside your house to tell you that Abertha says you’re okay.*

He is not your mate.

The black spreads until it doesn’t exist inside me anymore. It *is* my insides. This is reality. I don’t have a mate.

And yet, still, without conscious intention, the question flies from my lips. “Why?”

And I really am a stupid, naïve child because despite the fact that I know there is no explanation that will fix this, no explanation that will make it okay, no explanation that would make him a different person, a male who didn’t nut on my back and bail—a very small flame of hope still flickers in my chest all the same.

“W-why?” I ask again and hold my breath.

His spine straightens and his shoulders go back like he’s facing an opponent in the ring. Like he’s waiting for the bell.

He doesn’t say anything.

He meets my eyes, his chin high, somehow still unbearably beautiful despite his beaten face, and he doesn’t say anything at all.

But I wait.

I hold my breath until my lungs burn because the part of you that wants to be loved is so very, very fucking hard to kill.

I hold my breath until I can't, and the air whooshes out in a jagged rush, and rage tears words from my throat.

“Get out of here! Go away and don't you ever dare come back. Don't ever even speak to me again. Don't look at me. You're dead to me, you hear? You're dead. Fuck you, Darragh Ryan. Fuck you.”

Then I whirl around, run inside, and slam the door, my pathetic little girl voice stumbling *why?* echoing in my ear.

There is no *why*.

Not in this fucked-up world. There's only what *is* and what's next.

Darragh Ryan doesn't exist in this world anymore.

I crawl back into bed, and I stare at the pink canopy, and I begin to teach myself how to make that real.

When Darragh finally leaves, I don't know. And if there's a mournful howl in the wee hours, just before daybreak, I don't hear it. Not at all.

MARI, FOUR YEARS LATER

“Hey, Mari,” Kennedy hollers through the screen door of the lodge kitchen. “Special meat delivery for you!”

Old Noreen, Annie, and Lucan pop straight up from what they’re doing and look at me. My face bursts into flame.

“You take it,” I call back, my body tensing like I’m bracing for a hit. “You’re out there.”

I hear her murmur in low tones to someone out back. No, not just someone. It’s Darragh Ryan. The mate who wasn’t, but who won’t quite go away.

I concentrate on the carrots I’m peeling, focus on not getting distracted and nipping the tip of a finger off with the peeler. *Go away, go away, go away.*

For years, he was content to drop off his gifts of obligation with Killian or Old Noreen and disappear again for weeks, or once, months, but early this summer, he started showing up at the kitchen door when I’m doing meal prep with fresh meat or firewood or tanned skins and furs.

I’ve managed to avoid him every time. It’s not the bond that gives me the heads up—I’ve become a master at ignoring it—but his scent precedes him and gives me fair warning to make myself scarce. He snuck up on me this time. I sniff, and damn if it’s not there, under the overpowering smell of the onions Lucan is chopping.

Like always, the sunshine smell tickles my nose. While I try to blink away a sneeze, I notice a tingle between my legs, and immediately, I panic. My heart lodges in my throat as I scan my body. My boobs feel normal. Except for the tingle, which is gone now, there's nothing going on downtown.

I'm hot, but the kitchen's hot. It's a normal hot. This isn't heat. That's not why he's here.

I force myself to breathe and will my pulse to slow its roll. Everything's okay. For now.

How much longer am I going to luck out? Four years between heats isn't unheard of, but it's definitely on the long side.

Does Darragh sense something I don't yet?

I lay a carrot on the cutting board and whack it into dime-sized pieces like a machine. The *thwack, thwack* helps ease the tightness in my chest.

It doesn't matter if he senses something. I have a contingency plan, and even if I didn't, I wouldn't present to Darragh Ryan if there was a gun to my head. Not in a million years.

I've learned next to nothing about him these past few years, but I've learned a hell of a lot about myself. I'm not that sweet girl with her head in the clouds anymore. I'm never going to stroll blithely into a trap again, I don't care who sets it—Fate, biology, a grizzled loner with a guilty conscience.

“Mari!” Kennedy pokes her head through the door. “He says he needs to give it to you.”

She's trying to make it not sound dirty. Still, Lucan snorts and mutters, “That's what she said.”

Kennedy drops her straight face and snorts, too. I really thought she'd hate Darragh forever out of solidarity, but at some point over the past four years, the whole night we almost got killed by his wolf became an epic adventure in her mind that she always retells when we get drunk. She still shit-talks him to my face, but I've seen her from a distance, giving him a chin dip when he deigns to come to camp.

That's fine. I don't need anyone else to hate him. I'm holding onto this grudge hard enough to make sure he's never in a position to hurt me again.

"Uh, Mari?" Kennedy calls again. "He's not going anywhere."

He will if I keep ignoring him and chopping carrots. He's only ever passing through. He'll never just stay gone, but he's never around for very long, either. It's like he picked the perfect way to make sure I can never get over what happened—he won't stay gone, and he won't stay around long enough for me to become immune to him.

"Mari?" Kennedy calls, louder.

I slam the knife to the wooden board.

What the *fuck* does he want?

I've never asked that male for anything. He got his way—no one besides a handful of people even know we're mates. And I'm finally getting on with life—with what life's *supposed* to be.

Since Killian and Una mated, things have changed. I have a job that pays human money and a bank account to put it in with my name on it. I make scented candles infused with homegrown herbs for our online store, and they sell like hotcakes. I can go into town without having to sneak off. Life is good.

Fuck Darragh Ryan and his guilt meat.

He needs to get the message.

I jerk my apron off and drop it on the counter. Lucan and Annie take a time out from their work to gawk at me stomping to the back exit. As I throw open the screen door, Kennedy ducks through, offering me a rueful smile.

The scent hits me first. It's November, so there are all the usual fall smells—leaves and cold earth and hints of woodstove—but there's a distinct note of late summer afternoon threading through the crisp air, and it's Darragh. Warm hay and thick green clover and the mellow stillness of

four o'clock in August when the worst of the season's heat has broken.

I hate that his scent never fails to deceive me. My muscles always relax when it hits my nose, and then I remember that night, and I tense up. It's jarring. He should smell like spilled blood. My body wouldn't mistake him then.

He's standing a respectful distance from the concrete patio where we keep the recycling bins and the gas grill. I force myself to look at his face even though I can't meet his eye.

He looks surprised that I came out. It makes sense. I haven't willingly been within yards of him since the night his wolf attacked me. When I catch sight or scent of him, I head the other way.

Now, he's maybe ten feet from me. I can make out the crinkles in the corners of his eyes. They're a bit deeper, and there's a little more gray threaded through his brown hair, but he doesn't look that much older. His jeans and boots are the same, just a few more scuffs and tears, and his flannel is a different color than the one he wore that night, but I'm sure he's had it just as long.

I feel like I've changed into a whole new person, and here he is, like four years ago was yesterday.

My stomach feels strangely hollow. I draw back my shoulders.

He doesn't seem like he's going to say anything. His jaw is clenched tight. Instead of the usual package of venison wrapped in white butcher's paper, he's got a canvas sack. By the scent of it, it's pheasant.

I raise an eyebrow and tilt my head, as if he's any male, and this is a minor inconvenience. I feel like I'm hovering above the scene, in awe of my own composure.

Yeah, fuck Darragh Ryan. He is any male, the most minor of inconveniences.

"What?" I ask, and I intend the word to sound sharp, but it comes out frail. Bruised.

I straighten my spine and hike my chin.

Darragh's brown eyes darken, the golden rings around the irises glowing brighter, and his chest rises and falls like he ran here and hasn't quite caught his breath yet. He holds up the sack.

"Pheasant," he says. His voice is a gruff, rusty creak that sets my nerves off like a shot. I ball my fingers into fists so they don't even think about trembling.

I hate what his proximity does to me. Thank goodness my wolf is still drowsing off one of her fugues. I couldn't deal with her reactions on top of this—trauma response. Yeah. That's what it is.

I need to get out of here. The anger's worn off, and I'm turning into a jittery mess of unresolved feelings, and the male who is supposed to be my mate is just staring at me, mute, holding a dead pheasant in a burlap sack.

"You couldn't give it to Kennedy?" I ask.

His mouth spears down. "I wanted to say—you've got to look out for buckshot."

"I know how to clean a bird." Old Noreen won't let us near the oven, but prep work, that's all on us.

For a second, I think that's all he has to say. He stands there frowning, taking up more space than it seems he should, smelling like the nicest things, fucking with my head.

I'm not going to take the sack from him. I'm not going an inch closer unless I have to. It took months for me to learn how to block out the bond and train my brain not to think about him, and I'm not undoing that work.

I firm my wobbly mouth and stare over his shoulder at the woods. I don't think about how the last time we were here together, he led me down the trail to a guest cabin, and I thought I was on my way to a new life. I stomp the memory as it tries to form. Kill it before it can grow.

"Is there something else?" I ask, my gaze level with an oak two yards behind him.

Darragh coughs. “I, uh, I got it in the wing, but there was spray. So you’ll need to look out.”

“Fine.” I thrust out my hand. I changed my mind. He can come closer if it puts an end to this sooner.

He crosses the space between us in two long strides, but he doesn’t hand over the sack. “Maybe shred the meat. Or grind it.”

“Okay.” I stand there with my hand open, and he’s right there, so close I notice the button missing on his flannel and the frayed collar of the undershirt beneath it. The nick on his neck where he evened his beard. The way he’s holding himself so stiff and still, and how he’s so much bigger than me, than most of the males in the pack, and how that makes me feel small and intimidated and mad and confused.

How his wolf is totally silent in his chest.

“I don’t know why you needed to tell me. You could have told Kennedy,” I mutter, head bent, staring at the concrete patio because it’s too much, trying to read a face that gives nothing away, avoiding eyes that have seen me like no one else ever has.

For a moment, I think he won’t answer, that I’ll have to take the sack from him and turn my back on him and go back inside. Which I can do. I’m not scared of Darragh Ryan.

“I’ll have elk next week,” he says.

“I don’t need it. Just give it to Old Noreen.”

“If not elk, definitely venison.”

My waiting hand trembles. What is this? Why won’t he finish this, hand me the sack, and bail? I shouldn’t have come out. I should’ve hidden in the freezer until he left. I’ve done it before.

He hacks a sharp cough, and my gaze flies to his face. His brow’s furrowed.

“I don’t know how to talk to you,” he says, frustration gleaming in his hooded eyes. “I don’t—” He glares at the wall

behind me, slashes of color darkening his cheekbones. “You know, I’m *here*.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

“I don’t give a shit.” I reach out and snatch the sack from his hand.

For a second, we both stand frozen, glaring at each other, and I don’t know why he’s pissed at me, but I’m happy he is. I hope I’m ruining his whole damn day.

“Watch for buckshot,” he snaps like he’s cursing at me.

And then, with a disgruntled growl, he tacks on, “I’ll get you an elk,” turns, and strides off.

I stand there, furious and hurt and confused again, alone except for a dead pheasant, and for the hundredth time I start to wonder why, but I don’t let myself go one single step further down that road.

There is no *why*. Fate does what she wants, and it’s not making people happy. She throws spanners in the works. If I want a good life, it’s up to me. No looking back. No wondering why.

Darragh Ryan walks away. That’s what he does. I should be grateful. I could be chasing after a pup in a shack up in the foothills, squatting over a hole to pee.

I grab the sack and drag it into the kitchen all the way to where Kennedy’s sitting on an overturned bucket playing on her Switch. “Take care of this, will you? Apparently, it might have some buckshot left in it.”

I hustle away so she can’t foist it back on me, ignoring her “hey.” I go back to my workspace and grab another bunch of carrots. Annie’s set herself up next to me, cutting up parsnips.

“Who’s bringing you meat, anyway?” Lucan calls over. He’s done with the onions, and now he’s lining up beets in rows two deep. He selects the longest knife—which happens to be the bread knife—presumably to try to double the number of beets he can cut at once.

“None of your business.” I start chopping. The *thwump, thwump* begins to soothe my shattered nerves.

“If you don’t want whatever it is, I’ll take it off your hands.” Lucan sniffs the air. I can smell the pheasant, too, now that Darragh’s scent isn’t messing with my nose.

My wolf twitches her nose at the scent of fresh kill. It’s the first sign of life I’ve seen from her all day.

“It’s going in with the rest.”

“Why you always gotta be so stingy, Mari Fane?” Lucan smirks. He teases me all the time about being mean. He knows I’m not, I’m nice to a fault, and I fold under very little pressure. He’s not beyond exploiting those facts for food.

Overall, though, he’s harmless, especially since he got knocked down to kitchen help.

About a year ago, he was part of the coup that tried to barter Annie, Kennedy and me to the Last Pack in exchange for their help taking out Killian Kelly and installing Eamon Byrne as our alpha.

Killian relegated the conspirators to shit work until they proved themselves in a fight with one of his lieutenants. At this point, every male who sided with Byrne—and lived—has been able to win a reconciliation match and get his rank back. Except Lucan.

Part of me suspects he’s too comfortable on Z-roster, although he sucks at everything except cutting corners. I dread seeing what he did with the onions.

“You’ve got such a hard heart.” As sensitive to a female’s moods as most males, I see Lucan has decided to push it. “How come you can’t throw a dog a bone for once, eh?”

“How come you can’t work your way out of the kitchen, Lucan Hayes?” I toss back, rocking my chef’s knife back and forth, making short work of the last of the carrots. I shove the encounter with Darragh to the back of my mind where all that garbage goes and get back to my real life.

“Maybe I want to be your special meat delivery.” Lucan grins at me across the counter and cocks an eyebrow. Beside me, Annie lets out a soft, scandalized gasp.

“The vibe you’re supposed to be going for is sexually competent line cook.” I blow a curl off my sweaty forehead. It *is* hot in here.

That frisson of fear I can never quite shake sputters to life in my chest, but I dampen it immediately. I’m not going into heat. I just had an intense emotional encounter, which is not worth dwelling on, and Old Noreen has both ovens on, and no one’s bothered to open a window. I’m fine.

“Oh, I’m more than sexually competent,” Lucan throws back, leaning over the counter, bracing himself on his sharp elbows. “Sexually, I’m definitely above average.”

“Oh, yeah?” I scoop the carrots into a bowl and start scrubbing potatoes. It’s roasted root vegetable night.

“I’m at least in the fifty-first percentile. *Sexually.*” His grin widens, revealing his snaggle tooth.

“That is the most humble of brags I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m a modest dude. Think about it, Mari. You could be having reliably average sex. In a world of uncertainty, you shouldn’t dismiss that kind of offer out of hand.” He cocks his head.

Annie groans under her breath.

“I suppose I shouldn’t.” I pretend to eye him up, letting my gaze drop meaningfully from his lips to his chest to his pile of beets. I raise a dubious eyebrow. “I guess I could add you to my list for consideration.”

“That’s all a male can ask for. Due consideration.” He winks and grins wider, returning his attention to his beets, attacking them with the bread knife, sawing them into a huge, shredded mess.

Before the failed coup, Lucan was a dickhead like ninety-nine percent of Quarry Pack males, but even though he’s slightly sleazy and more trouble than help in the kitchen, he’s

grown on me. He's not going on any list, though, no matter how desperate I get.

Annie elbows me. "Want help with those?" She nods at my bowl of clean, wet potatoes.

"Thanks." We set up our usual assembly line—I peel, and she chops.

Last summer, I caught the flu, and for a day or so, I was certain I was going into heat again. I panicked. I had fever-fueled nightmares of Darragh saying, "When you go into heat next time—tell Killian. He'll come find me," and I woke myself up puking.

After I got better, Kennedy and I had a serious talk. I made her swear that when I go into heat again, she'll tie me to my bed. Or go to town and score serious drugs from a human—maybe the veterinarian—and knock my ass unconscious until it's over.

The messed-up thing is that no one seems to know what happens if a female doesn't give in to her heat. Males go into rut if they're kept from their mate, but apparently, in the history of shifters, no female has ever *not* gotten on all fours and presented.

Abertha probably knows what happens, but I don't talk to her if I can avoid it. She looks at me like she knows all my private business, and it makes me want to go after her face with my nails. Despite her weird, youthful vibe, she's an elder. It'd be wrong to fight her.

My wolf hates her. Since we got rejected, my wolf has pretty much packed herself away into a corner to sleep away the days, but Abertha is one of two people that rouses her interest. My wolf doesn't try to go after her or anything. She's too out of it for that. She only opens her eyes a slit, bares a fang, and growls. When she does, Abertha politely ignores her, and for some reason, that pisses me off even more.

Anyway, I don't know if she and Darragh are fuck buddies or not, and I don't care, but I'm not asking her how to avoid a

heat, and there is no way in hell I am going to just let it happen again.

So Kennedy and I brainstormed all the solutions we could think of. Tying me up. Drugs. That was basically it.

“When are you meeting him?” Annie murmurs, interrupting my thoughts.

“Noon.”

“You’re definitely going through with it?” Her brown eyes are troubled.

I nod and reach over to squeeze her thin hand. “It’ll be fine.”

Annie manages to give me a wavery smile.

Drugs and restraints did not seem like fun, but then, an idea occurred to me. What if I had someone on tap to sex up? Maybe I could do the heat without begging Killian to fetch my mate. Or dying from humiliation, which is what would happen if I ever had to ask my alpha to go get me dick.

Killian’s cooler now that he’s with Una, and they’ve got a pup, but he’s still a massive dick with the emotional intelligence of a bag of rocks.

After I decided to do it, the question became who would be my heat-mate. I immediately ruled out every male in Quarry Pack. If the sex is bad, I don’t need another male I have to avoid. Darragh and his meat is bad enough.

Right after the debacle in the cabin, Darragh had the nerve to come up to our cabin and leave wrapped venison steaks right there on the porch.

I asked Kennedy to throw it away—I wasn’t getting out of bed much at that point—but she took it to Killian instead. Killian must’ve said something to Darragh because he took to giving the meat to him or Old Noreen to pass to me instead of leaving it on the doorstep like a dead mouse.

I eventually summoned up the balls to tell Killian I didn’t want it, and he told me that I should tell Darragh myself.

So like today's pheasant, I get a lot of meat. I throw it in with the rest of our stores. It doesn't even hurt much, anymore, that he doesn't want me, but I guess since he sees me as a responsibility, he'll go ahead and throw me a few chops now and then.

I don't know why he needed to give it to me personally today. Probably guilt.

I don't dwell on it. As I toss the peeler in the sink, I mentally wrap the past hour up in a ball, throw it in a dark closet in the recesses of my mind, and lock the door.

When I was younger, I daydreamed about a house with hundreds of rooms, but now my brain is a hallway with a bunch of locked and barricaded doors. I don't think I'm any different than most folks. That's just life and growing up. You've got to keep going however you can, and you've got to be pragmatic.

"Did you ask Liam to borrow the truck?" Annie interrupts me again. Her anxiety is working overtime today. She gets this way when her routine is going to change. She hates it, but she can't chill out, either.

"Yup."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said we need to take things to market."

"But we're not scheduled to work tomorrow."

"Liam doesn't know that."

"What if he mentions it to Killian, and Killian tells Una? Una knows it's not our turn."

I hold up a finger, swipe the potato peels into my cupped palms, and run them to the compost bucket. When Annie gets into one of her worry spirals, she can really get stuck.

That's why Kennedy and I decided to keep it to ourselves when we first sat down and made a list of all the males we know from other packs. We itemized their pros and cons and had pragmatic discussions about whether being a rich asshole

from Moon Pack is disqualifying for reasons of rank solidarity, and if North Border is too far to go for a one-night stand.

There was no clear good choice, and we were getting ready to settle for a dude drawn at random, when Lenox landed in our lap.

It was karma. There was this guy that Kennedy played online with, and he just talked like a shifter. I played the game for a few weeks while we were trying to figure out how to smoke him out. Since the coup, nothing interesting has happened, so deducing that “flowb4bros” was one of us was a big thrill. Eventually, Kennedy worked up the courage to ask him point blank what pack he’s from, and he said Salt Mountain.

And then he asked for my number. He texted me immediately, and we’ve been talking every day since. We chatted on video, and now, finally, I’m going to meet him tomorrow in Chapel Bell to see if we have a “connection.”

That’s his word, not mine. When he talks about feelings, he talks like a guy on a reality TV dating show, and it’s cringey, but in a sweet way. So much better than the double entendres that Quarry Pack males think passes for flirting.

He knows I’m not looking for my mate. I got tipsy a few weeks ago and told him about Darragh and how I want a backup to see me through my heat if it should ever come again. He says he totally understands, and there’s absolutely no pressure, but that he’d be honored to be there for me in that way.

I’m not a hundred percent sure that I’m not skeeved out by that, but then again, I’m not used to males treating me as an equal worthy of respect and consideration.

Anyway, we’re going to get coffee together like humans. We’re going to have fun. No pressure.

I rinse the potato juice off my hands and rejoin Annie. She’s shoveling the chunks into a big bowl to coat them in olive oil and rosemary.

“What dress do you think I should wear tomorrow?” I ask her. On her face, I watch her wires cross. The easiest way to get Annie out of her own head is to ask for her help. She’s the kind of person who will do anything for anyone even when she can’t do for herself.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I got a new dress online, but I’m not sure about it.”

“What does it look like?”

“It’s mauve.”

“You look really pretty in mauve.” That’s Annie. It’s as natural for her to build other people up as it is to give herself a hard time.

It’s going to be the first time I’ve worn a dress in forever. After Darragh, I switched to long skirts, and then after the coup, when Una made Killian ditch the dumbest of the rules, I switched to pants. But for my first real date, I’ve decided to go super feminine. Which is good. It’s progress. Getting back to the me I was before.

I’m excited, I think, at least as excited as I ever get these days. Time is passing more quickly than usual, and my heart is beating at a faster tempo. Nothing extreme. Just healthy, normal excitement.

It has nothing to do with the lingering effects of seeing Darragh. He’s gone again. Locked back up in a dusty corner of my mind where he belongs. He’s the past. I have a future.

“Annie, come help with this.” Noreen’s bent over the open oven door, waving her mitts and frowning.

“I’ll finish here.” I take the bowl of veggies from Annie, and she rushes to Noreen.

“Last chance, Mari,” Lucan calls from the walk-in freezer. He’s holding the sack of pheasant in front of his dick and grinning. “If you want this meat all to yourself, speak now or hold your peace.”

“Pass.” A smile pokes up the corners of my mouth. “Actually, I have a date tomorrow.”

Saying it out loud sends a thrill down my spine. I think things are really turning around. *I'm* turning them around. I'm not going to walk around under a gray cloud anymore. I ignore the small unease in my gut. I always feel like puking after I see Darragh.

“Seriously? Unprotected females can't date.” He chuckles the bird onto a shelf and ambles back to the island, studiously avoiding the disaster he made of the beets.

“Who says?”

“Who said you could?” He's not being a dick. It's a genuine question.

“We can go into town now if we take someone with us. There are no rules against drinking coffee.”

“Coffee? What, are you going on a date with a human?” He wrinkles his nose.

“No. A male from Salt Mountain.”

“What's his name?”

“Lenox.”

He snorts. “That's a douchebag's name.”

“Lucan's a douchebag's name.” It's not the best comeback, but comebacks aren't exactly my forte.

“Who's going with you?”

“Annie and Kennedy.”

“So this douchebag hillbilly has a date with *three* of our unmated females? That's bullshit.”

“Hey, don't hate the player, man. Hate the game.” I grin, and despite the grimness still lingering from that strange interaction out back, it comes easy.

Darragh Ryan is just a fact of my life. Like allergies. Or lactose intolerance. I'm going to live my life despite him.

One day soon, I'm going to take a package of meat off of him, say thanks, and not think about him at all the next minute.

I ladle the seasoned vegetables onto a pan, set it on the counter next to the oven, and scrub down my work area. When Old Noreen sends Lucan into the pantry to get a jar for her from a high shelf, I stow his abandoned pile of mangled beets in the fridge for smoothies.

I don't have anything else I have to do tonight. I could eat if I want. I don't have to serve anymore. These days, males like Lucan who are on Killian's shitlist get to do a lot of the jobs that used to be Una's and ours.

I believe Gael is serving my tables tonight. He probably tapped out too soon in the ring, or "whined like a bitch," or something like that. No one will miss me if I skip dinner, so instead of heading back inside after I smash the beets down with the rest of the food scraps, I slip off for home.

Our new place near Una and Killian's is a lot less homey than our cabin that blew up. It's a little more bachelor pad, for lack of a better term. Our chore rotation lasted for about a week without Una to organize it, and it's a good thing that Killian relaxed the rules because as soon as she wasn't there to remind us, we immediately stopped hiding the gaming systems and the liquor.

The cabin is dark when I get there which means Annie must have been the last one to leave for dinner service. She's the one who's good about turning lights off when she leaves, and pre-rinsing the dishes, and stuff. I don't bother turning on a lamp. I'm in the mood to be alone and under the radar.

I strip in my bedroom and streak down the hallway to run the bath. Annie did my nails earlier today, so I have classic red fingers and toes. I was thinking about putting my hair in an updo tomorrow, but if there's even one percent humidity, it'll look like a Truffula tree from Dr. Seuss. Besides, Lenox says he can't wait to play with my curls. They're pretty much irresistible to everyone.

Even Darragh wound one around his finger that night when—

I squash the memory. Stomp it flat. Kick it into a corner. Slam and bolt the door behind it. Still, my stomach cramps. I

sink back in the hot water until the steam heats my chin and focus on my breath.

Why did he have to show up today of all days? Just when I'm taking this big step?

The past is over. I'm not going back to thinking there's something wrong with me, and perversely daydreaming about him showing up and begging my forgiveness. And I'm not going back to being angry all the time.

Life is good now, and tomorrow I'm going on the first date of my life. It's a weird thing for a shifter to do, but Lenox is into human culture like I am. He loves music and TV shows and comic books.

No one in Quarry Pack likes comics, so I hadn't read one until he passed a manila envelope full to Fallon at a fight. Fallon made me give him a jar of Old Noreen's moonshine before he'd hand it over, but it was worth it. I loved the art.

For a long time after the thing with Darragh, I lost interest in the things I used to get excited about. I got skittish. I didn't want to shift, and I'd only do it for full moon runs, which you're pretty much required to do unless you've got wasting sickness. I could only get my wolf to come out if Kennedy was right there.

But these past few months, things have turned around. I'm sleeping better, and I'm not just going through the motions.

It's nice being excited about things again. Even if Lenox turns out to be a dud, it feels good to look forward to things. To *like* things again.

After the water cools, I drain the tub and fill it again to shave. I go over each leg twice, ankle to butt cheek. I even slosh onto my stomach and crane my neck to make sure I got everything behind my knees. After scrubbing myself dry with a terry cloth towel, I rub baby oil all over my skin and dab lavender on my pulse points. I want to get a good night's sleep so that I don't have red eyes tomorrow.

Kennedy and Annie are back from dinner and hanging in the common room by the time I'm done in the bathroom. I say

goodnight and head for bed. I have trouble falling and staying asleep normally, so tonight, I'm gonna give myself lots of time to stare at the ceiling, and hopefully, I'll drift off from boredom by one or two at the latest.

I'm nowhere near sleep when there's a gentle rapping at my door.

"Mari?" Annie's soft voice calls out. "You've got a visitor."

All my relaxing is undone in an instant. Is it Darragh? It can't be. Not twice in one day.

"Who is it?" I ask, but Annie must've already walked away.

I fight the urge to hide under the covers like a pup and shrug on my robe. My stomach is a knot.

As I make my way down the hall, I hear Kennedy chatting away and take a breath. It's not Darragh. She wouldn't be that open with any male.

I smell baby before I see our company. Una's come by. She's got Raff in his baby carrier. He's curled up like a shrimp, conked out, his little fist balling her shirt, his bald head nestled in her cleavage. My heart goes mushy.

Una greets me with a smile and cocks her head toward the door. I follow her out to the porch. She never drops by this late just to chat. Killian wouldn't let her.

I hope this is about candles, but from the careful kindness in her expression, I bet it isn't. Shit. Was Annie right? Did she find out from Liam that we're borrowing the truck? She can't bust us for that, not after all the years that she snuck off pack territory to the farmers' market, and it was against the rules then.

She leans back against the railing, facing me, smoothing her palm over her sleeping baby's butt, her weight on her good leg.

"Want a chair?" I ask, making to go back inside.

“No, I’m good. If I sit, he’ll wake up. He’s got something against me taking a rest.” She smiles. It’s strange seeing her so happy. She’s changed since she mated to Killian, and it’s a good thing.

“So like his daddy, eh?” Killian’s notorious for running the males into the ground.

Una chuckles, dropping a kiss to the top of his head, pausing a beat to sniff. New dams are so weird.

“We had a visitor after dinner,” she says, changing the subject. Or rather, probably getting around to the reason she dropped by.

“Yeah?”

“Darragh Ryan.”

“Yeah?” I don’t let my face show a thing. I don’t know how much Una knows about Darragh and me. Sometimes I think Killian must have told her everything by now, but she’s never brought it up. She’s not one to poke her nose into anyone’s business, though.

“He wanted to talk to Killian. He won’t ever come inside, of course, so Killian had to go out to the porch.”

I hum, polite yet uninterested, but my stupid heartrate speeds up.

Una waits for a second like she’s giving me the opportunity to speak, but when I say nothing, she goes on. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, but the window was open.” Most people would be lying, but there’s no doubt she’s telling the truth. “Darragh was saying he brought you a kill? A pheasant?”

“Yeah.”

She waits again. I keep my mouth shut.

Her eyes warm, and she begins to idly rub Raff’s rump again. “Darragh said there’s buckshot in the bird.”

This can’t be why she came over so late. “We’ll keep an eye out. No worries.”

“I know.” She cups Raff’s little head and strokes him with the lightest touch. His mouth works like he’s dreaming of milk. “He was...on edge.”

I shrug.

“He said he’d talked to you.”

I nod, folding my arms.

As she idly traces Raff’s tiny ear, she gives me a soft smile. “You can always come to me, you know? Even though I’m busy all the time with this little guy and getting the online store set up and the plans for the warehouse—” She stops for a breath, her smile turning wry. “I’ve always got the time. If you want to talk about it. Or not talk about it. Either way. I’m just over there.” She nods in the direction of her cabin. The lights are blazing.

“I can’t believe Killian let you walk over here in the dark.”

She snorts, scans the shadows, and nods at the trees in our side yard. I can just make out the huge silver wolf, sitting under an elm, grooming his coat as he keeps an eye on Una and the pup.

I can’t help but smile. The biggest wolf in the five packs, if what they say about Rosie Collins is an exaggeration, and he’s completely tamed.

“I mean it, Mari.”

“I know, but there’s really nothing to say.” I cross over to her and reach out to run the tip of a finger over the impossibly soft back of Raff’s balled fist. “He’s lost in dream land, isn’t he?” I say, praying she lets me change the subject. My eyes are prickling, and I don’t want to lose it—I have a date tomorrow. I am moving forward. I don’t need a big sister to lean on. I need to turn a new page.

For a second, Una searches my face, but then, thankfully, she chuckles. “Oh yeah. He’ll be out like a light until the second I get my own butt into bed. Then it’s party time.”

We chat another minute or two before Killian’s wolf pads over and stares at Una expectantly. She rolls her eyes, but she

lets him act like a banister to help her descend the stairs, and as they walk home, side by side, she rests a hand on his shiny coat.

My heart pings, and I ignore it. I go inside, lock the door, say goodnight to Kennedy, and go to bed.

I lie in bed a long time, arms folded under my head, my nightgown riding up. The fresh night air from the cracked window feels delicious on my moisturized skin. Of their own accord, my fingers trace the faint silvery white scar that runs from my top rib toward my belly button. I probably would have healed without a scratch if I'd let Una or Annie stitch me up. In retrospect, I did a real shit job.

I don't mind the scar, though. Touching it anchors me. It's proof that no matter what dark thoughts I have in the wee hours of the night, I'm lucky. I got away. And I'm strong. I patched myself up.

I settle into the mattress and try to untangle my jumbled feelings so sleep will come. I'm nervous and scared and bitter and hopeful. I focus on my breathing, careful to keep the bond blanked out. I'm an expert at ignoring its existence. It was hard at first, especially when Darragh dropped by camp and it would light up like a flashing neon arrow, but I learned how to look past it, to listen without hearing, feel without acknowledging.

I sigh. I don't want to think about Darragh now. I don't owe him anything. If he wanted to talk it out, he's had four years, and the closest he's come is today, and he wanted to tell me how to cook a bird.

On the nightstand, my phone buzzes. I check it. It's Lenox.

i can't wait to see you tomorrow.

My belly does a weird flip. I'm excited. It's nice. I text him back.

me too.

And then I settle back to stare at my stark white walls.

Maybe it's time to put fairy lights up again.

After the incident with Darragh's wolf, I packed up my girly princess shit and left it on the free table in the back of the commissary. Someone took all three boxes by the next time I checked. Probably a dam with a little girl. She must have thought she hit the jackpot. It makes me happy to think so, to imagine a little girl decorating her room like a princess's turret.

It makes me sad, too, but I don't dwell on it.

My phone buzzes again. I roll over to my side to check it.

you aren't gonna ghost me, are you?

Oh, he's nervous. That's so cute. He's a really confident guy. It's kind of nice knowing he's a little uncertain, too.

no way. i hate ghosts.

He sends me a ghost emoji. I send him the barfing smiley face and go back to staring around my empty room.

Junking my stuff was my version of chopping off all my hair. At least I didn't do that. I would've looked like a mess when it was growing out.

But maybe it's time to invest in some décor again. I have money, and now that Una's the alpha female, we don't have to hide it anymore.

Yeah, new male, new space, new me.

That's good.

The phone buzzes. Once again, my stomach does a strange somersault. Lenox has zero problem showing he's interested, and I could totally get used to it.

are you coming alone?

I kind of wish I was, now, but I'm already bending enough rules.

i'm riding in with kennedy and annie, but they're gonna go shopping.

He sends me a smiley face wearing sunglasses. I don't reply. It's kind of a thrill to leave him on read.

I snuggle under the covers and drift off designing a vision board in my mind, swapping out pinks for reds, creams for browns, geometric designs for flowers, imagining what tomorrow will be like, what Lenox will wear, what we'll do after we drink coffee.

I don't wonder why Darragh wanted to talk to me so bad or why he went to Killian afterwards. I don't think about him at all.

My finger skims along my scar, and as my eyes grow impossibly heavy, the scent of sunshine at midnight drifts into my bedroom on a breeze, teasing my nose and unfurling the ball of nerves in my belly. My wolf calms, her twitching limbs still, and we both fall fast asleep.

“Holy. Fucking. Fate. Is he ripping its spine out?” The young male that Killian brought with him whispers under his breath, but there’s nothing wrong with my ears.

I am ripping its spine out.

Actually, I’m cracking it apart, vertebrae by vertebrae, and pitching the bones as far as I can in opposite directions. That’s how you kill this thing.

If it can be killed.

I thought I’d finished it off when I’d decapitated it and threw its carcass back into the bog it had invaded up by Salt Mountain territory. In retrospect, maybe I cut its ass off, not its head. It’s a worm the size of a truck. How do I know which end is its ass? I’m not checking the holes for teeth.

It should be Salt Mountain’s problem, but they don’t do shit until an issue is sitting on their doorstep, if then. I draw my arm back and cannon a vertebra into an oak. The kid with Killian almost jumps out of his skin when the bark explodes.

And what am I going to do with this shit? I toe the slimy, mottled green carcass, and the flesh slides off the rest of its remaining skeleton with a limp squelch. That’s not edible meat.

You know what? I’m gonna haul it up to those hillbilly fucks and leave it at the back door of their kitchen. Either it’ll piss ’em off, or they’ll eat it. Win win.

I pitch another vertebra into the distance, this time aiming for height. Killian and the kid crane their necks and shade their eyes.

The kid whistles.

Did they hike all this way just to watch me muck around?

And what am I gonna have to do to get them to fuck off? Killian probably wants me to teach the kid some kind of lesson. I've told him before. I'm not some wise old fucker who lives in the woods. He's rolling the dice. Except when it comes to *her*, the control I have over the wolf is always touch-and-go.

For her, I'd kill the wolf, no matter that it'd be the end of me as well, and he knows it. The wolf's too smart to test me. For every other living thing, he'll take his chances.

I crack the last few vertebrae apart. The wolf is intrigued. He wants to gnaw on the bones and bury them, see if it regenerates so we can kill it again.

If I thought the bones would burn, I would've made a bonfire. As it is, I have the sinking suspicion that the wolf is thinking about stealing our skin tonight. If I don't want to wake up to a pile of bog worm skeleton, I'll have to sleep up in the tree. The wolf isn't mad enough to risk the leap to the ground, and he can't navigate a rope ladder. Not yet.

They say the wolf and the man are one, but not in my case. Mine is an abomination. He's mad, bloodthirsty, and I suspect, much more fucking clever than I am. He doesn't have opposable thumbs, though, and he's constrained by the laws of gravity, and I exploit the hell out of those weaknesses.

I hurl a vertebra at the top of a pine where two turkey vultures are perching on a dead branch. I nail the spot right between them with a crack, and they startle, squawking with indignation, wings flapping. My wolf strains to chase them. The fact that he can't fly is of no consideration whatsoever.

"Dudes were just hanging around for the leftovers," Killian chides.

"The meat's poison." There's something in the layer of slime on this thing's skin. I can feel it eat at the flesh of my

palms almost as quickly as my shifter healing repairs it. It's unpleasant.

I wipe my hands on my jeans, a thin film still sticking to my skin. I'll try peanut butter when Killian and the kid leave. It works for sap and tar, why not bog worm?

"What is it?" the kid asks, gawking at it from a safe distance with his nose turned up.

I grunt and shrug. "Dead."

"Do you think it's our culprit?" Killian comes to stand beside me and considers the baggy, deboned carcass splayed at my feet.

"No. It lived in a bog up by Whitetail Ridge. The bog wasn't near big enough for all the bones." Whatever has been hunting our kind has killed at least two hundred souls over the course of the past two decades. The bog this fucker was squatting in was no more than a yard in diameter.

"It could be stashing the bodies somewhere else," Killian suggests.

"Do you see arms?" I point out the obvious.

"Maybe it eats the bones." Killian strokes his chin. Dude might be a shade less dictatorial now that he's mated, but he still clings to a bad idea as tightly as a good one if he comes up with it himself.

"It's not big enough. It'd take days—maybe a week—to metabolize a shifter skeleton. What does it do with the other person he took while it's digesting? Tie them up with its flipper things?" I toe the vestigial fins along what was its belly or back.

The enemy that's stalking our kind takes two at a time, usually a female and a male. We only figured it out when Cadoc Collins called a meet between the local packs.

Apparently, whoever's been doing this has been picking off couples from Moon Lake for years with impunity. Quarry Pack had only ever lost one here and there. During Declan

Kelly's time, we were never sure that he hadn't had something to do with the disappearance, especially when it was a female.

It wasn't until the meet when we compared notes with Salt Mountain that we realized our packs often lost folks within days of each other, far too many times for it to be coincidence.

My best guess? He's using females to bait the males. What happens then? I have no idea.

We've never found the bodies, signs of struggle, clothes, or personal effects. After Rosie, Cadoc's new mate, recounted all the people her folks have lost—it would be impossible to hide so many dead on pack land. That means we're looking for a predator that can transport its victims.

The bog worm is out as a suspect.

As I throw the last vertebra, pitching it so it buzzes the kid's ear to see what kind of reflexes he's got, I allow myself a small measure of satisfaction.

Another threat down.

She's safer.

I give myself permission to listen to the bond for a second. It's like the insides of a seashell, empty but full of sound. The peacefulness hits like a drug, loosening the vise that constantly squeezes my chest, and at the same time, slipping another blade between my ribs, pricking my heart. This is all I can have.

I accept it. It's on me. It's my burden.

I shouldn't have insisted on talking to her yesterday. It made her unhappy. It was selfish.

She didn't want the pheasant. Why would she? No one wants to waste their time picking out birdshot. I should've fed the bird to my wolf and gone after the elk I saw signs of last week near Tall Pines Lake. I was putting the hunt off because I don't like venturing so far from camp for very long.

She didn't seem interested when I mentioned the elk. She just wanted me gone, which is fair.

Maybe she'd like some salmon. I've never really brought her fish. The best spots are further up the mountain, and I don't like being so far afield, but if I knew Killian was in camp—

I still wouldn't go. Not that far. Not when there's this invisible threat out there, leaving no scent, no tracks.

She might really be into fish.

For the first time, I take a good look at the kid Killian's brought. I recognize him. He works in the kitchen with her. She's not afraid of him, and he doesn't touch her, so I haven't had to worry about what to do with him yet.

He looks dumb and overconfident.

"Can you fish?" I ask him.

He blinks up from watching Killian prod around in the bog worm's innards with a stick. "I never have. Is it hard?"

I sigh. Well, there goes that idea. I stalk over to the hand pump and rinse my hands, although as I figured, water does nothing to cut the grime.

"He know what he's in for?" I ask Killian, jerking a nod at the kid as I rub my hands dry with a rag. The fabric sticks to my skin.

"I don't know. Lucan, you know why I brought you up here?" Killian's smirking. He loves this shit.

To his credit, the kid doesn't lose his nonchalance. "To feed me to this motherfucker?" He flashes a wry grin.

Besides cocky, he's wiry. Hopefully, he's fast, too. He has a better chance of surviving my wolf if he's fast.

Killian slaps his back. "I won't let his wolf eat you."

"How are you going to stop him?" I ask. The wolf doesn't recognize Killian as his alpha, and Killian knows it.

"You don't think I could take your wolf?" Killian arcs an eyebrow.

“You think you can?” I’m genuinely curious. Killian and I have been sparring in human form for years, and it’s usually a toss-up, but for obvious reasons, our wolves have never fought. I don’t want to accidentally end up as Alpha of Quarry Pack.

“Is that a challenge?” Killian’s smile stretches to his ears.

“I thought you wanted me to fight the kid?” I brush my palms once more on my jeans, as much good as it does. “Shit, I guess I have time to whup you both.”

Killian bursts out in laughter, and a few seconds later, the kid joins in, but his nerves are showing now.

“So what’s the agenda? You want the wolf to take the kid down a peg, or is this about facing his fears?” I crack my neck and roll my shoulders. My wolf rumbles in my chest. The kid’s face grays, and my wolf lets out an unearthly howl. He’s caught the scent of prey.

I lead the way to a patch of even ground upwind from the bog worm carcass.

“You know who this kid is?” Killian asks me.

I shrug. “I’ve seen him around.” Truth be told, the younger pack males are interchangeable. They all wear baggy shorts with elastic waistbands and smell like armpit and the shit that humans sell in aerosol cans.

“He works in the kitchen with Mari.” Every muscle in my body tenses. Obviously, I know that. And obviously, Killian can say her name. That’s fine. There’s no reason I need to kill him because he said her name.

But the urge to do it is hard to tamp down. I grit my teeth and shake out my arms, twist a few times at the waist. Not that I need to warm up. The wolf is always ready.

“His name’s Lucan.” Killian keeps running his mouth. “He tried to overthrow me, didn’t you, dumbass?” Killian whacks the kid upside the head. The kid ducks and flushes.

“I didn’t think they were actually going to do it.” He has the sense to look ashamed. “I thought we were just blowing

off steam.”

Killian tosses a shoulder, fundamentally unconcerned. After the attempted coup, he and I had many long conversations about whether or not to let the tagalong males like Lucan live. In the end, it came down to numbers. Kill too many pack males, and we’d have to thin out patrols, leaving us more vulnerable.

It was an unacceptable risk, so I agreed to go along with Killian’s rehabilitation plan with the understanding that if any of the half-assed conspirators shows the slightest sign of fucking around again, my wolf gets him.

“Well, it wasn’t blowing off steam, was it?” Killian’s eyes narrow, and he gets right in the kid’s face. “You put our females at risk. *My* female. Annie. Mari.” He draws out her name and watches my reaction from the corner of his eye.

He’s fucking with me.

“You tried to sell sweet little innocent Mari to the Last Pack as a whore.”

The wolf rattles my chest as my nails dig into the flesh of my palms.

“Enough,” I tell Killian, my voice so distorted by my wolf that the word is nearly incomprehensible.

Killian smiles at me, snaps his teeth, and winks. “I’m just messing with you, man. Get that blood flowing. You’ve got the chains?”

It takes a few seconds to pull myself back from the edge. Killian’s an asshole. He’s riling me up to get a better show. I don’t dance for him. He’s not my alpha. He’s the male that leads the pack I don’t quite belong to, and I can never bring myself to leave.

I wave him away and give him my back. “Too late. Take the kid home. I got shit to do.”

It’s not a lie. Winter is coming, and I wanted to be much further along on construction than I am. I’m always losing work days when the wolf demands to run, and I have to

borrow a truck and drive my ass all the way to the far side of Salt Mountain before it's safe to let him take our skin.

He makes a beeline straight back here—to her—and he holds nothing back so he's dead on his feet by the time he limps his way over the border to Quarry Pack, and I wrestle him back inside. The next day, I have to get Liam or Tye to drive me all the way back to the truck and return it to camp, and that's two whole days gone.

And that's not even accounting for the time I lose over bog worms, and tracking ferals who wander too close, and chasing down rumors about whatever's picking us off.

I don't have time for Killian Kelly's bullshit, too. I go back to the worm carcass, careful to breathe through my nose. How much lighter fluid will it take to make it go up all at once? It's not going to be a good smell. Better to have it burn hot and quick.

A footstep sounds behind me, and Killian clears his throat and waits. That's as close as he'll ever come to an apology.

“Fuck off,” I tell him.

He comes to stand even with me. “What if I take care of this for you?” He nudges the carcass with his foot.

“I'm looking forward to doing it myself.”

Killian slides me a glance. You can see the wheels turning. “You know Dermot's a good hand at fishing. What if I send him up the mountain? Have him bring you down some fat salmon.” The corners of his mouth rise. He knows he's got me.

It'd bother me more if I didn't know he's as bound as I am by this *thing*—this bond that hurts worse than any wound, but that I wouldn't sever for anything in the world.

He's a luckier male than I am, but he also knows the bite of this trap, the brutal sharpness of its teeth. It changes everything, but for me, it's fixed nothing.

I sigh. “You want me to fight him?”

Killian grunts in the affirmative. “As the wolf.”

“I want a fuck ton of salmon. Enough for the whole pack.”
If I don’t give her enough to make a meal for everyone, she won’t eat any of it herself. If it’s pack dinner, she might.

“I’ll let Dermot take a few males with him.”

“Not too many.”

Killian nods, humoring me. “Of course.”

I sigh again. “I better get the chains.”

I give the bog worm one last prod just to see it jiggle, and then I head to the structure I’m building in the elms on the northern edge of the clearing. I haul myself up the rope ladder to the first platform, hand over hand.

Life was easier when I lived in the old shelter, everything in one place, on one level, but I needed the space for the planer and the lathe and the other machines I bought to do the woodworking. I also sleep better up high— *when* I sleep— knowing my wolf would probably break its legs if it took our skin in the night and leapt to the ground. And, most importantly, if she gets it in her head to come up here again, she won’t be able to catch us unaware.

I climb the floating staircase to the platform where I store my shit, rummage in a box, and take out a length of chain, a collar, and a padlock. I toss them over the railing, and I guess I should’ve looked first, because there’s a thunk and a yelp.

I poke my head over the side. The kid is hopping on one leg, holding his foot.

“Sorry about that,” I call down.

He squints up. “It’s cool, man.” He walks it off, hissing when he puts his weight down. “Can I ask you something though?”

I grunt.

“Why are you building a treehouse?”

I hear the unspoken part. What’s up with the gingerbread trim and red shutters and shit? It’s a fair question. I’m not a fucking garden gnome.

“Shits and giggles,” I say. The kid doesn’t have the balls to ask a follow-up question.

I lower myself back down the ladder and drop the ten feet between the bottom and the ground. It took experimentation to come up with the exact height and ladder design to prevent my wolf from getting a foothold, but I came up with the right specs eventually.

While I was occupied, Killian stripped naked, and now he’s rolling his shoulders, stretching out his triceps. I join him in the dead center of the clearing, drop my pants, and tighten the collar around my neck until the buckle bites into my skin. The kid turns a little green around the gills.

“We’re just sparring, right, Alpha?” he asks Killian as he kicks off his trainers.

I hook the chain to the metal loop in the collar and padlock the other end to the ring in a twelve-foot steel post I buried ten feet deep. After what I did to her, I slept chained for years until I was sure I wasn’t going to shift in the middle of the night.

“Yeah, that’s the idea,” Killian says, lifting himself up onto the high branch of a black walnut tree. He sits there bare-assed, swinging his legs like a pup. He’s expecting a good show.

“Your wolf knows we’re just sparring, right?” the kid asks me as he squares up.

“Not at all.” My wolf wants to kill everyone. He has no concept of “sparring.”

The kid grins like I made a joke. When I don’t blink, it fades into a look of dawning horror. He flicks a glance up at Killian in the tree. “Why do I have to do this, Alpha?”

“Because you’ve got the yips. That’s why you can’t win a reconciliation match. You know the best thing to do for the yips?”

The kid shakes his head as he gets into his fighting stance.

“You scare ’em away. Like hiccups.” Killian gives me the nod.

I focus on the tight hold I keep on the wolf every second of every minute of every hour of every day, and like Atlas when he handed over the world, I exhale in profound relief as I release the reins. Always ready, the mad wolf inside me launches himself into the world. He bursts through my bones and muscle in an explosion of blood and fur.

The second before I recede entirely, Killian calls down from his branch, smug, eyes sparkling, “Can you smell Mari on the kid? I can. I can smell her all over him.”

My roar is submerged in my wolf’s.

The kid’s scream hovers in the air as his wolf takes his skin and immediately turns tail.

My wolf is quicker. He slams into the smaller wolf’s side, sending him cartwheeling across the clearing. The end of the chain jerks my wolf short, so he leaps and snarls, snapping at the air. The kid’s wolf wisely stays outside the radius of the chain, whining, head bowed. A bared neck does nothing to appease my wolf. To him, it’s an instigation.

She bared her neck that night. Not intentionally. I’d touched one of her curls, and I guess I’d tugged her head to the side. My wolf saw the pale skin, the pulse flickering under her ear, and he wanted to rip out her throat. He threw the image into my mind, rendered in perfect detail complete with the scent of copper and the sound of blood gushing from a gaping wound.

My wolf rages at the evening sky, fighting to get free, to kill the defenseless wolf trembling yards from us, lowering his chest to the ground in a hopeless bid to appease it.

“Come on! Get back in there.” Killian chucks a black walnut at the kid’s wolf. “He’s chained up for fuck’s sake.”

The kid’s wolf scoots backward in the dirt.

My wolf lunges for him, choking himself off with the collar. The force of each leap causes the chain to swing him backward through the air. He slams into the ground and

bounds back onto his feet, over and over, because my wolf is unrelenting. He's a curse.

If the kid's wolf comes within range, he doesn't have a chance in hell. I reach out to see if there's a possibility of taking our skin back, but there's no handhold, no crack. My wolf won't be satisfied until he bathes in blood.

There's nothing I can do but wait for an opening.

Killian leaps down from the tree. "Come on. Where are your balls?" He nudges the kid's rump with his foot. The kid's wolf flattens himself even closer to the ground.

Killian sighs and a wicked grin breaks across his face. He strides to the exact point in space where the chain jerks my wolf back and stares unblinking into his slavering, snapping fangs.

He ignores my wolf's mad howls, speaking low and clear. "I bet you hate that this kid gets to hang out with your mate every day, talking with her, laughing with her. *Smelling* her. I bet it fucking kills you. And I bet this wolf here doesn't care about anything but ripping the kid's throat out. And you know what else I bet?"

Killian's smirk widens and his eyes gleam. "I bet if you killed this kid, little Mari would cry. So I bet when I set you free—I bet that you're not gonna kill him. What do you think?"

I roar, but it's nothing against my wolf's raging howls.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Killian winks and feints left in human form. My wolf lunges. Killian flipshifts and darts past him, shifting again, and with a shout, rips the post from the ground and hoists it like a javelin across the clearing. My wolf is flung through the air behind it, dragged by the collar, and slams into the ground, tangled in the chain.

Killian bounds for his tree and scrambles back up to perch on his branch.

As my wolf struggles to free himself from the snarled chain, I fight him, haul back on the reins, but there are no reins, not when he's wearing our skin. There's only his will

versus mine, and he's subject to no constraint, no compunction, no qualms.

He wants to hack the small, quivering male wolf huddled in terror across the yard into pieces. He wants to tear down the world. Break everything breakable. Rip the civilized veil off the world until it's as blood-soaked and chaotic as it really is, underneath.

Mari will cry.

It isn't a plea. I'm not trying to reason with him. I gave up on that decades ago. It's a passing thought. Nothing more.

But, for the first time since he was dragged out of me at age nine, he doesn't launch himself into action. He kicks the last loop of chain from his foreleg. He's free, but he doesn't race for the kid's wolf. He stalks toward him, unhurried, until he's looming above the quaking mound of fur.

My wolf sniffs at the piss-scented ball. The fear is as thick as soup, and for a second, I can feel the rage threaten to overtake him again, but for the first time, he shakes himself off.

What is he thinking?

I can't tell. I've never been able to.

He snaps his teeth one last time at the kid, and as if he's lost interest, he strolls away, plops his ass down, and thwaps his tail against the ground. I don't waste a second seizing our skin. He doesn't fight me.

I hop to my feet, striding towards Killian, adrenaline pumping.

"Come down here so I can beat your ass," I holler up at him. His expression is stuck between smug and boggled.

"I told you," he says as he swings himself down.

"You couldn't have known." My blood is roaring in my ears.

He barks a laugh. "To be honest, I didn't, but I figured the odds were better than even."

The kid has taken his skin back, and he's rising on wobbling legs, pale as a ghost.

"I could've killed him." I slam Killian in the shoulder with an open palm. He shoves me back. Our eyes meet, and there's a second when we decide whether we want to keep it going while our wolves posture by rattling our chests, but I guess neither of us are that invested.

We turn away from each other. I walk it off, hands on my hips, while Killian snags the kid around the neck and ruffles his hair. Lucan tries to yank himself loose to no avail.

"You almost got me killed," he says, incredulous.

Killian chuckles like he's been given a compliment. "You just stared death in the face, kid. I bet those yips are gone. Ivo and Tye don't look so scary now, eh?"

Lucan looks completely unimpressed by his logic, which amuses Killian even more.

"Come on." He claps the kid on the back. "Let's go back to camp and get a soak and a steam. Get that fear stink off your skin."

I'm still reeling from what happened, so they're almost to the trail before I remember that I've got something for her. For Mari. Once I light the bog worm carcass up, I'm going to be stuck here for the next day or so making sure it doesn't start a forest fire.

"Hold up," I call to Killian. "I've got something for her." She'll need something for later this week.

I trot to the fridge I've got behind the shelter. It feels wasteful to have a generator just for a fridge, but I need a place to store the meat before I can get it down to camp. I have plans to eventually wire the structure in the trees for electricity, but that's in the future.

"Here." I toss a few wrapped steaks to Killian. "Tell her if she doesn't cook it today she should freeze it. It's on its third day."

Killian nods, but Lucan's checking out the package, a strange expression on his still-blانched face. "You're the one who gives Mari meat?"

I tense, but I nod.

"I can put it in the freezer for you," the kid offers.

"Killian can give it to her." I can hear my wolf in my voice. I guess I might not want the kid dead, but I don't have to like the fact that he spends part of his days with her.

"It's just that Mari's not around today, right? She's gone to town."

I stalk forward, closing the space between us in seconds. The kid freezes, fear blowing out his pupils.

"What is she doing in town?" I ask, the question barely audible above my wolf's growling. "It's not market day."

"W-well, I mean, she's got a d-date, right?"

Every fight instinct inside me triggers. My chest swells. Blood rushes to my extremities. My wolf's growls rattle my voice box. I dig my sprung claws into the meat of my palms.

I've gone over this with myself a thousand times. If she wants another male, I have no right to do shit about it. She deserves to be happy. I have no claim. My gut plummets, and in this instant, I recognize how many times I've lied to myself.

Killian asks the question since I can't speak above the snarling in my throat. "Who is she meeting?"

"S-some guy from Salt Mountain. They're just getting coffee. Her girls are going with her."

I stand in place, fighting for breath, to beat back the blind aggression seizing my brain. I've told myself what I'll do when this happens. Nothing. I'll do nothing.

I'm going to puke.

"What guy from Salt Mountain?" Killian presses.

"I don't remember—" Lucan's eyes dart from me to Killian to the trail back to camp. His wolf is telling him to run.

“Shit. Lenox! That’s his name. Lenox.” Lucan exhales a sigh in relief.

I’ve told myself that if she finds a male, I’ll let her be. I won’t stop someone else from giving her what I can’t. I’ll deal with it. Deal with this feeling the same as I would deal with getting my leg ripped off.

“We need to go to town now,” Killian meets my eyes.

I clench my fists, desperately summoning the strength to make myself tell him to leave her be, let her be happy.

“It’s b-broad daylight,” Lucan stammers on like he’s trying to cover for her. “Females are allowed to go to town together now.”

Killian’s eyes darken, and he holds my gaze as he says, “They are, man, but we’ve got a problem. I know every male from Salt Mountain from the fights. I’m telling you—there’s no Lenox.”

My restraint explodes like a grenade. As I bolt for my four-wheeler, my wolf’s howls echo mine, and for once, we’re both calling for the same blood. We’re both tearing in the same direction, and I don’t have the bandwidth to consider whether the greater danger to Mari is this male or my wolf. I can only pray and shout down the bond—

Hold on.

I’m coming.

Lenox is even cuter in person. He's wearing a snap cap in a herringbone pattern. It's not a fedora, but it's adorable. He looks like a newsie. He's waiting at the coffee shop counter for our orders. We both got tea.

I'm so glad I didn't chicken out. I almost did a half dozen times. When I woke up this morning, I had trouble getting out of bed, like back when Darragh had just—nope. No. I'm not thinking about that today.

Anyway, I was in the process of hyping myself enough to throw back the covers when Kennedy and Annie burst in with breakfast in bed. It was a bowl of cereal, but it's the thought that counts. I got myself into the shower, and then I freaked out again when I decided I didn't want to wear the dress I bought online for the occasion.

It was a mauve organza mini-dress with an oversized bow neck, and I loved how it's super cute and feminine even though it reveals absolutely zero chest. But this morning, my legs felt too exposed, so of course, I was going to call the whole thing off until Annie dragged me to her closet, which is nothing but long hems and high necklines.

There, behind all her kindergarten teacher jumpers, was the perfect dress. It's soft pink, midi length, with a dragon fly pattern and long sheer mesh sleeves, a V in the back, and a black ribbon that ties in a bow to keep the shoulders up. Somehow, it's still casual and picnic-in-a-wildflower-field-y.

The day was saved—until I lost it again because of a rogue curl which, despite the mousse, kept popping up like an antenna. Then I dropped my makeup bag, and my mascara rolled under the bathroom vanity, and I burst into tears. I sat on the edge of the bathtub, weeping, and Kennedy came in and sat beside me, slinging an arm over my shoulder.

“Good thing you didn’t put the mascara on *before* you started crying,” she pointed out helpfully.

I pulled it together, but for the entire drive into town, I felt *wrong*, and that just made me mad. My wolf is flat out on strike. She’s skulking somewhere in the depths of our psyche. All I can feel is her censure like an ambient funk stinking up my mind. I guess she wants us to be alone forever.

Everyone deserves a chance at happiness. Even if this doesn’t go anywhere, I won’t regret it. I just wish I *felt* better about it.

I surreptitiously check Lenox out as he leans against the cream and sugar counter, texting on his phone. He’s tall and fit, like most shifters, but he also has a sense of fashion. He’s wearing a crisp white collared shirt, a denim jacket, and he’s *not* wearing athletic shorts. His brown pants have a zipper, a button, and a nice leather belt. Already, he outclasses every male in Quarry Pack.

The barista calls out “Len,” and he carries our drinks out to the café table on the sidewalk where I’m staking out our seats. The coffee shop is crowded with the lunchtime crowd, but we’re the only shifters. I kind of like the feeling. No one knows my backstory. No one’s sneaking glances or judging. I’m just a girl on a date.

It’s normal. Natural. I’m not betraying anyone. I have no reason to feel guilty.

I take a deep breath. This is no big deal.

Kennedy and Annie are around, visiting the shops, giving me space, but they’re close in case I need to bail. My stomach hasn’t felt right all day, and when I saw Lenox, the feeling got

worse. It's butterflies. First date jitters. It's nothing to worry about. This is fine. Everything is fine.

Lenox slides into the chair across from me, but because the table's so small, his knees bump mine. I instinctively tuck my legs back as far as they'll go under the chair.

"Sorry," he says with a rueful smile.

"No worries." I force my legs to stretch back out where they were and take the cup he offers, wrapping my hands around it, enjoying the warmth. It's hardly fall, the equinox was only last week, but there's a nip in the air that has chilled the tips of my fingers. "Thank you."

"It's nothing." He nods at my hands. "You cold?"

"Not much." I sip my tea, and my cheeks flush as I try to think of something to say. Why is talking so hard? It was so easy over the phone. I couldn't smell him, then. His scent is—different.

Different isn't bad. It's just different. He smells like machinery. Metals. Objectively, it's a good smell, but it reminds me of the abandoned groundskeeper's shed across from our cabin, of the rusty equipment shrouded in cobwebs. That's not his fault.

For his part, Lenox doesn't seem fazed by my awkwardness. He calmly stirs his tea, and when a cloud passes overhead, he tugs the brim of his hat down. He took the seat with the sun in his eyes.

"I like your hat," I say. Oh, lord. That sounded so loud and random. A blush creeps up my neck, across my face, to the tip of my ears.

"Yeah? Thanks." He smiles. He has a nice smile. Good, even teeth. That's not a given with shifters from Salt Mountain. They don't do as well on the shifter circuit as our males do, and they aren't into human business like Moon Lake.

Lenox takes the hat and reaches across the table to set it on my head. "Looks better on you."

“Yeah?” I tilt it to a jaunty angle even though it’s unsettling to have something touching me that was just on his head. “You think it suits me?”

“Anything would suit you.” For a second, he leans in, and without meaning to, I jerk back, pressing my spine into the wrought iron chair.

He smiles wryly and shifts back in his chair. “You’re jumpy.”

I lift a shoulder. No sense in denying it. “It’s just jitters. I’ve never, uh, done this before.”

“This is your first cup of tea? Seriously?” He’s teasing, and it’s silly, but I appreciate it. The tightness in my chest loosens a little.

“First human date,” I say.

“Should I have waited for a full moon run and cut you off from the pack?”

That’s how it’s usually done between shifters who get with people besides their mates. It always reminded me of a lion picking off the weakest gazelle in the herd, but I guess when you do it that way, there’s the fiction that your animal is calling the shots. Maybe that’s easier than making the decision yourself. Maybe then there isn’t the gross taste of wrongness in your mouth that the taste of tea can’t begin to cover.

“No, this is nice.” I force a smile. It isn’t Lenox’s fault that I’m ambivalent about it all.

A man bumps the back of Lenox’s chair, and he deftly lifts his cup so nothing spills. “It’s crowded here,” he says.

“Yeah.” The scent of human is thick. My wolf’s head must be stuck deep in a hole somewhere because it should be driving her nuts.

“How would you like to go for your first human walk?”

“How’s it different from a shifter walk?” I say with a little glow of accomplishment. It was a rough start, but I’m totally holding up my end of the conversation now.

“Slower,” he says, his smile creasing the corner of his cool gray eyes. “Definitely slower.”

I told Kennedy and Annie that I’d be at the coffee shop, but I don’t see the harm in a stroll, as the humans say. I’ve got my phone, and I’m sure we won’t go that far.

“Okay,” I say.

Lenox stands and offers me his elbow like in a movie. I take it, and he leads me down the sidewalk. He points to the green. “Is that where the farmers’ market is?”

“Yeah. On weekends.”

“And you sell your candles there?”

“Yeah. Along with other stuff. Mushrooms, honey, herbs.”

“Sweet,” he says. “Your alpha must be really liberated. Even Moon Lake doesn’t do business in human territory.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it liberated. More the opposite, really.” I grin to myself. Killian will do basically anything Una wants. It’s enough to make anyone jealous, but no one deserves a male who lives and breathes for her more than Una. Una risked her life for me when I was a baby, and she’s worked her fingers to the bone to make a better life for us than she had coming up.

Sometimes, when I’m fighting the insomnia hard, and I can’t beat back the black thoughts, I wonder if I have the right to feel so wronged by Darragh Ryan. What have I done to deserve a happily ever after, after all? Fate is capricious. I got what I got. What right do I have to feel all tragic about it?

I need to take a page out of Una’s book and make my own way.

I firm my tentative grip on Lenox’s arm. We stroll past storefronts, sipping our drinks, pointing out things in the windows. The blue sky is high above and crystal clear, and a brisk breeze is nipping at my cheeks. I’m still wearing Lenox’s hat, and for a second, I feel my steps grow lighter.

I could be any human girl on a date with a handsome boy, nervous about whether he’ll kiss her at the end of the evening,

nothing lodged in her chest, intrusive and inseverable, withered like a mangled limb.

No. I'm not thinking about that. I force myself to smile up at Lenox, and he grins down at me. His eyes are a smooth, light gray. They're really hard to read, but his face is wide open. He's the opposite of tormented and hostile.

"Can we turn here?" he asks when we get to the intersection with the Chapel Mews. There's nothing down the cobblestoned alley, just the back of the buildings on High Street, but it's a cut through to the park.

"Okay."

We turn, and my stomach churns. No. It's not churning, it's fluttering. This is anticipation.

The mews are only a block long, but it's private. It's cool enough outside that none of the windows are open.

Lenox straightens the elbow I was holding onto so my arm falls to my side. He grabs my hand. My heart jerks. No, it *flips*.

Is he going to kiss me?

My heartrate kicks up a notch, and my stomach knots. I curl my free hand into a ball. I'm not freaking out. I'm excited.

I want him to kiss me. I've never kissed anyone, and I've been mated for four years, and that's bullshit. My eyes prickle. I blink them quickly.

Lenox slows and draws me in front of him so we're facing each other. Oh, crap. When I was blinking, did it look like I was batting my eyelashes? Does that actually work?

He gently unclenches the fingers of my other hand and takes it in his. His palms are smooth and cool. He gazes down at me. "You're really special, Mari," he says.

I swallow.

"You're hot as shit, too," he says. "Fantastic tits." He smiles wider. I smile back out of habit, but something in my

chest feels weird. I don't think I've heard him cuss before. And "tits?"

"Sorry that this had to happen," he says. "It's nothing personal."

What?

His grip slides to my wrists, clamping down until the bones grind, and he spins me so my arms are crossed over my chest, and I'm caught, and I can't breathe. The cobblestones rattle. Tires squeal. A white van screeches to a halt in front of us. The sliding door flies open.

I kick and lose my footing. I'm dangling forward like a ragdoll, trapped by my own crossed arms. My wolf springs awake, but she's disoriented, slow in stumbling to her feet. I scream as I'm thrown with full force into the van, my shoulder slamming into the metal interior wall, inertia sending my body airborne as the van speeds forward. My head slams into the rear doors, and everything goes black.



WHEN I WAKE UP, I'm being hoisted out of the dark van into the bright daylight, rough hands seizing my arms and legs. A piercing pain spears my temples.

I squeeze my eyes shut and go limp. My wolf is awake, too, but she's cowering in a corner, fur damp with fear sweat. My heart bangs so loud it's almost impossible to think over it.

What do I do?

I fight. Shift.

Come on. Take our skin.

My wolf stumbles a few steps forward on wobbling legs.

That's right. Come on. We need the fangs and claws.

She totters to a stop, nose quivering, whining low in her throat. She won't come any further. She senses something I haven't. I force my eyes to open, force my lungs to draw air.

What does she sense that I don't?

The tang of carbon steels burns my nose. Guns. The males hauling me across a clearing toward a tree line are armed. They have holsters at their sides and strapped to their ankles. They're dressed in all black, black skull caps, black boots.

And they're human.

I squint and try to force my blurry eyes to focus. There are six of them that I can see. Four carrying me, one loaded down with gear, and a gray-haired man leading the way. I draw in another breath. Lenox is here, too, following behind. We're heading away from the scent of asphalt and gasoline fumes into a wood. It doesn't smell like Quarry Pack territory.

How long was I out?

What are they going to do with me?

They're going to kill me.

My panic rises to a sudden, crashing crescendo, and spurred by instinct, I fight, buck, flail, but every time I manage to free a leg or an arm, the gray-haired man is there, and he has a stick, a taser, and he jabs me in my side. The pain *sears*. I jerk and spasm, my wolf screaming, but I keep fighting, keep thrashing, because I don't want to die.

The gray-haired man jolts me again and again until my muscles seize, and then they won't work. My tongue is bleeding. Only two men are dragging me by my armpits now, through underbrush, over exposed roots. Thorns and low branches catch and tear my dress and my skin. My shoes are gone.

"Think she's finally had enough?" one of the men says, chuckling.

"Why doesn't she shift?" the gray-haired man asks over his shoulder. He's taken the lead again.

"Couldn't say," Lenox answers. "Her wolf might be too intimidated. She says it's small." I told him that in confidence, late one night over video chat. He asked to see pics, but I didn't have any.

“Smart wolf. She should be scared.” The gray-haired man smirks.

She’s terrified. She’s paralyzed on her feet, pupils blown, fur bristled, trembling. She’s not hiding, though. She’s waiting for an opening. We’re of one mind. We’re getting out of this.

We come to a small clearing, no more than a quarter mile from where we started, and the men drop me. Instantly, I curl into a ball, my knees to my chest, arms tucked to my sides where the taser singed holes in my dress. I let my curls fall in my face and watch the men from slitted eyes.

Without speaking, they fan out in a circle. Two of them disappear into the surrounding trees, moving in a sure and practiced way, like they’ve done this before. My blood runs cold. Are they the human government? Am I being kidnapped for some kind of unsanctioned experiments? There have always been rumors, scary stories told around the bonfire after full moon runs.

But then why are we stopping in the middle of the woods?

Lenox and the gray-haired man squat beside me. He’s older—in his late fifties—and he’s got a close-cropped gray beard and a thick gold ring with a red stone. He shoves my curls out of my face. I jerk my head away. He laughs.

“She’s pretty.”

Lenox grunts. He’s squatting on the ground, rummaging in a rucksack.

“Did you fuck her?” the gray-haired man asks him while smirking at me.

Lenox flashes him an irritated glance. “No. You don’t want to mess with the bond,” he says. “It defeats the purpose.”

What is he talking about?

Lenox finally stops rifling through his bag and takes out a metal thermos. He shakes it a few times, and then he carefully pours a measure into the cup that doubles as a lid.

“Sit up, Mari,” he says.

I curl myself into a tighter ball.

The gray-haired man jabs the taser under my rib and fires. My neck snaps back from the jolt. Hot liquid trickles down my inner thighs. I mash my lips shut against a whimper of pain.

“Sit up,” Lenox says again, voice calm, almost unconcerned.

The gray-haired man spears his fingers into my hair, his nails scraping my scalp, and he drags me upward, hard. It hurts. I scramble to my knees, grappling for his wrists. He lets go, and I drop back to my butt, panting.

“Just do what I say.” Lenox hands me the cup. I take it automatically. “Drink.”

It smells like herbs. Like Abertha’s cottage. My eyes prickle. Ice seeps into my chest. “Wh-what is it?”

“It’ll calm you down.” Lenox urges the cup toward my mouth.

“I don’t want it.”

The gray-haired man raises his taser. I startle. The drink sloshes over the side of the cup.

“Careful, Smith,” Lenox hisses. That’s the gray-haired man’s name. Smith.

“Drink,” Lenox repeats in a sterner voice. It’s hard to believe that he ever looked harmless. It’s like he turned himself off, and his gray eyes are a one-way mirror, and whatever’s behind them isn’t really shifter at all.

I clamp my lips tight together.

“Miller. Jones. Hold her,” Lenox says. The men move so quickly, my terror-numbed brain doesn’t have time to react. They seize my arms and legs.

“Open her mouth.” Smith tucks his taser under his armpit, kneels in front of me, digs his nails into my cheeks, and cracks my jaw open. His fingers taste like tobacco.

“Tilt her head back,” Lenox orders.

Smith forces my neck to bend backwards until my spine screams. Inside, my wolf shakes and whines.

The sound escapes my throat, and Smith sneers. “That’s right. Open up and drink. If you spit it out, I’m going to stick my cock in after to keep it down.” He nods at Lenox.

Lenox pours the contents of the cup down my throat. I gag, but before I can spew it up, Smith shoves my jaw shut and holds my mouth closed in a vise-like grip. I hack and choke, but I have no choice but to swallow. The drink is cold and bitter. It burns my nose when it comes back up.

For no reason, Smith violently jerks my head from side to side a few times before he shoves me back to the ground by my face and dusts his hands off. “Phase two?” he says to Lenox.

Lenox nods. “String her up,” he says and busies himself reorganizing his rucksack.

Again, Miller and Jones follow orders quickly like they’ve done this before. Like they’re trained. The other two men stand in position at the perimeter of the clearing, rifles aimed into the woods.

With arms hooked under my armpits, Miller and Jones drag me under a sycamore tree. They buckle a collar around my neck and restraints around my wrists, jerking the straps so tight that it almost crushes my throat and cuts off the feeling to my hands.

Then they run chains through the attached loops, hoist the chains over a branch and pull until I’m stretched almost past my full height. My arms are wrenched from my shoulder sockets, the collar biting into the underside of my jaw. I can’t breathe unless I balance on my toes, and if I sway, if I stumble, my air is cut off. I fight a wave of panic, struggling with everything in me to keep my balance.

I need my wolf.

Come. Shift. You have fangs. Claws. Please.

She flashes a picture into my brain—a small white wolf dangling from a collar, lifeless in mid-air, its neck snapped.

My toes dig into the dirt. The foul drink sloshes in my stomach, scoring my esophagus. I'm not going to die. I'm not going to give in to the fear.

Lenox and Smith come to stand in front of me, arms crossed, faces undisturbed. Clinical.

Smith raises the taser. Without thinking, I jerk my torso away and lose my footing. I gag as my toes scramble for purchase, and by the time I steady myself, blood is roaring in my ears. The men watch me impassively, Smith's thin lips curving in amusement.

"You don't like choking out, do you?" he asks. "You're going to do what we say, aren't you?"

I can't speak. I can't nod. I can only balance and gasp down as much air as I can.

Smith sneers. He wants a response. He wants me to bare my neck to him.

Lenox cuts in, cool and even. "Of course she is." He reaches up and grabs me by the chin, bracing me in place, allowing me to suck down a decent breath. "Mari? You listening to me?" He squeezes my jaw. My wild gaze drops to his empty eyes. "Good girl," he says. "Now, I want you to call your mate."

My mate? Darragh? How?

"Yank his leash," Lenox says as if he can read my mind. "Or—what do your people call it?" He snaps his finger. "Pull the reins? Is that how Quarry Pack puts it?"

I don't know what he means.

"Call him through the bond," Lenox spells out.

My head draws back of its own accord, away from his unyielding grasp. The leather cuts into my neck, but I can't loosen his grip. I can feel my eyeballs bulging. They want Darragh? That's what this is about?

"Now, please," Lenox says.

Smith takes a step toward me. Lenox drops my chin. My full weight goes to my numb toes again, and my legs quake as I desperately try not to move, not to stumble.

I don't know how to call Darragh, and I can't tell Lenox. The collar is too tight, and I don't have enough breath. Lenox stares at my face, blinking like an owl, like he knows I can't speak, and he doesn't care. I close my eyes.

Ringing his bell. That's what our older mated couples call it.

I never have. Obviously. I don't acknowledge that the bond exists. It was a lot of work to ignore it at first, but like a car alarm or a chirping fire detector, eventually, if it doesn't drive you crazy, you tune it out.

I haven't let myself notice it in years. I scurry past it like it's a graveyard.

I can't do what he's asking. I don't know how, and if I could, would I really call Darragh here? Could I do that?

Would he even come?

With every second that passes, my lungs get tighter and tighter. My head feels overstuffed, like it's close to bursting. How long before I pass out? Before I strangle myself on this collar?

I don't want to die.

I can ring his bell. A distant memory flickers at the corner of my fuzzy brain. The lodge at dinnertime. Darragh by the dais. Me by the kitchen. My fingers tangling in a bright, glowing brand-new bond.

I can do this. I can do whatever I have to do to survive.

And if he doesn't come—

I have to try. I close my eyes, and for the first time in four years, I search for the bond. At first, all I hear is the pounding of my blood in my ears and the wild thumping of my heart. A flare of panic rises in my chest. Maybe it's gone, atrophied, shriveled into nothing.

My wolf whines. She's inched closer to the border between us, worrying at something. She's got something. She wants me to check it out.

I'm scared.

Even though I can't get enough air, and my sides are on fire, and my shoulder bones are being slowly ripped from their sockets by the weight of my body, I'm scared to look inside.

What if it isn't there anymore?

My wolf glances over her shoulder at me and whines again. I have no other choice. I let my mind go there, where she wants me to look. To the thing in my chest.

And as soon as I do, it's like a veil falls and it's *there*, and it's *loud*, much louder than a car alarm. It's blaring like an air raid siren. I scramble back, shove it away, turn my face. I don't understand. How can *that* exist inside me?

I try to deafen myself, at least enough so I can think clearly, but now that it's in my head, I can't turn it down.

What do I do now?

I don't know. It's a torrent flowing into and out of my chest, the kind of flood that sweeps away river banks and turns houses into matchsticks. How do I call him? I'm so small in the face of it.

I reach out, tentative, trying to summon up the genetic wisdom to do this thing, but no instinctual understanding appears. So I say in my mind—

Darragh.

The bond roars, but other than that—nothing.

I teeter on my toes, the collar cutting into my neck. This time I don't mean to, the name forms itself.

Darragh.

My fear swells, tears burning my eyes, and I know that I'm calling into the void, that I'm alone, and no one is coming, but I can't stop crying in silence.

Darragh.

I don't want to die.

Eventually, I'm too tired to call anymore. I go limp in my chains, my head lolling forward. I can't keep my neck straight. There's nothing left in me. He's not there. He's not coming.

Lenox's gaze rakes my face, and the corner of his lip rises. "Begin phase three," he says.

He reaches up and loosens the collar a notch. Air rushes into my lungs, and I sway.

"Let her down a few inches," he says to Miller. The chain is lowered enough so that my soles can touch the ground. The evening is cooling off. The sun is low in the west and shadows are lengthening. As air rushes into my lungs, I begin to notice details.

The foothills rise in the northeast. We must be in human territory. Except for Lenox, I don't scent any shifters, not present now or here recently. The two humans who went into the woods are close, but silent. Occasionally, I can scent them on the wind. What are they doing? Are they lookouts?

What happens to me now? How long before they give up on Darragh coming for me? What do they do to me then?

Whatever was in the drink, it isn't calming me. Every time I push my panic down, it rears back up, as loud as the bond I can't tune out. The drink is doing strange things to my stomach, though. I'm not quite nauseous, but my belly doesn't feel right. It's squirmy.

As the wind picks up, goosebumps rise on my arms, although I'm not cold. I'm clammy.

Lenox ignores me to go mess around with his gear. Miller and Jones cluster by the trunk of the tree I'm hanging from, muttering in undertones. I strain to overhear. They're talking about basketball. Eventually, they grow quiet and still, waiting for whatever is going to happen.

Smith leans against an opposite tree and stares at me. The other two men keep their position on the perimeter, watching

the woods, but they give themselves occasional breaks, lowering their rifles every few minutes to stretch and roll out their shoulders.

“How much longer?” Smith asks Lenox, breaking the silence.

Lenox checks his watch. Earlier, I’d admired it. It has little dials inside the face for time zones and day of the week and date. I thought it looked steampunk, but it isn’t. It’s military grade.

How long before they figure out that Darragh isn’t coming?

“Can’t be much longer,” Lenox says.

“And you’re sure he’ll come alone?” Smith asks him, but he’s still staring at me with a speculative gleam in his eyes.

“He won’t come alone,” Lenox answers. “But he’ll get here first. That’s why this needs to go down fast. No room for error. Secure the subject, and then we’re out.”

Without taking his gaze off me, Smith presses a button on the radio that was clipped to his shoulder. “Williams, you’re in position?”

The radio crackles. “In position.”

“Johnson?”

“In position.”

Smith grunts and stalks toward me. I recognize his expression. The Byrnes and their crew looked at females like that before Killian Kelly killed them all. That’s how Lochlan Byrne would look when he tried to crowd me into a corner at the lodge, like a sly predator, like I’m nothing more than prey. My stomach knots.

Smith slips a utility knife from a sheath on his belt. He smirks.

“Hold still,” he says to me and grabs my dress. He tears it apart from the holes burned by the taser, knocking my body from side to side, straining my arms where they stretch,

prickling with pins and needles, above my head. When he can't tear it anymore, he slips the cold steel under the fabric and cuts the rest of it off me.

"Is that necessary?" Lenox asks without looking up from what he's doing.

"Oh, I think this'll make a nice little diversion for our mad wolf." Smith scrapes the tip of his knife down my front, between my bared breasts, over the burns along my ribs. I swallow a whimper. He smiles. His teeth are too square. They can't be real.

He backs up, re-sheathing his knife with deliberate slowness. A memory niggles in the back of my brain.

When I was little, before Declan Kelly choked on a chicken bone and Killian became alpha, there were lots of males in the pack like Smith, always smirking, lounging around with their legs sprawled and in the way, making the females scurry past them, threatening disgusting things, their teeth bared in fake smiles.

Those males are all gone now.

I try to turn the memory into bravery, but the human males are staring at me now, eyes raking from my breasts to the curls between my legs. Even the ones watching the woods cast leers at me over their shoulders.

I squeeze my thighs together, but I can't hide my breasts, and my nipples have puckered in the cold breeze. The shame is instinctual. I blink tears out of my eyes. I need to be able to see. There's a tension in the air. Something is about to happen, and I'm not going to die.

My wolf's tail is still, and her head is high. She's watching with wide eyes, too, as she waits. In the sky high above this wood, a bird of prey swoops, a black outline against the gold and denim blue above the hills where the sun is setting. The insects fall silent.

That's how we know.

Someone is here.

“Steady,” Smith whispers into his radio.

When it happens, it happens in an instant. In a soundless blur, Darragh bursts into the clearing, past the men with rifles, claws extending from his ruptured knuckles, white fangs descended from his mouth like wicked blades, sprinting straight for me, bare-chested in jeans.

He came.

The instant that he sees me, his gaze locks onto mine, his flaming golden eyes speaking, reaching, but I don’t know the words, and I can’t reach back, and in that moment, a surge of strength cannons into my chest, and I fight, tearing at my restraints, jerking and flailing.

When Darragh reaches Miller and Jones, he roars, and his claws slice through the thick black vests, through the skin and muscle, their screams cut off abruptly as their throats are ripped from their necks. Their bodies crumple to the ground.

I bow my back, throwing my weight against the chains.

Darragh’s eyes find mine again. I *feel* them.

“Now,” Lenox says from a distance.

A quick succession of snicks erupts from the surrounding woods. Darragh throws his arms wide to block my body from whatever is coming. In slow motion, between one step and the next, he falters. The black of his pupils explode, obliterating all but the thinnest sliver of gold.

“Mari,” he mouths as he sways, and then with a terrible thud, he slams face first into the ground like a felled oak. Ten darts with red feathers stick out of his back. He lies there motionless except for the rise and fall of his breath.

Smith comes to loom over him, and with an air gun that came from nowhere, rapidly empties another several darts into his back. He grins up at me. “That should do the job,” he says. And then he levels the gun at me and shoots.

I glance down. A fluffy red feathered dart sticks out of my breast. Once again, the world goes black.

When I come to, I'm lying naked on cold steel in a metal box. It's moving. I push to sit up, and my stomach lurches. Every bone in my body aches, especially my skull. My head throbs. My wolf is awake, but she's confused and scared, too.

I go to push my curls out of my face, and my arm is caught short. There's a leather strap around my right wrist and another around my waist, cinched so painfully tight that the skin of my belly folds over it. I lift my arm, rattling the chain hooked to the strap. It's attached to the side wall.

Panic crushes my lungs. I'm trapped.

"We're in a cargo container." It's Darragh. His voice is low. Careful. He's close. There. At the other end of the box.

I try to focus, scrubbing my eyes with my free hand. It's dim in here, but I can make him out. He's on his knees. There are metal bands around both of his wrists and another around his neck. Chains lead to the wall behind him. He's shirtless, wearing familiar faded blue jeans with threadbare patches on the thigh.

"Are those the same jeans?" I ask without thinking. It's a crazy question, but my brain is only creaking into gear.

He glances at his lap. "The same as what?"

"As you wore before."

He furrows his brow. "I've got, like, seven or eight pairs of them."

“Why do you have so many?” It’s an inane thing to ask, but it’s a handhold to climb out of the panic.

“I don’t know. They fit. I buy as many as they’ve got in stock. When they fit.” He coughs awkwardly.

I nod. That makes sense. Nothing else does, but he’s here, and he’s talking to me. I’m not alone, and his voice isn’t scared—it’s deliberately calm—and the fear isn’t screaming so loud.

My wolf trots closer to the border between us. Closer to *him*. He’s older, stronger, fierce. He’ll protect us. She’s certain. Her blind faith tricks my pounding heart into calming.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“A cargo container,” he says again. “They’re taking us somewhere.”

I glance around the box. The walls and top are corrugated. Small holes in the roof let in gray light. It’s either evening or daybreak. Either way, I’ve been out a while. I squint. The holes are in an arching spray pattern. A shiver chases down my spine. “Those are bullet holes.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Where are they taking us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why?” My eyes search for his, and unbidden, the past wells up, as ugly and raw as if it was yesterday. My voice cracking as he stood in the path in front of my cabin, and I asked him why. Darragh staring at me, cold and silent, without a glimmer of compassion. For a second, I think I’m not strong enough. I’m going to fall apart. But I don’t.

I try to shove the memory down, but for the first time in a long time, I can’t. It lingers, out of place.

He must see the distress on my face because he lifts his gaze to the wall above my head like it embarrasses him.

He clears his throat. “I don’t know, but they’re going to try to hurt us.”

My wolf's whimper escapes the back of my throat. Darragh's wolf rumbles his chest in reply. My wolf's ears prick, and after listening to the rumble for a few long moments, she settles back down, gingerly lowering herself onto her back haunches.

Darragh seems to force his eyes to lower to mine again. He holds my gaze like it's hard to do. "When I say run, you run. Okay? When I say fight, fight. Shift and fight, okay?"

Fight? How? I've never fought in my life, not even playing around as a pup. I jerk with all my strength at the chain with my wrist. It's welded to a plate screwed into the wall. I jerk it again, harder. The leather bites into my wrist. I throw my body into it. There's no give.

"Hey, hey, stop that now." There's an edge of command in his voice, and it sparks my temper at the same time it soothes the momentary panic that had regained a foothold in my woolly brain.

He goes on, "They'll have to move us. When they unchain us to do it, as soon as you're loose, shift and run. If you can't run, fight. Claws and fangs. Go for their faces. Then their necks."

I half listen as I try to dig my fingers into the skin under the cuff. It's tight, but if I shifted, I could slip it off. Wolf paws are thinner than human hands. I don't know about the band around my waist, though. I don't think it'd go over my wolf's haunches or her shoulders. It's cinched so tight that it's displacing my guts, making the roiling in my stomach worse.

"I think I'm going to puke," I mutter.

"Okay," he says, his face grim. "Do what you have to do."

For some reason, permission takes the urgency away. "They made me drink something," I tell him, remembering with dawning horror.

His jaw tightens. "What?"

"I don't know. It tasted weird."

"Weird how?"

“Weird like *weird*.” My voice rises, edged with hysteria. I feel like a pup confessing a mistake and doing it badly.

“Okay,” he says again, reassuringly.

“It’s not okay.” I got us into this. I did everything the bad guys told me to do because I was afraid, and now I’m afraid, *and* I feel like the world’s biggest coward. Something felt wrong, but I ignored it, because ever since Darragh mated me, *everything* has felt wrong.

He opens his mouth, and I swear he’s about to say “okay” again, but he sees my face and catches himself. After a few moments, he clears his throat and says, “I’m going to try something again. Don’t be scared.”

Is he nuts? I’m already scared.

He seems to be waiting for a response, some kind of reassurance, so I nod. I need to get a grip.

He draws in a deep breath, and then, with a grunt and a throaty growl, he heaves at his restraints. His eyes are screwed shut, his face and pecs flushing as his neck veins pop, his biceps and thick thighs bulging as he bares his gritted teeth. His fangs have receded, but not all the way. The tips of his canines are still sharp.

Something swirls low in my belly, like fear, but not fear. I swallow a whimper. I’m not sure if it came from me or my wolf.

He’s the strongest male I’ve ever seen up close. Killian is known as the best fighter in the five packs, and he might be, but he’s not like this. He doesn’t have this primal energy, this ferocity.

Darragh fights like a wild animal, his muscles convulsing, the bands cutting into his flesh, fat drops of blood beading on his skin and splattering to the metal floor, but the chains don’t give. I notice that he’s shoeless, and there are shackles around his ankles, too.

Finally, with a tortured groan, he exhales, and the chains clatter to the floor. He drags in a ragged breath.

He bows his head, as if in shame, and my stupid heart twinges for him. I distract myself by examining his restraints, to see if there's any obvious point of weakness.

Why are his metal while mine are leather?

Hold up.

Metal means wiggle room.

If he shifts, he could be able to slip free. His wolf is huge, but his human form is huge, too, and so are his restraints. His neck is definitely as thick as a wolf's skull. My heart speeds faster.

"You can shift," I say. "You can squeeze loose." Why didn't he already?

He tenses. When he glances up at me from under his thick lashes, that strange not-quite-fear feeling swirls in my belly again.

"I can't," he says, his expression suddenly guarded.

"Why not?" I ask, but the second I do, I realize why. His wolf hates me. He'd kill me. I'd be a sitting duck.

"He doesn't hate you. He—he's just not right in the head."

I blink. Did I say that out loud? I replay the last few seconds. No, I definitely didn't. "Can you read my mind? Through the bond?" Please, Lord, no.

"No."

I expect him to say something else—to reassure me about reading my mind or his wolf—but he doesn't. He shakes out his arms and rolls his shoulders, clanking his chains.

"I'm going to try again," he says and repeats, "Don't be afraid."

Then he grunts, and his wolf bays, the echoes ricocheting from wall to wall as he fights the chains again, every muscle carved and shaking with the strain. I hold my breath until he gives up with a growl. For a moment, he bows forward, but then he straightens his spine, like he's being watched, and he doesn't want to betray a second of weakness.

I guess he is being watched. I'm riveted by his every move. The shock and whatever drug they shot me up with has worn off enough, and reality is hitting me hard—I'm fucked. *We're* fucked.

Darragh is the only thing between me and them, my only chance of getting out of this alive. The thought should push me closer to the edge, but it doesn't. Maybe because my wolf isn't freaking out. She's watchful, too, or more accurately, she's *enthralled* by the male tied up in front of her. She thinks he's the most fascinating thing she's ever seen.

"Is there any give at all?" I ask.

He grimaces. "No. It's welded to the wall."

"What are we going to do?"

"Like I said—eventually, they'll let us go, and when they do, you're going to run. I'm going to fight."

My blood runs cold. He's so calm and certain.

"Are you going to shift?" I ask.

"When you're far enough away."

"How far is that?"

His nostrils flare, and a tic above his left jaw pulses. "I won't let the wolf get you."

"He got me before." I don't know why I'm bringing it up now, here.

"I wasn't on guard that night."

"You figured you'd do the old nail and bail, and I wouldn't come bother you. Right." I have no idea where this is coming from. I've thought it a hundred times, but I've never, not once, imagined saying it to his face.

And now isn't the time or place. I could have confronted him a hundred times in the past four years, but I didn't.

Why didn't I? Did I need him chained up to get the courage to ask?

Darragh sinks back, propping his butt on his heels. His hair is a mess, hanging in his eyes. There's blood smeared across his pecs. It doesn't smell like his.

"I won't let the wolf hurt you," he says.

"What's wrong with him?" My cheeks heat. It feels weird to ask. I'm not a nosy person by nature, but don't I have the right to know? If this is it—if we die in this box—I want to understand.

"He's fucked up."

"Fucked up how?" I push.

He sighs, but he answers me. "He thinks everyone's the enemy."

"Why is he like that?" I'm half expecting him to shrug or blank me out, so when he answers, it takes me a second to process.

"He had to come before his time. It fucked up the way he sees things." His body's tense, his face hard as he explains. He looks like he's been called on the carpet in front of the elders.

"What made him come too soon?"

"You don't need to know that," he growls.

I duck my head, instinct driving me to appease the stronger male I've angered. I make myself lift my chin. No. I deserve to know. I tell him so.

"Yes, I do," I say, willing my voice to be strong, not wounded, knowing as the first words tremble out that I'm failing. "I-I should know why I can't have a mate."

He lifts his head and frowns at the bullet holes in the top of the box. The light coming in is brighter now. It must be morning.

I wait.

"I don't want you to know," he finally says, meeting my eyes again. "I don't want it in your head." His voice doesn't falter.

I curl my hands into fists, not because I want to fight, but because I'm desperate to hold tight to the last shred of myself that knows how to not care, but I think I lost it when I called for him—I think it's already gone.

"I don't want what happened between us in my head," I say quietly, head bent. "That was the worst night of my life."

"I— If I'd been awake, it never would have happened."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about earlier. In the cabin."

For a moment, he doesn't say anything. The blood drains from his face. His eyes go black. His hands curl into fists.

I figure he'll stop talking now. Males don't acknowledge criticism. Not in Quarry Pack.

I lower myself to my knees, tucking my tailbone to hide my pussy as best I can and wrapping an arm across my breasts. I rest my bare butt on my feet, careful so it doesn't graze the floor. The box isn't dirty exactly, but it's a used cargo container. There's a grime to the cold metal.

When he speaks, his voice is hard, but underneath, there's a note that pierces my skin, punctures my heart. "I hurt you," he says. "I tried not to, but I did anyway. I've gone over it a thousand times in my head—what I should have done."

"What should you have done?"

"Told you why I had to leave."

"Why didn't you?"

"I couldn't. I couldn't tell you that I'm not strong enough." His words burn like antiseptic. They might not be meant to hurt, but they do.

"So why say anything now?" I press my lips together so they don't tremble, but I can feel my chin wobble.

"Because if this—" He stops, draws in a breath, and begins again. "If I don't make it, I want you to know—" He coughs, and in a jagged, deep voice that scrapes softly across my skin, he says, "I want you to know that you are the most beautiful

thing in the world, and even if I couldn't have you, and even though I fucked it up, you were the best thing that ever happened to me."

He coughs again in the suddenly silent container.

I realize my cheeks are wet. I don't know what to say. To think. "I-I d-don't want us to die."

"You're going to be okay, Mari. Watch for the opening, and when you get it, shift and run. I'll take care of them. I think we're heading north. Run south as fast as you can. Don't stop. Okay?"

I wasn't listening. I'm fighting back tears, and somehow in the past few minutes, as the sun's risen high enough to shoot beams through the bullet holes, it's gotten almost unbearably warm in here.

I twist my hair and hold it up on top of my head to get some air on the back of my neck.

From his end of the box, Darragh makes a strangled sound.

Oh. My boobs. I'm flashing him. I drop my arm and cover myself again. I still want to know why his wolf attacked me, but I feel like the moment has passed, and we're somehow in a new place.

Darragh clears his throat. "I'm going to try again."

I nod. My cheeks blaze.

He grunts, and the steel creaks, but in the end, the metal links clatter when he drops them, and when I peek back up at him, he's panting and flushed and still chained to the wall. On his knees. My blood heats. I can't bear to kneel here, doing nothing, afraid.

I need to move.

"I'll try," I say, collecting myself. I'm not strong when compared to the other females in the pack, but I do still have shifter strength, and leather's weaker than metal. Why did this just occur to me?

I take a deep breath, and I try to do the same thing Darragh did, straining every muscle, and I pull, scraping the skin off my wrist when the strap won't go over the bone, digging the band around my waist even deeper into my guts until it has to be nearly touching my spine.

I strain until I break out in a clammy sweat.

“Mari,” Darragh says gently. “That’s enough.”

I exhale and slump back to sit on my heels, rotating my sore wrist. As the burst of adrenaline ebbs, a bleakness rushes in to fill the space. “What if the plan is to leave us here? What if there is no opening?”

Darragh doesn't answer. “We'll give it a minute and try again,” he says. “Okay?”

I force myself to beat the hopelessness back. That's not me. I keep going. I get back up. I'm not going to die in this box. That's not going to happen.

“Mari?” Darragh says my name again. It sounds strange on his lips.

“Gimme a second.” I suck down a big breath. “Okay. On the count of three.”

His forehead furrows. I don't think he expected me to take the lead.

“On the count of three, we both pull. Okay?” I feel better being the boss.

“Okay.” The corner of his mouth turns up. It makes my belly flutter.

I ignore it and hold up my fingers. “One. Two. Three.”

With a low growl, I pull at my chains again, as hard as I can. He follows my lead and pulls, too. I try my damndest to last as long as he does, but there's no way. I collapse minutes before he does.

For what feels like the next hour, as the container zooms along and the light coming through the bullet holes gets brighter, we strain at our bonds. I wait until the burn in my

muscles eases enough to try again, and then I count to three, and we both pull.

He focuses on me while he fights the chains. I stare at the ceiling or the oil stain on the floor by his knees and flush bright red.

In between tries, we're quiet. I fight the rising queasiness in my belly while he darts glances at me from under his lashes. I want the sloshing and cramping to be motion sickness. It could be. I've never traveled this long and fast in a vehicle before.

But I don't think it is. I think that potion is doing something to me. My heart is beating faster, even when I'm not fighting the chains, and my brain is fuzzing up. I've felt this before, but it didn't come on this quickly.

Please, Fate, no. It can't be.

I want this ride to stop, and I'm scared shitless that it will. And it's so damn *hot* in here. My skin is covered with a light sheen of sweat, and my curls are sticking to my neck, which I hate. I think I'm breathing faster, too, even when I'm not fighting the chains. I touch my cheeks. They're burning up.

"Do you think I'm having a panic attack?" I ask.

Darragh blinks. He's been examining his shackles, so for a second, the question throws him.

"What?" he kind of croaks.

"Humans have panic attacks. They hyperventilate. Do you think that can happen to shifters?"

He frowns. "I don't know much about humans."

"I'm asking about shifters. Do you think *we* can have panic attacks?" I press my palm to my chest. My heart thumps against it—hard.

"I don't know much about shifters, either." His mouth curves in a wry smile, and as quick as it appears, it's gone. "You don't have to panic. We have a plan."

"What if the plan fails?"

“It won’t.” His mouth turns down now, and the brow furrow is back in full effect. He’s got the furrowing-est brow of any male I know. He might not have the gravitas and slowness of an elder, but he’s got the forehead wrinkle down.

He gives me a long, searching stare, and then, with the air of a male who’s come to a momentous decision, and who is also about to walk himself off the edge of a cliff, he firms his jaw and says, “I like action-adventure books.”

I blink. My head tilts. A damp curl falls and sticks to my cheek. I shove it away.

“You do?” I don’t know what else to say. Where did this come from?

He nods.

“Um.” What is the next logical thing to say? “Who do you like to read?”

He looks surprised, like he’s said what he meant to say, and he wasn’t expecting a follow up. After a few seconds of blank-eyed blinking, he says, “Jack London. Robert Louis Stevenson. Uh. Jules Verne. Alexandre Dumas.”

Except for Jack London, who they made us read at Moon Lake school, I’ve never heard of these guys.

I have no idea why we’re talking about books, but it’s something to think about besides our ugly past and being poisoned and panic attacks, so I grab on with both hands. “What did he write?”

“Who? Dumas?”

“Sure.”

“Uh. *The Three Musketeers*. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. *The Man in the Iron Mask*.”

“What’s it about?”

“*The Man in the Iron Mask*?”

“Yeah.” I don’t care. I can just breathe better when he’s talking. His voice is nice. Deep and gruff and rumbly and not scared.

“A man. In, uh, an iron mask. He’s in a prison. He’s the king’s twin. Louis the Fourteenth. But in real life, he was a valet. Maybe. No one knows.”

He’s speaking complete gibberish, but the thudding in my chest gets less frantic. A scowl flashes across his face—like he knows he’s not making any sense. He goes to run a hand through his hair, but he’s caught short by the chains. The hinge of his jaw clamps tight.

“What’s a valet?” I don’t want him to stop talking.

“A male who serves a rich man.”

“Like a butler?” I’ve seen them on TV.

“Yeah.” Darragh looks like he wants to keep talking, but it doesn’t seem like he knows what to say next. After a few seconds, he lets his mouth shut, and he frowns at the floor between us.

I remember him saying something about how he doesn’t know how to talk.

Except for dropping by with meat, he’s never around camp. He doesn’t hang around at the lodge or go on the full moon runs. He lives alone in that shack. I bet he doesn’t talk much. Except to Abertha.

A hot, itchy prickling crawls across my skin. Darragh’s eyes dart to my face, concerned. How does he know? It must be the bond. I’m so used to ignoring it now that I do it out of habit.

A sharp curiosity replaces the crawly feeling. Back in the clearing, when they made me call him, everything was happening so quickly, and I was terrified and in pain. All I remember now about the bond is the loudness and that surge of energy.

Is the bond always like that?

I shouldn’t want to know. Nothing good can come from poking it. But Darragh’s over there, chained up and at a loss for words, and even though he’s always intimidating, he’s not exactly scary in this moment.

It feels like a risk I could take.

I focus inside—my wolf stirring with her own curiosity—and the second that I pay attention, the bond is there—bam—strong and firm and entrenched like an anchor. A sudden rush of fear thrums in my veins again.

Has it been like this since the beginning? Or has it been growing while I turned a blind eye? It's not withered, not deformed. It's—strong.

How have I been walking around this whole time, ignoring it? It's like I've had a big-ass jungle vine growing out of my chest, and I've just been shambling around, dragging it along, oblivious.

The corners of Darragh's eyes crease as he watches me. He knows I'm tuning in—because he's been tuned in the whole time. I don't know how I know, but I do.

Is the bond so strong because of him? Because he's been tending to it all along?

How does a bond work? Is it like a vine, like an appendage, like a current? They call it all kinds of things, but there was never a class in school, and if it's something your dad tells you, mine never said anything to me but “hush” and “shut the door behind you.”

I could ask Darragh. For a second, I'm tempted, but then another wave of heat erupts in my chest, and I lose my nerve.

“Tell me about the other books,” I say instead.

“The other books?”

I nod. And as I tuck my knees to my chest and wind my free arm around my knees, breathing through the stuffiness that's getting more unbearable by the minute, I listen to the most garbled plot summaries I've ever heard in my entire life.

“Okay. See, there's this one with a man and his nephew. And they journey to the center of the earth. And there are dinosaurs. And a tornado? Shit—” The brow furrows again. “It might have been a tsunami. Something like that.”

“A tornado in the center of the earth?”

“Yeah.”

“How was there enough air down there for a tornado?”

“There were caverns.”

“How do the men get down there?”

“Uh, they rappelled.”

“Okay.” I’m starting to feel woozy.

“And at the end, they’re spit out of Stromboli.”

“Like the food?”

“No, it was a volcano. Its name was Stromboli.”

“What’s the book called?”

“*Journey to the Center of the Earth.*”

“Makes sense.”

It’s the strangest conversation I’ve ever had, but I’m calming down again, and I’m not thinking about the spike in my temperature or the massive *thing* connecting this male to me. This complete stranger.

“Tell me about another one,” I ask.

He looks surprised that I asked—heck, I am too—but he starts on another without hesitation.

“So there’s this doctor. His name is Jekyll. He drinks a serum so he can do evil things.”

“He wants to do evil things?”

“Yeah. And he turns into a man named Hyde. He, uh, tramples a girl.”

“Tramples? Like a horse?”

“Yeah. And then he gets caught, more or less, and he transforms in front of this guy Lanyon who dies from shock.”

“An electrical shock?”

“No, an, um, emotional shock.”

That story reminds me of the taser, and I crane my neck to check out the burns on my sides. The pain has dulled, but if I wasn't in emotional shock myself, it'd probably hurt like a bitch. Darragh catches the direction I'm looking, and for a moment, fury darkens his face.

"It doesn't hurt much," I tell him. I'm not sure why I feel the urge to reassure him. I just do. He's angry, and even though it doesn't scare me, I don't like it.

"I'll tear those fuckers apart," he says. Other males would say it with their chest, but Darragh mutters it to the floor, furious and grim and utterly sincere, and then he spends the next five minutes straining against his bonds without me counting to three.

I don't understand him.

In my head, I've built him up to be the world's biggest asshole. He rejected me because he's a tormented loner or whatever, which holds no water with me because my father tried to kill me when I was a baby, and my mother chose the freezing river over her only child. *I'm* tormented, and *I* didn't give up on him without a second thought.

Or maybe it was because his wolf wants me dead, but who knows if that's the real reason? He didn't even bother telling me *why*. Clearly, he can be around people sometimes. But with me, he wasn't even going to try.

So he's a fucked-up asshole, right? Another Quarry Pack tough guy who's too broken to function.

And underneath all these assumptions is the idea that I wasn't worth the effort to him. Just like I wasn't worth it to my mom.

That he *could* have made it work if he'd tried.

But this male in chains across from me—he came for me. He put his body between them and me and flung his arms wide, even though he must have known he was outgunned and outnumbered. And now he's making himself summarize classics to keep me calm.

"Why are we talking about books?"

The brow furrows again. “You asked me. Remember? When you came to my place that day. You asked me what books I like.”

“I did?”

“Yeah.”

I don’t remember. All I can clearly recall is the embarrassment and the sight of his back as he led me all those miles back to camp. That’s what that afternoon was for me—humiliation and rejection.

What was it like for him?

Why didn’t I ever wonder before?

I shift my butt to rest on the other calf. “So what’s the name of the story with the guy who wants to do evil things?” I ask.

“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” The corner of his lips twitch.

Mine soften. “Makes sense.”

“Want to hear about *Ivanhoe*?” he asks, and from his tone, it’s clear that he’s not excited about the prospect of telling me, but he wants to do it. He wants to comfort me.

I can’t untangle it all—the fear, the strange swirling in my belly, the heat in this box, the way his gruff voice makes me feel small and safe, even though I know I’m not.

Darragh is sweaty, too. He’s not dripping with it, but there’s a sheen on his chest that makes the ridges of his abs glimmer. They catch my eye, and I know I shouldn’t stare, but it doesn’t feel like staring. It feels like admiring. The heat in here itself is beginning to feel less oppressive and more sedative.

I slip into a dull, drowsy haze while Darragh tells me about a knight who is disinherited because he supports the wrong king or loves the wrong woman—or both—it’s unclear, and how the knight won tournaments in a secret disguise, and he’s

wounded, and another woman comes into it and is mistaken for the first woman...

I don't know how the story could make sense even if Darragh is telling it right, but I'm only paying the barest bit of attention. I'm watching the sunlight coming through the bullet holes play on his sweat-slick muscles. His bare chest is different from the males who strut around camp. His skin is tanner, more weathered, like it's spent more time in the elements, like it's tougher.

Darragh gestures to show how the knight pierces another with a lance, and his biceps and forearms flex. I love his forearms. There's a spasm low in my belly.

The air rushes from my lungs. Shit. This is heat. I'm in heat.

I can't pretend it's not. It's heat, and it's not coming on, it's here.

I tense. I was resting to the side on a hip, arm draped across my boobs, and I straighten, tucking my legs tight to my chest, clutching my shins tight.

Darragh immediately tenses, too, searching for whatever changed, but nothing has. We're still speeding somewhere, stuck in a box. I'm just royally screwed.

"What's wrong?" Darragh asks.

I look down at my pale knees. There's a dirt smudge on the right one.

I can't bring myself to say it. Why can't he smell it? He sure knew last time. He skulked around camp until it took over, and I didn't have a choice anymore. Until I lost control. My nose burns with gathering tears.

I promised myself that I'd never let it happen again.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't something I could make promises about, though, didn't I? I could only pray, and what good does that do? My temples start to ache.

"Mari?" Darragh says my name so low, I almost can't hear it over the dull roar of the road.

I'm about to open my mouth, to say what, I don't know, but the truck suddenly shifts and slows. The road becomes bumpier. I yank the chain taut to keep myself from sliding across the floor.

Darragh springs into action, flexing and straining at the chains, an unearthly growl pouring from his throat and echoing off the walls. Nothing gives. He doesn't stop. He grunts and bears down until his arms give out, and then after a series of quick pants, he grits his teeth and starts again.

My heart begins to pound again.

By the time we roll to a halt, he's bright red and dripping. His fangs have completely descended, and his claws have sprung. The gold of his wolf eyes has eaten his pupils.

I'm scared.

Two doors slam in quick succession. Behind me, there's a scraping of metal on metal. They're sliding the bars that secure the doors.

"The second you get an opening, shift and run," Darragh growls at me under his breath. "Say it—shift and run."

"Shift and run," I repeat, yanking helplessly at the cuff around my wrist, knowing I can't do either.

She's in heat. They must have put something in the shit they made her drink to bring it on. It came on too suddenly. Last time, it was—

Well, it was gradual. I had days to fuck myself up in the head about it.

Her scent floods my senses, and it's all I can do to think. The fuckers have finally stopped the truck, and they're opening the door. We've been traveling north for hours—I'd say mostly at highway speeds. We could have gone three hundred, four hundred miles easily. That puts us well beyond all pack territories.

No matter that they've got a shifter working with them, this is human shit. They want us alive for something, and that means they're going to move us. There will be an opportunity. Mari will shift and run, and I'll let out the wolf.

She better fucking shift and run.

I broadcast the words through the bond, but like always, she's ignoring it. When it comes to the bond, somehow she figured out how to stick her fingers in her ears and sing la, la, la. I never learned that trick, but I guess I never wanted to, either.

I can't reinforce the message by giving her the eye. She's got her neck twisted as far as it'll go to watch the doors creak open. She's a pale female, but she's blanched fish belly white right now. Her fear pounds fists against my chest where the bond flows in.

The humans will die for this. I'm going to rend their limbs from their bodies with my bare hands and let my wolf shit on the piles of their bones. The shifter, Lenox, I'm going to kill him last. He's going to suffer.

I don't know how to make her less scared if she won't tune into the bond. I don't know how to make her less scared, period, and to be honest, fear is the reasonable reaction to the situation. As long as I can't risk shifting, we're out armed.

I grit my teeth as the barrel of a rifle appears in the opening. It remains trained on me while the cocky elder one, Smith, hoists himself into the container. Lenox follows him, and the man with the rifle brings up the rear.

Mari scuttles as far from them as her chains allow, plastering her back to the side wall. They don't seem worried about her. All three only have eyes for me. Good.

I get why the humans underestimate her—they believe their females to be physically weaker—but Lenox has no excuse. Even the weakest shifter female is magnitudes faster and stronger than the most capable human male.

Mari doesn't have an opening in this moment, though. She could take Smith out if she struck quickly, but the man with the rifle is out of range, and even a male shifter as puny as Lenox could take her. Mari isn't the smallest in the pack, but she might be the most delicate. She's like a fucking dandelion fluff.

My shredded muscles swell, half in response to the threat, half in response to the sweet scent wafting toward me on the breeze coming through the open doors. I don't know how, but even when she's not in heat, Mari's scent makes me think of pretty shit—like rainbows and snowflakes and butterflies. It's insane, but hell, so am I.

Smith looks from me to her and smirks like he knows something. I'm going to rip his smug face off his skull and shove it through his eye holes. He leers at Mari as she tries to hide her breasts and her pussy while at the same time pressing closer against the wall.

There's a stabbing pain in my guts. I'm going to kill them slowly while she watches.

Unless she doesn't want to.

She probably wouldn't want to.

Fuck.

My wolf lets out a pissed off rumble. He's being weird. He's been hanging back, super-attuned to the fact that we're in a hairy situation, aware that I'm going to call him out at the first opportunity, and he's ready for it, but for once, he's not chomping at the bit. It's disorienting. I'm used to having to hold him back with the full force of my will.

"So, Mr. Ryan, did you enjoy your little road trip?" Smith finally speaks after doing the silent sneering thing to try to mess with our heads and assert his dominance.

It's always embarrassing when humans try to assert dominance over shifters. They misunderstand the concept on a fundamental level. It's not about who has the advantage in any given moment. That's luck or Fate, maybe skill or intelligence.

Dominance is something else. It's why even with me chained to a wall in a metal box, all three males' heart rates increased the second they stepped in here, even though they're armed. It's why even though I'm terrified that Mari's going to get hurt, I'm not the least bit scared of any of them on an individual level. They just haven't earned it.

"I hope you appreciated the company we *secured* for you." Smith leers at Mari.

What's wrong with this guy? He's a fucking creep.

"She confided in Lenox here that you fucked her and dumped her. Ouch. That's gotta hurt." He tuts and shoots Mari a look of feigned sympathy. She clenches her small fists and drops her head. Red seeps across her chest and up her neck.

I jerk at my chains. *Look over here, motherfucker. Get your eyes off her.*

"Is that true, Mr. Ryan? You did the old catch and release?" He arches an eyebrow.

There's a knot in my throat. My wolf growls in my chest.

"I mean, I get it. I do," Smith goes on when I don't otherwise answer him. "A female might be a decent lay, but that doesn't mean you necessarily want them around the house, yapping in your ear all the time, right?"

I feel a sharp pain through the bond. At the beginning, that's how it felt pretty much all the time, unless Mari was asleep, and she didn't sleep much. I fucking hate the feeling, but I don't turn away from it. I never have.

Smith cocks his head. "No comment?" He shrugs and eyes Mari again, his gaze lingering between her legs.

I clench my teeth so hard that a fang nicks the inside of my lower lip.

"Is she in heat?" he asks over his shoulder.

"Yes," Lenox answers.

"How can you tell?"

"The look she gives me." As he says it, Mari glances up at him from staring daggers at the floor, and her face scrunches like she's sucking a lemon.

Smith snickers. "I think you've definitely blown your chance, Len. She hates you."

Lenox's bland face doesn't show the least concern. "My scent is registering to her as noxious. Like fecal matter or spoiled meat. It's a physiological reaction among shifters to encourage pair bonding between fated mates."

"So, you're saying that you literally smell like shit to her?" Smith barks a laugh. "Now I've heard it all."

Lenox is unruffled. I want to know where he comes from. I bet he's Moon Lake, using words like "physiological reaction."

Smith slaps his hands together. "Excellent. How long before Conan over there goes into rut?"

My gut cramps. That's not happening. Hell, no.

“Once she’s in full heat? I’d give it twelve hours minimum. Maybe forty-eight on the outside.” Lenox taps the wall. “There’s minimal ventilation in here. That should speed things up.”

Smith frowns. “The last clients fly in tomorrow evening. They’re not going to want to wait to hunt.”

“I told you to hold off a day or two so we could better gauge the, uh, female’s readiness.” Lenox averts his eyes from Mari like the subject offends his delicate sensibilities.

When I’m done with him, when he’s learned to cry and pray again, I’m going to cut his tongue out, shove it down his throat, hold his nose and clamp my hand over his mouth, and suffocate him with it.

Smith takes a few steps further into the box, closer to Mari. My whole body primes.

“You think you can hold out four whole days, Conan?” He grabs Mari’s wrist and drags her arm to her side, baring her breasts. She tenses all over, but she lets him. Why? She’s stronger than he is. I want her to fight, but I also want her to do whatever she has to do to keep herself safe. Acid surges up my throat.

Standing here, powerless, I know what hell is.

I try to hold her eyes, but she bows her head, and before I can stop it, my gaze falls to her breasts, just for a moment, a split second, and fuck, they’re beautiful, round and heavy and tipped with big, puckered, pouty, brownish-red nipples. Saliva floods my mouth and shame throttles my throat. What am I doing?

I force my focus back to her face. She’s looking up again, but not at me. She’s staring at the man. No. She’s staring at the rifle pointed at me.

That’s why she’s letting Smith touch her. She’s scared. For me?

I growl—not my wolf—*me*. She doesn’t have to give a shit about me. That’s not how this works. That’s not the tradeoff. I leave her alone, and she doesn’t suffer. That’s the deal I made

with Fate or God or whatever calls the shots in this fucked-up world.

I yank violently at the chains to distract the males.

“So you’re going to hunt me? That’s the plan? Hunt a wolf in rut?” The last thing I want to do is dialogue with these motherfuckers, but I need Mari to stop looking at that gun. I need her to stop feeling the way she’s feeling.

Smith grins. “Well, not me, personally. I don’t have the two million buy in. Yet. I will after this, but for this round, I’m serving in an exclusively logistical support role.”

Two million?

Smith draws his lips back in the approximation of a smile, revealing his bleached Chiclet teeth. He looks like that crazy actor with the face you want to punch.

“I know, right? Two million.” He whistles. “That’s a lot of dough, but you’ve developed quite a reputation. Haunt of the Hills? The Mercenary?”

“I’m not a mercenary.” That’s human bullshit.

“You just roam shifter territories, taking out ferals for the fun of it?” He says it like he can’t believe it, but with the notable exception of Moon Lake, the packs don’t care about getting rich. And I sure don’t do it because it’s fun. It’s nerve-racking as shit being away from Quarry Pack camp.

It’s worse, though, trying to sleep knowing that shit is out there, and Mari weighs maybe a hundred-and-seventy-pounds max, and she’s got the self-preservation instincts of a drunk bunny rabbit. No, a drunk bunny rabbit is canner. What’s the kind of animal with such undeveloped defense mechanisms that it would charge alone into a dark shack with a notorious mad wolf in it?

I don’t think an animal capable of that type of recklessness has made it this far through evolution.

I go to run my hand through my hair and the chain catches me short. There will be time for losing my shit about Mari going on a coffee date with the villain from “The Most

Dangerous Game” after I’ve killed them all. That’s the only possible outcome of this.

Emboldened by the gun, Smith saunters further into the container and squats to size me up. He probably intended to put us on eye level, but he misgauged. I’m on my knees, and still, I’m sneering down at him.

He’s the kind of arrogant that’ll run his mouth as he smirks up into the face of his own death.

“Do you even realize that you took out two of our clients?” he asks. “Up past the bogs, on the east ridge. About a year back.”

I remember. Two male human hunters who reeked of human female terror and stale sex. They’d been passed out drunk with a poached grizzly cub strung up from a nearby tree. I was tracking a moon mad wolf who’d been harassing the bus taking pups from Salt Mountain to the school at Moon Lake. I figured since I was passing through, I’d do the world a favor and snap their necks in their sleep.

“There’s been a bounty on you ever since, and we’re going to collect. A quarter million plus the commission on the hunt. Your pelt is gonna buy me a house in Sarasota and a bay boat.” Smith grins, and this time, it’s genuine.

“A male in rut isn’t much of a challenge,” I say, watching Lenox’s expression. He knows a male in that condition is no more capable of strategy or restraint than a rabid animal. It’d be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Has he tried to put one over on the humans? Maybe I can play them against each other.

Lenox doesn’t blink though. “We’re trying something different this time.”

Smith’s eyes gleam. “This isn’t a boring track and kill. No guns. No tranqs. Dogs, blades, and traps only. Man versus nature. Nothing in between a male in rut and his female in heat except the cunning and skill of the most consummate sportsmen on the planet, and the winner gets to fuck the Haunt

of the Hill's mate on his own bloody pelt." Smith fakes a shiver of delight. "It's going to be legendary."

Mari's fear bursts through the bond, setting my teeth on edge.

Don't be afraid. It's going to be okay.

The fear keeps coming. She's not listening. She never does.

What do I do? Her fear makes my brain roar.

Please.

It doesn't work. Mari's chest rises and falls even quicker. Her round blue eyes pool with tears. I can't stop myself. I throw myself against the chains, half choking myself out. Mari cries out. I stop mid-thing, and with every ounce of my will, I force myself to be still.

Fuck.

"Hey, save some for the main event," Smith tuts. "We can't have you going down in the first round, can we?" He lets out a sigh of self-satisfaction. "It's going to be epic. The vig off the side bets alone." Smith kisses his fingers. "What are you gonna do with your cut, Lenox?"

Lenox doesn't answer. He's squinting at Mari like the psychopathic squirrel in his head has gotten ahold of a nut. I jerk my chains again, try to get his focus off her, but he's not distracted.

"There's about a half cup of the drink left. The witch told the female I bought it from to drink half before the full moon and the rest after."

"And?"

"Well, we're not trying to get a mated female pregnant here, are we?"

Smith's eyes light up. "Is it safe to give her the rest?"

"It probably won't kill her."

"Do it."

Lenox jumps out of the back of the truck. My brain explodes in a red haze. I fight the chains for real, my wolf's howls tearing up my throat, the metal scoring my wrists and ankles down to the bone, blood splatting to the metal floor.

Mari's terrified, and I can't do anything but howl and fight as her fear plunges into my chest like a jagged blade.

I watch Lenox climb back in with the two other men, watch the humans pin Mari's arms behind her back, watch her struggle until Smith takes out the taser from his belt, watch her freeze and then tremble violently as Lenox grips her jaw and forces it open. I watch her throat gulp as she chokes it down, tears streaming down her cheeks. I watch him clamp her mouth shut until he's satisfied that she's swallowed.

And my wolf's cries shake the walls, scraping up my throat like ragged claws.

It does nothing to know that I'll lay their corpses at her feet. I seize the bond, and with everything in me, I try to take the pain and fear, but I can't—I never could—so I rage and tear myself apart while I hold my wolf back with every fiber of my being, and for the hundredth time in my ill-fated life, I curse the Fate that made me.

MARI

Darragh's doing worse than I am.

After Lenox emptied the thermos into my mouth, he and the others left, locking the door behind them. I fell to my knees and barfed. Some came back up, but not as much as he made me swallow, and whatever it is, it's working.

I'm flushing in waves like I did the first time I went into heat, right before I lost control, and my brain is getting that cotton feeling. But Darragh—he's definitely worse off.

There's something wrong with his eyes. They're flat, except for the gold rings, which glow like embers. He's mangled his wrists and ankles to the point that I see flashes of white bone. He's heaving and boring a hole in the door with his eyes like he's going to charge it at any minute, and he's been like this since they left.

I'm too much of a coward to really listen to the bond, but I give it a kind of blind prod and pull back quickly. *It's okay. They're gone.*

No change. If anything, he tenses up even more. I try again.

I'm okay.

He focuses his blank gaze on me. I give him a nod. He blinks like he's coming out of a trance, scanning the box and taking in the little puddle of liquid on the ground before settling on me.

He screws his mouth up. Immediately, my hackles rise.

“There was nothing I could do,” I say. They had guns and tasers, and I’m not a mad wolf impervious to fear and pain.

“I know.” The brow furrows as he searches my face. What’s he looking for? “You did right. You didn’t have an opening.”

“I know,” I throw back, but my heart warms a smidgen. I did do right. I know that, but still—I don’t get told it often. Or ever. No one in my life is the “provides approval” type.

A wave of heat hits me. I whine low in my throat and muss with my curls, trying to get them to stop clinging to the back of my neck.

“It’s coming on faster now,” he observes. I can’t deny it.

I’m not bothering to cover myself as I pace the few feet that the chains allow me to move. I don’t feel exposed. I feel hot and cranky, my mind flooding with a sense of urgency intertwined with impending doom. And just like last time, Darragh is starting to feel like he’s not a stranger anymore. An instinct deep inside me trusts him implicitly, which unsettles the hell out of me.

“I don’t understand their plan.” I really don’t—I was too freaked out to follow what Smith was saying—but I bring it up to change the subject, to buy some time while the clock is inexorably running out.

Darragh’s thrown by the change of subject for a second, but he recovers quickly. “They’re talking about a reverse hunt. Instead of coming after me, they want to use you as bait, so I’ll go to them. The challenge is in the defense, not the offense.”

“Why?”

He lifts a tense shoulder. “Humans. They always pervert natural shit.”

“They want you in rut.” My heartbeat picks up as I inch closer to the sword hanging over my head.

He grunts.

“Why?”

“For the thrill, I guess. They can’t have a clear concept of what a male in rut is like.”

My throat tightens. “What’s it like?”

“I only know what I’ve heard.”

“What have you heard?” When I still went to school at Moon Lake, there were rumors about a female named Izzy. She ended up hooked up to a machine in their infirmary, and her mate was exiled to Salt Mountain.

“I won’t hurt you, Mari,” he says, dodging the question.

“Tell me.”

“No. You don’t need that kind of shit in your head.” He sets his jaw.

I step toward him, scratching my free forearm. The heat is making my skin itch. “Why do you keep thinking you get to decide what’s in my head?”

He shuffles backward a bit. “I don’t think that.”

“I’ve dealt with a lot of shit in my life, you know.”

“I know,” he says, and I can tell he does. In pack life, everyone knows everything. It’s a minor miracle that we were able to keep the fact that we’re mates on the down-low.

“I’ve gone through as much as you have, I bet.” I’m not even sure where I’m going with this or why I’m trying to argue with him. I’ve just got this energy in me, and my inhibitions are falling away by the minute.

He doesn’t answer. He looks grim, like he wishes he were somewhere else. Well, me, too.

“Nothing gives you the right to decide things for me,” I press.

“I’m not trying to do that.”

“You literally just did. *You don’t need that shit in your head.* That was you. Your words.” It feels strange to flat out needle an alpha, but I’m fully invested, and every time he doesn’t rise to the bait, I want to fight him even worse.

It must be the heat. I'm nice and good and easy to be around. That's my thing. *As sweet as she looks.*

"You're treating me like a pup," I throw at him.

Darragh braces his shoulders. "I'm not telling you shit that'll upset you more."

"Not telling me upsets me more."

He hikes his chin and tries to fold his arms, but the chains won't let him. He growls in exasperation and compresses his lips.

I ball my fists. My heart knocks around in my chest, and I don't feel nice or good or easy or sweet. I feel like I want to fight him.

I feel like for four years, I've accepted it—the rejection, the not knowing why, the guilt meat, which was just a constant reopening of the wound, the knowledge that I'll never have a male and a family and a home of my own, and there's nothing I can do about it. The fucking *helplessness*.

"I hate you," I spit at him.

He doesn't even have the grace to look down. He holds my gaze, muscles taut, like he's stoically taking whatever blows I choose to dish out, and that's not fair—*he's* the one who dealt the blows. He's the bad guy.

"You *owe* me." The question just flies out of my mouth. "Why wouldn't you mate me, Darragh? Because your wolf is crazy, so you won't even try? Or was it because—" The rest of the sentence gets stuck in my throat.

Was it because I'm not worth the trouble?

I *know* it's a garbage thought, that it's my past and my baggage talking, but still, the old question hovers in the back of my mind—am I just fundamentally not enough?

For a long moment, I think he's not going to answer. Hot tears well in my eyes. I scrub them away with my itchy, pink forearm.

I'm so stupid. What does it matter now?

“My wolf is crazy,” he finally says, slowly, deliberately. “I’d say he’s feral, except he can reason. Strategize. He’s smart, but he wants to destroy everything. Most of the time, I can keep him inside, but once he’s out, I can’t control him, not until he’s exhausted himself. I’ve fucking tried—”

He searches for words, and I force my fingers to unfurl. I try not to care so much about what he’s saying. I knew this about his wolf. This isn’t new. I try to put that distance back between us, but I tore it down myself.

“Mari, you were so fucking *young*. I mean, you’re still young now, but then—you had little fucking *bows* on your little pink *shoes*.” He grimaces up at the ceiling. “I was really gonna take you out to some shack in the woods to live with this” —he gestures angrily at himself— “and an insane killer wolf? That can’t be what’s supposed to happen.”

He shakes his head, and for a second, I think he’s done. He’s said everything that should make me feel better but doesn’t. It’s not me, it’s him. It’s my age. His wolf. Fate made a mistake. It is what it is.

But he’s not done.

“I was wrong. I fucked up. But I didn’t realize it for a long time. I thought I was doing the right thing.” He meets my eyes like he desperately wants to make sure that I understand, but I don’t.

“You were wrong?” My emotion-addled, woolly brain is trying to catch up, but the swirling gold of his irises and the creases in his worried brow and the sudden burst of sunshine scent in this rusty metallic box distracts me.

“It took me longer than it should have to realize what I should have done,” he says.

“It did?” What should he have done?

“I don’t have excuses, but Mari, when we get out of this, I’m going to fix everything. I’ve been working on it. I’ve almost got it all set up. Okay, Mari?”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but another wave of heat crashes over me, and I can barely hold on to the thread of

the conversation.

What he's saying doesn't sound like "I rejected you to save you from my damaged self, which makes me noble, sucks for you." I want to get it straight in my mind, but my lower belly cramps and warm liquid trickles down my thighs. I glance down, face blazing.

"Oh, crap." I lock my legs together.

"Mari, we have to talk about what's happening now," Darragh says with a voice that's both carefully gentle and intensely awkward.

I swallow. "I'm in heat."

"Yeah. And eventually, that's, uh, going to put me in rut."

"What do we do?"

For a second, he doesn't answer. Then, sweeping his chains to the side, he crouches, so when he speaks again, he's below me, looking up. I think he's making himself smaller, to reassure me, but a male with his presence cannot make himself submissive.

"If I'm in rut, and those men are between us, I'll attack them. No strategy, no discipline. I'll do damage, no doubt, but our chances are going to be a lot worse. I don't like the odds."

"What do you mean?"

"My wolf—he's a killer. He does what he does, you know? He goes for the throat. But when he has the skin, if I'm awake, I'm still in there. It's like riding a bucking bull, but I have some influence. Not much, granted. But some."

He draws in a steadying breath. "If I was in rut—it wouldn't be like that. The wolf would go straight for you, and I wouldn't have a chance at stopping him. Even without guns, he'd be easy to take down. He wouldn't care about saving his own skin. Only getting to you."

"To, uh, what? Um, mount me?" My cheeks burn. "Or kill me?"

His brows draw together, and he drops his head. He doesn't answer.

I go on for him. "And once you were dead, then they'd hurt me. Then they'd kill me." The horror is creeping up my throat.

His face tightens. He can't seem to bring himself to respond.

We fall silent.

"What do we do?" I finally ask, softly.

"They're going to have to unchain us to get us out. The second they set you free, you shift and run." He swallows. "If they don't kill me first, if my wolf catches you, don't fight. Present. When he mounts you, go for his eyes. Then go for his throat. Clamp down. Don't let go."

My mouth goes dry. "Would he try to mount me?"

"I don't know." He glances up. His eyes make my chest ache. Despite the creases in the corners, they're freezing cold. And sad.

I don't want to kill him.

I sure as hell don't want his wolf to kill me.

Without thinking, I tug at my restraints. The leather has stretched a little. Not nearly enough to slip my wrist free, but it doesn't bite into my skin anymore. I gaze down at my fist as I rotate it, my brain dull but spinning.

Paws are built differently than hands. I can picture the diagram from shifter physiology class at Moon Lake school. Humans have the long metacarpal bone in their thumb. Wolves only have small dewclaws. The actual circumference of the carpals aren't that much different, but broken—the wolf's bones would take up less space. Not much less. But maybe enough.

"What are you thinking?" Darragh asks from his crouch, his face darkening. Despite the submissive position, his posture crackles with dominance. Something has set him off. Can he read my forming intentions through the bond?

Am I really going to do this?

I can't think more than a step ahead or the fear threatens to choke me.

But can I really stand here until I fall irreparably into heat? What happens then? I present for Darragh, mindless and in misery, until he goes mad with rut? And then the humans string me up again until he comes for me, and they kill him and rape me on his hide.

I don't have a choice.

"I'm scared." In a way, the words slip out, but also, I need to hear Darragh say what I know he will.

"It'll be okay," he growls, eyes narrowed. He definitely knows something's up.

But it won't be okay, not unless I'm brave, and somehow, in a way that makes no sense at all, it's easier to be brave when he lies to me.

I give him a smile, because I think he might need a comforting lie, too, and then I close my eyes. My wolf is close. She rises to her feet. She understands what I want to do. She's sick with dread, but we're partners. We aren't two sides of a coin, like they say about the wolf and the man. We're sisters.

"Mari, no—" Darragh barks as he senses the shift, as he realizes what I'm going to do.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "It'll be okay." And I surrender my skin, my wolf seizing it seamlessly, assuming her shape, shaking out her fur.

"Mari, stop. Shift back." Darragh imbues the order with the strength of an alpha's command, and although my head instinctively ducks, my wolf doesn't obey. He's not our alpha. He's our mate. "No, Mari."

My wolf yips at him to be quiet. She's sizing up the cuff around her forepaw, wriggling her hindquarters to test the band around her middle. There's enough give in that one. If we have the room to maneuver, we can squeeze free.

She begins to chew the restraint, but as soon as her snout gets near it, I realize it isn't real leather. It's some kind of synthetic material. It tastes like chemicals.

"Mari, shift back. *Now.*" Darragh tries again, even firmer. My wolf snorts at him and keeps on gnawing.

"Mari, please," he tries again. My wolf's ear flicks at the tone of his voice. The thought of my pain is making him desperate.

Well, in this situation, pain is unavoidable. I give up on the band. My teeth haven't even made an impression.

This is going to hurt like a son of a bitch. With an instinct newly kicked in—or maybe connected to my impending heat—I know that Darragh isn't just going to hate this—it's gonna kill him. But not literally like those men will if he goes into rut.

Darragh is my best chance of getting out of this alive, so this has to happen. Besides, the thought of him collapsing at my feet again, dead this time—no.

No.

I take a few calming breaths, reaching deep to commune with the wolf, preparing myself to break my own wrist.

"Don't fucking do it, Mari." Darragh growls at the same time his wolf rumbles a warning in his chest.

My wolf closes her eyes and settles her full weight on the chain to hold it in place, bracing her hindlegs against the floor.

"Mari, I'm warning you." His voice has turned into a throaty snarl, and as I draw in one last big breath and grit my teeth, I think how weird it is that my stomach flips every time he says my name.

I jerk my foreleg back as hard as I can until it wedges tight in the band. Then, on my next breath, I use all my strength to drag it through the cuff, cracking the bones, one by one, until the limp paw slides the rest of the way through. The pain burns, shooting up my leg from the broken joints. My wolf clamps her throat shut on a scream.

Darragh roars and fights his chains, wild and terrifying in his fury. But not to my wolf. Even stronger than her pain is the urge to comfort him.

She hobbles up onto her good leg and drags her carcass toward him, contorting her middle, twisting her haunches left and right and clawing forward on the metal floor until she squeezes the rest of her body free.

Darragh's wolf howls. My wolf perks her head up long enough to yip at him to be quiet, and then she hauls herself the rest of the way over to him and collapses at his feet. I remember the night when I shifted for the first time, how I laid on my back and demanded that he scratch my belly.

There's no sting of humiliation in the memory anymore, not that I can feel much beyond the horrible throbbing in my wrist.

"Oh, Mari, what have you done?" he says, battered as he sinks despondently to the floor.

With the last dregs of her energy, my wolf gives over our skin, receding into the far reaches of our insides to lick her wounds. I curl into a ball and clutch my aching wrist to my chest. Darragh bends his knees and makes a barrier around me with his legs.

A hesitant hand touches my bare hip. His palm is cool and rough against my flushed skin. I moan.

His wolf rumbles, but softly.

Tentatively, he smooths the heel of his palm up my spine, avoiding the taser burns, until his fingers tangle into my hair. He strokes the pulse point under my ear with his calloused thumb. I squirm backward until I'm closer, tucked fully into the V of his legs.

He stretches a leg straight. With great effort, I lift my head to rest it on his thigh. The denim is cool under my cheek.

The pain in my body is all mixed up with the cramping in my lower belly and the terrible heat cresting in waves. I whimper. Darragh places his other hand on the small of my back and begins to make small circles.

“My mother used to do that when I was sick,” I say, letting my eyes drift shut.

“Mine, too.” He rubs gently, slowly.

“I didn’t know you had a mother.” It’s a dumb thing to say, but I’m well past making consistent sense.

“She passed away when I was little. Wasting sickness.”

“I’m sorry.”

He grunts in acknowledgement. “My sister took over when she was gone. She was a lot older than me.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.” It’s strange that I wouldn’t have ever heard of her.

“She lives with North Border pack now.”

“Do you see her?”

“Not in years.”

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” I say against his worn jeans. “We’re in the same pack, and we’re technically mates, but we don’t know each other at all.”

He doesn’t say anything for a minute, and then he says, low and gruff and careful, “I want to know you, Mari.”

“Yeah?” It makes me want to smile—it seems so silly. We’re probably going to die tomorrow, disappear like all those folks in Moon Lake who “went for a walk” and didn’t come back. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.” He says it so seriously. A warmth—not the prickly urgency of heat, but something airier, softer—unfurls in my stomach.

“There’s not much to know about me.”

“Me neither,” he says, both wry and sincere, and strokes my hip and massages my neck with exquisite tenderness, as if he’s scared that he’ll spook me, and I’ll pull myself away and stop him.

“You like books,” I say.

“You do, too.”

I hum a yes.

“What do you like?”

“Anything that has a happy ending.”

“Me, too,” he says, so quietly that if there was anyone else in this box, they wouldn’t be able to hear him.

“Those men got out of the center of the earth, right?” I peek up at him.

His lips curve. “They did.”

“And the story with knights? The good guy wins and marries the lady, right?”

His brown eyes grow somehow browner, and the creases in the corner of his eyes deepen. “Ivanhoe wins,” he says, and oddly, I feel like he’s not quite telling me the truth, like he’s telling me what I want to hear.

It makes the warmth in my chest glow.

I haven’t lived a life where anyone’s tried very hard to protect me from hard truths. I know “it’s going to be all right” is a fantasy—I know the danger is real and close and ugly—but for this moment, I let myself give in to it.

I’m curled close to my strong mate, and I hurt, but he’s stroking me with his careful hands, telling me everything is going to be okay, everything is going to turn out all right.

The heat washes over me, and I wriggle closer until my knees are tucked flush against his hard inner thigh. The pain in my wrist is slowly easing into a dull throb.

His steady breathing coaxes mine into the same calm rhythm. I nuzzle his jeans. The denim smells like him—fresh air, dew, home.

I don’t want this to end here.

I force my brain to focus, searching out his eyes. They’re on me. On my face. And even if I don’t quite trust it, I see it—longing. Bitter, tender, hopeless longing. It stirs me, touches my raw and bruised heart.

I swallow to clear the lump in my throat and say what needs saying. “We need to mate. Before they come back.”

His hand pauses mid-stroke. My wolf whines. He keeps going.

“We don’t have to,” he says, grim and certain.

“Yes, we do.”

“I won’t make you.” His voice drops so deep, it rumbles.

“I know you wouldn’t.”

“We can wait.” His mouth flattens.

“No, we can’t.” I didn’t do this for nothing. I turn to gaze up at him. Pain and remorse and rage are etched on his rugged, beautiful face.

“I can’t make a nest,” I say, low and broken, like a confession, like a shared grief.

“I’m sorry.” The hand on my neck wanders to my hair. I can hardly feel it, but I know what he’s doing. He’s touching my curls.

“I don’t want to do this here.” It’s another confession. “Like this.”

“We don’t have to,” he says, and I know in my bones that he means it as much as he also knows that we do.

“I want it to be my choice.”

“It is,” he says.

Everything is such a mess. I can’t ignore the bond at all anymore. Maybe we’ve been too close for too long, or I’m too tired, or it’s just gotten too strong. I can feel his fury, his shame, the conflict tearing him apart, and underneath it all, his desire.

His awe.

Of me.

I can feel it all, and it blows my mind and breaks my heart, and I feel as young as he sees me and a million years old at the same time.

“You want me,” I whisper.

“Yes.”

“A lot.”

“Like air,” he says.

My lips curve, sad and rueful and bittersweet. “Nobody wants air.”

“They need it.”

“You don’t need me.” He walked away. He stayed away.

“Like air,” he says again with a note of finality.

“You don’t even know me.” I cradle my wrist closer to my bare breast. The throbbing is easing more quickly than I’d expect. Maybe my heat is accelerating the healing.

Darragh leans closer. His chains clank. I feel guarded. Protected.

“I know the important things.” His fingers stroke down my cheek, finding the divot at the corner of my mouth. He strokes lightly across my thirst-chapped lower lip. He traces my nose from the bridge to the tip like I’m exquisitely delicate. Like I’m a work of art. “You’re strong. Brave. Beautiful.”

“You’re just saying nice things because you feel bad.”

He rumbles a denial, and his touch disappears. I blink my blurred eyes, distressed by the loss, but before my wolf can growl, he scoops me up, adjusting me so I’m right side up, drawing my back to his chest, wrapping his arms around my middle. He gently rocks us side to side. I prop my hurt wrist on his forearm.

“Is this okay?” he asks.

I hum and lean back, letting him take my weight.

“If you need me to stop, just say so, okay?” he says.

I tilt my head back to rest it in the place where his neck meets his shoulder. This is another “not quite the truth.” Soon, I won’t be able to stop myself, and not too long after that, he won’t be able to stop himself, either. We’re powerless against

our biology, powerless in this situation, but somehow, still, when he says he'll stop if I ask him to, it isn't a lie.

It's what the truth *would be* if it were just us, Darragh and Mari. If there were no past and no present. If we existed in a world where Fate didn't decide for us. In that world, Darragh would say, "If you say stop, I will."

And I'd say, "Don't stop."

So I do. I say it. "Don't stop," I murmur.

His lungs catch. He groans and buries his face in the crook of my neck, breathing me in. He places a reverent kiss on my pulse point, so carefully, like I'm glass. Like he's never kissed anyone anywhere before.

"Oh, Mari," he growls. "I want to do things to you." His breath is hot on my earlobe. A shiver judders down my spine.

"Like what?"

"Anything you want. Make you feel good." His voice grows even more ragged. "Kiss you."

"You are kissing me."

"You know what I mean."

"You mean on the lips?" He rumbles. For some reason, I want to giggle.

He's so male and dominant and grown, but in this moment, he reminds me of Fallon and the other scrappers who come by the cabin on some pretext—to borrow a video game or get a cut fixed up—and try to chat us up, puffed up and bold and transparently scared as shit.

I squirm in Darragh's arms, but I don't try to escape him. He tightens his grip anyway, but gently. A fizzy warmth tingles between my legs, and it's not heat—it's a more subtle sensation. I'm surprised it even registers.

"Yes, I want to kiss you, Mari," he mutters like I've tortured it out of him.

"How bad?" I whisper.

“So fucking bad,” he groans.

“Okay,” I say and twist in his arms.

“Okay,” he says back, cupping my bottom to scoot me closer while he gazes down at me as if he’s never seen anything like me in his life. Sheer wonder. Slight terror.

I smile and tilt my head. He tracks my curls as they fall back, and then his gaze falls to my lips. I don’t have time to take another breath. He takes my face in his hands and kisses me.

Like he’s starving.

Like I’m everything.

Like he’s wanted to do this his entire life, and he never thought he would, and reality has exploded into a technicolor dream, and I’m the center of it all.

Like that.

The power makes me lightheaded. It scares me witless.

His lips taste like salt and copper, and they’re rough but soft, and I can’t get enough. He won’t give me enough. He kisses me and then holds me away, his grip tight on my upper arms, searching my face—I guess to see if I’m freaking out—and then he groans in surrender and kisses me again.

I’ve never been kissed before.

I’ve never been this close to someone, and he doesn’t let me adjust at my own pace. He demands that I open my mouth for his tongue, that I wrap my good arm around his neck, that I hold on to him tight.

His hand slips between us. Between the clank of the chains, a button pops, a zipper unzips, and fabric rips. I glance down. His jeans are in tatters, his ruddy cock jutting up, flush with his taut abs, thick and proud.

I nip his tongue so that he’ll let me up for air. He growls into my mouth, his eyes flying open. They’re burnished, swirling gold, the pupils mere pinpricks.

“D-Darragh?”

He growls again. His fangs flash. From one instant to the next, something has changed. Something is different.

Oh, shit. Is this rut?

Fear shoots down my veins at the same time a gush of wetness soaks my pussy, dribbling down my splayed thighs. I freeze. I hardly breathe.

He rises to his feet. I fall to my butt, barely managing to cushion my wrist to my chest, and scuttle back. He reaches for me, but the chain catches him short, and he roars. As if newly aware of his bonds, he tears at them, fighting forward, wild-eyed, his bared fangs glistening.

With a groan, the container walls dent inward, but the metal plates don't give.

Darragh raises his head to the roof and howls, a primal outcry of rage and the promise of retribution. My wolf whimpers and goes to her belly, caught between the impulse to run, hide, and present.

In a split second, the illusion of free choice is gone. I either do this and save him from himself, or I don't. I leave him like this.

He left me, and my heart is still bitter, so bitter. But what if he didn't want to?

I don't think he wanted to.

I don't think he's just the male who hurt me. I think he lived a whole life before we recognized each other, and maybe I don't understand everything, and maybe I haven't tried.

Maybe he needs me.

Maybe I have to be the strong and brave one.

Oh, shit.

I don't want to go down on all fours. I don't want it to be anything like last time.

I'm so scared, and there's no time. If they open the door and shoot us full of tranqs now, it'll all happen like they want. We won't have a chance.

Darragh's howl of rage subsides into a prolonged growl, punctuated by snarls and the snap of his teeth, and his blanked-out eyes roll toward me. He tries to lunge forward, but he's come as far as the chains will let him.

His throat rattles with a series of guttural snarls, and I don't need my wolf to translate—it's a demand to present.

For a moment, a sense of profound loneliness grips me. My gaze skitters around the empty box, dimming as the sun sets.

I don't want to be alone in this. I want Darragh back.

And I'm so fucking terrified. My knees knock.

"D-Darragh?" I say, softly.

He snarls and fights against his chains, his skin flushing, his cock even harder and thicker, his balls heavy where they hang.

Inside my trembling body, a gush of heat clashes with a wave of cold fear.

"P-Please don't hurt me." I take a small step toward him. I can't tear my eyes away. I've seen the man and the wolf, but I've never seen or imagined this terrifying amalgamation—Darragh's innate dominance and strength coupled with his wolf's wildness, his ferocity.

I'm not going to walk into his arms, am I? That's insane.

But I'm not leaving him like this. I'm strong and brave and this is not ending with us disappearing—it ends with Darragh laying their bodies at my feet, like he said.

Again, I flash back to him racing for me in the clearing, throwing his arms wide, a different wildness in his eyes.

I take another small step forward.

"I-I'm scared," I whisper to him.

His face doesn't change. There's no flicker of awareness in his blazing eyes, but as he strains toward me, he throws his shoulder back and sort of rotates his arm. It's a jerky maneuver, like he's a marionette on a string. He does it again

with the other shoulder while he snarls, demanding I present, and my body instinctively responds, my nipples aching, my belly contracting.

It takes me longer than it should to realize what he's doing. He's winding the chains around his arms, pinning them behind his back. Obviously, he could free himself as easily as he's strung himself up, but I understand.

Warmth infuses my chest. He's in there, or if he isn't, whatever he is now doesn't want to hurt me.

"Okay." I take a deep breath. Sunshine fills my lungs. "I'm doing this." I step closer.

He drops to his knees. His arms are pulled taut behind him, and he's gripping the chains in his fists, like a sacrifice. He growls at me, and I don't need my wolf to know what he's saying. *Come here. Now.*

Every inch of my skin is alive. I want to touch him. Crush my aching, full breasts against his hard chest. Lick and bite his tensed, exposed neck.

I give in.

This is mine.

I drive my fingers into his hair, fist the strands, yank his head back. Snarl into his face.

He snarls back.

I nip his lower lip. His growls quiet, although they still vibrate his chest.

I don't know what I'm doing, but I know what I want, and he has it.

I lower myself to his lap. He widens his thighs so I can kneel on the tops of them and open myself. I glance down. I'm hovering above his flushed, erect, greedy cock. If he bucked his hips, he'd have a good shot at impaling me, especially since I've wound my arms around his neck, and I'm rubbing my aching nipples over the crisp hairs on his pecs.

But he doesn't. He growls for me, deep, approving, and he tracks the drag of my swollen breasts with pure gold eyes.

I rock, slipping his hot length through my wet lips, grinding my clit against the ridged head of his cock. It feels so good, climbing him, riding him, digging my nails into his shoulders, listening to him purr his satisfaction, his praise.

I'm doing this right, and the pleasure coiling faster and tighter inside me is exactly what I need. On an upward slide, he thrusts his hips, and that's right, too. I sink down on him, let him split me, stretch me until it burns.

I whine. He drags his fangs along the top of my shoulder, and the prick of his incisors distracts me from my fleeting distress. The pain is not worth paying attention to, and then it's gone, and all that's left is the exquisite agony of Darragh driving wildly into me, pistoning his hips, slamming the spot that makes me feel good, so good.

I hook an arm around his neck, arch my spine, drop my head back, and close my eyes. I'm riding him, but I'm not in control. I'm in heaven.

I angle my hips so his pubic bone grazes my clit with each thrust, and I'm flying. Darragh's a beast, out of his mind, but I am, too. We're together, snarling and howling our release, as I come on his cock. His knot swells, holding me in place, capturing me, quivering and limp against his chest.

His growl vibrates my cheek. Eyes plastered shut and mind spinning, I hardly register his nose nudging at the crook of my neck, and then, with no warning except a rise in the timbre of his rumbling, his fangs pierce my skin.

I shriek and struggle out of instinct, but I'm trapped by his knot and his teeth. I brace my palms against his hot, hard chest. He bites down harder.

A rush surges through my body, dancing from nerve to nerve. I stop fighting. The bond pulses, alive in a new way, sluggish but strong.

This is how it's supposed to be. My mate. Claiming me.

I'm not alone.

I haven't ever been because this male was waiting in my future.

I snuggle closer, boneless, as he licks my wound closed, rumbling his assurance, his pride. I feel his heartbeat slow to normal against my cooling breasts.

At some point, he unwinds the chains and wraps his arms around me, stroking my back, and the licks turn to gentle kisses.

My jaw cracks as I yawn. His knot subsides, and fluids gush from my battered pussy and splatter on the metal floor. I'm past embarrassment, past everything. In this moment, I'm safe. My mate is here. His claiming mark smarts, and it hurts, but it's a good hurt. All is well.

Metal grinds on metal. Rusty hinges creak. Behind us, a door opens.

Darragh springs to his feet with a roar. I tumble to the ground.

The scope of a rifle appears, aimed by a new human in a black vest. Another man I haven't seen before vaults into the container. He has a tray. It smells like raw meat.

I watch the man with the meat's gaze drop to my bare wrist and waist, his eyes rounding as he registers my location in the box. I watch his mouth open and his head turn.

The man with the rifle's focus is glued to Darragh.

I hear Darragh's voice in my head. *Shift and run.*

I sprint for the door, and mid-stride, I seize my wolf, thrust her into our skin, screaming as bones snap as I propel them forward with sheer will, and my wolf leaps through the air. There is a moment when we see the open field beyond, and the royal blue evening sky—and then my wolf collides with the rifle barrel, knocking it aside, and she goes for the man's eyes, and then she tears out his throat.

DARRAGH

Terror cuts straight through my dwindling rut, sweeping the madness from my brain and leaving everything crystal clear.

Time slows until it ticks by frame by frame.

Mari's wolf has her teeth sunk into the mangled remains of a man's throat. His rifle has fallen beside his lifeless body.

The other man is reaching for a taser holstered at his waist.

From a distance—a yard or so—shouts ring out. Boots hit the ground. Four, five, six men.

My nose quivers. Many guns. Gas. Exhaust. Vehicles. But I can't see anything out of the open doors but a field of tall grass and forest beyond.

Mari's wolf has hunkered down, shrinking herself against the corpse, trembling. Her blue eyes are huge and trained on me.

"Run," I shout, tearing at my chains. "Run!"

Her wolf's gaze flashes to the other man. He's raising the taser, his hand shaking.

I roar, buying her time as he turns to me, his instincts warning him that I'm the real threat.

"Run!"

Her wolf glances over her shoulder in the direction of the pounding boots, and she huddles lower, whining up at me.

“Fuck, Mari, run! Now!”

A sharp crack sounds. Dirt explodes a few feet from where she’s cowering. She ducks her head under her paws.

A man—Smith—shouts from a distance, “Hold your fire! Tranqs only!”

A split second later, there’s another pop and a clipped ping as a bullet hits the side of the container.

I fight the chains. The cuffs cut into the gashes I’ve carved in my wrists. The links groan, the walls creak where the plates attach, and given ten, twenty more minutes, I could tear them free, but they need to give now, and I’m not strong enough. I need a burst of power, and will isn’t enough. I’m not enough.

“Go!” I scream. She crouches and shakes.

In this second or the next one, a shot will ring out, it’ll hit its mark, and maybe it’ll be a dart with red feathers, or maybe it’ll be lead.

Time stops.

For the first time since he tore himself from my skinny, nine-year-old body, my wolf is dead silent.

He could rip these chains free and destroy these men.

Or he could leap down from this box and kill her.

And he’s silent and still and I don’t know which side the coin will land on.

Do I watch her die, or do I watch my wolf kill her?

Killian’s voice echoes in my head. *The odds were better than even.*

But I don’t risk her. Ever.

I don’t have a fucking choice.

Through my gritted jaw, I suck down a last breath laced with our mingled scents, and I don’t take my eyes off my little mate as I vow to Fate that I’ll do anything—*anything*—if she spares Mari, and with knotted guts, for the first time in my life, I call the wolf.

He bursts through me like wildfire.

He detonates.

Metal scrapes. Screeches. There's a bang. Light floods the box.

He's airborne. He's ripped the panels from the container, leaving jagged holes in the sides. He's trailing chains.

He lands on the man with the taser, knocking him on his back. The electrified barbs sink into his fur, shock jarring his bones, gasoline on his rage. He rips the man's face off and flings his muzzle, sending the flesh sailing. It lands with a wet thud on the flattened grass.

There are shouts. A scream. Another gunshot sends clods of dirt into his eyes.

He tears the barbs out of his flesh with his teeth.

Mari peers up at him from her curled up ball next to the body. The fur around her mouth is stained red. My wolf notices, growling his approval as he bounds past her, straight toward the phalanx of five men in combat gear, rifles raised, advancing on us from the east. Behind the formation, Smith shouts orders.

“Johnson, Williams, Garcia! Suppressive fire! Davis, Brown—tranqs. Fire at will!”

My wolf launches himself at the men. There is an explosion of sound—gunshots, screams, my wolf's roars, the crunch of bones. I register a starburst of pain in our left flank and the bite of shrapnel in our underbelly, but the wolf doesn't falter. He is a symphony of teeth and claws, ripping flesh, spilling blood, howling his victory to the moon rising above the sunset as he steps on top of a mangled torso.

“We need back up!” Smith shouts into the radio on his shoulder. “Back up to the box! All hands!”

My wolf's focus narrows on the older man as he stumbles backward, his pistol wavering as he trips over body parts. My wolf peels his lips back from his blood-stained teeth.

I shout into the wolf's whirling mind with all my might.
No. Get Mari. Run.

It's like shouting into a hurricane.

The wolf growls so low in his throat, it's a purr.

"Okay, whoa, relax, let's talk about this," Smith says, raising his left hand, palm open, as a distraction to cover him while he steadies his aim and prepares to fire. He's too late.

As his last words leave his mouth, my wolf is in the air, and as Smith's lifeless finger empties the chamber, the bullets fly wide and his headless body crumbles to the ground. My wolf's jaw crunches his skull. He trots over to Mari's wolf with it lodged in his maw like a ball.

I scream at him, pull him back with all my might. *No. Don't. Mate. Mate!*

He doesn't stop until he's looming over her small, quaking body. He raises his muzzle again to the sky, his howl of victory muffled this time by the human head in his mouth. Mari's wolf mewls with abject terror. Blood drips from Smith's neck onto her matted, stained coat.

Go. Leave. Let her run.

My wolf shows no sign of hearing me. I grasp for our skin, but it's like snatching air.

I can hear panicked voices to the north. We need to get out of here now.

My wolf bends his neck and sniffs Mari's neck. Immediately, she freezes as stiff as a board. His nose twitches. It's the spot where just minutes ago, I claimed her with my teeth. He growls.

She stays as still as the corpse beside her.

He prods her flank with a paw.

She plays dead.

He rumbles and uses Smith's head to kind of whack her on the back.

Her wolf drags herself forward with her forepaws in almost an Army crawl.

My wolf growls, the tone menacing and yet, somehow encouraging, and he crowds her, urging her on until she staggers to her wobbling legs and starts trotting across the field, away from the massacre by the cargo container.

He's *herding* her. She stumbles, and he's there by her left haunch, growling and prodding her onwards, the fucking crushed skull stuck in his maw like an apple in a roasted pig's mouth.

She's slow. She's shaken, and she's so much smaller that her gait is a quarter of his, but he adjusts his pace, in essence strolling behind her as she runs. She staggers, and he uses his body as a guard rail, directing her toward the thick trees at the end of the field.

The pain in our flank and underbelly throbs, but it has no effect on him. His ears flick as he tracks the shouts behind us. The surviving men aren't following us. They're gathering, regrouping. They'll have transportation—four wheelers, dirt bikes. They'll know this terrain.

We're moving too slowly.

My wolf snarls, and even though Mari's wolf whines and tries in vain to force those short, shaky legs to go faster, I get the sense that the snarl was meant for me, not her.

The tree line grows closer. My wolf treads nearer to Mari's side. The last glow from sunset fades, and the unfamiliar landscape is lit by a low moon, almost full. Cold dew mats our fur, our jagged breath visible in the chilly air.

My wolf's jaw is still clamped tight on the damn head.

We come to a shallow stream. Mari's wolf balks. My wolf nudges her rear haunch with the skull. She swallows a faint whine that rises low in her throat, and then with tentative steps, she picks her way across the dark water. My wolf follows.

She scrambles up the far bank, stumbling more than once to her front knees. Her strength is fading. She's not hurt. The

scent of blood in my nose is heavy, but none of it is hers. Still, she's struggling.

Give the skin back. I'll carry her.

If my wolf hears me, he gives no indication. He follows her, rumbling for her to go faster, but even though she tries in spurts, she inevitably slows again to an exhausted stagger.

They'll be coming soon. Shift back.

He peels his lips back, his tongue flicking forward to lick the bones and gristle wedged between his teeth. His heart fills with anticipation. He wants them to come.

They are a danger to her.

He scoffs, tossing up images in our brain of the carnage he wrought on the men at the container.

Does he care that she's in danger? He's not attacking her—and there hasn't been a second to wrap my mind around it—but that's not enough. Apparently, he can walk off a bullet wound, but she's little. Her hide isn't as thick as his, and her muscles aren't even visible under her fur.

Vengeance is too risky, but how do I make him understand? There is no reasoning with him. There never has been.

Desperate, I reach into my memory and toss up an image of my own. The raw burn marks on her sides. Her naked body strung from a branch, her pale shoulders twisted in their sockets. Her blue eyes bright with tears.

He snarls, and this time, without a doubt, it's aimed at me.

With a whimper, Mari tries to trot faster, but she stumbles. My wolf growls in frustration as he overtakes her and plants himself in her path. She stops short, her quivering legs give out, and she plops onto her butt in the tangled undergrowth. She keeps her spine straight, and although the fear comes off her in waves, she doesn't lower her head or bend her neck.

My wolf throws back his head, releases one last muffled howl at the moon, and then, with exaggerated ceremony, he drops Smith's head at her feet.

She blinks at it.

He bares his fangs at her.

She squints down at the bloody thing, furry brow knit. The head lolls onto its side. An eyeless socket stares up at the starry night sky.

An impatient growl erupts from the back of my wolf's throat. He nudges the head with his snout, shoving it closer to her wet, dirty paws. Careful not to make too sudden of a move, she wriggles backward.

He rumbles, lifts his right paw, and sets it on Smith's caved in forehead. He cocks his head.

Her eyes narrow.

He rumbles louder.

She tosses her head, and then she prowls forward, carefully, and gives the head the barest sniff and a gingerly poke with the very tip of her claw. My wolf's rumble melts from demand to magnanimous satisfaction. She's given him his due, recognized his gift. He's content.

She casts him a sidelong glance and returns to where she was, lowering herself back to her rump with an arthritic stiffness. She's still shaking, probably from shock.

She's hurt. Shift. I'll carry her.

He ignores me. Instead, he swings his paw, batting the skull away with a dismissive thwack, and stalks to close the distance between him and our tiny, shivering mate. He grunts at her to get up, to keep moving.

She sits slumped to one side and stares up at him with dull eyes, panting even though we've been resting for minutes now.

He growls and jerks his head in the direction we were heading before he stopped her. She casts a despairing glance toward the dark thicket and whimpers.

He snaps his teeth. She blinks. He butts her flank with the flat of his head.

She topples over, her head dropping to lay listless on her front leg. She gazes up at him, and with the last of her energy, she yips at him, snapping her own teeth, cranky and tired and no longer the least bit afraid.

His jaw shuts.

With a last burst of energy, she lunges at his front legs and manages to nip his ankle, snagging a tuft of fur.

With slow care, he extricates the leg from her bite and takes a step back.

In the distance, motors roar to life and dogs begin to bay.

Give over our skin. They're coming.

My wolf nuzzles her flank, buries his nose in her matted fur, and he whines. She's laying on her side again, motionless except for her shallow breaths. She's done. She's not getting up.

He doesn't so much surrender our skin as he passes it to me, like a king bestows a knighthood. I seize it, suddenly aware of the metal cuffs still circling my neck and wrists and ankles, and the trailing, broken chains.

We've left an unmistakable trail. Our only hope is beating them to a terrain they can't navigate with ATVs. I scoop Mari's wolf up, and carefully tuck her in the crook of my arm. Her eyes have drifted closed, but she wedges her cold nose into the crease between my bicep and my side.

I gather what chains I can in my free hand, and then I run full speed into the dark, thick forest, oblivious to the sticks and rocks tearing at my bare soles, the gunshot hole knitting itself together between my ribs, or the shards of bullets flecking from my abs as my skin mends itself.

All I can feel is the bristly warmth of Mari's wolf, the flow of our bond—for once calm and clear and strong—and pure terror.

MARI

Even the terror can't keep me awake. The pounding of Darragh's feet and his ragged yet even breaths lull me into a fugue state where I can't move my limbs, can't make my brain work, but I can't fully surrender to unconsciousness either. I lie frozen as he dashes through streams and scrabbles up rocky inclines, zigzagging, as the motors and dogs sound in the distance.

I huddle inside the wolf, cold and scared and helpless, while she trembles in Darragh's arms.

At some point, he shakes her awake and growls, "Stay here. Don't make a sound."

He sets her in the crook of a tree, high off the ground. I watch with slitted eyes as a dirt bike slides to a stop mere feet from Darragh, and I'm so deep in shock that my adrenaline doesn't even spike as Darragh uses the chain still dangling from a manacle to rip the gun from the man's hand. When he's jerked off the bike, his helmet falls. It's Lenox.

He doesn't look like a newsie now. His face is hard and mean, his expression blank like a doll with its eyes popped out.

Darragh bares his teeth, a self-satisfied rumble rising in his chest as the males square off.

"I was thinking I'd have to come back for you," Darragh says. "But here you are."

They circle each other, Lenox's hand twitching at his side. From my vantage point, I can see a bulge in the back of his waistband, but Darragh's too close. If Lenox goes for it, Darragh will have his arm ripped off before he can touch it.

This is only ending one way. It's like watching a lion stalk a housecat, but the cat is from that movie where they bury it in a pet cemetery and it comes back wrong.

Darragh spits at Lenox's feet. "You'd betray your own kind for money?"

A light flares in Lenox's dead eyes. "My own kind? No. I don't claim kinship with you, living off the crumbs the humans leave you, fighting each other for their amusement."

Darragh doesn't seem to give a shit about what Lenox is saying. Darragh's sizing up the distance between them. He's going to strike.

"Men with *wolves* inside them, paying humans for our own territory," Lenox sneers. "As if we shouldn't by right rule them."

So he works for them? It makes no sense, but I've known mad wolves before. They do what they want and justify it with whatever bullshit they can come up with.

Darragh's not paying attention to what Lenox's spouting. He's priming himself.

"Where is that weak female you were so keen to mount?" His voice drips with scorn. "The Mercenary. The Haunt of the Hill." He snorts. "It was too fucking easy. Just dangle some pussy." He glances into the surrounding trees. It's his last mistake.

Darragh leaps for him, slamming him to the ground, pinning him down with his weight, an arm across Lenox's chest. And then my mate rips off Lenox's jaw and tosses it. It hits a tree trunk with a thunk.

Wet, choking screams fill the air.

"Look away, Mari," Darragh calls. I can't.

Darragh's claws snick from his fingers, and in one smooth downward motion, he slices off Lenox's tongue. It thuds in the dirt. Darragh reaches over, stabs it, and while blood and screams spurt from Lenox's mouth, Darragh shoves the tongue down his throat. Darragh clamps his hand over the place where his jaw used to be until Lenox is quiet and still.

A vague look of satisfaction crosses Darragh's face, and then he's all business. He quickly strips Lenox of his jacket and pants, but the pants won't come up past Darragh's thighs, and he doesn't even try with the top. Instead, he ties it into a sling, drapes it around his neck, and with gentle hands, takes my wolf down and tucks her in.

My mind is horror bleached from what I just saw, but my wolf isn't thrown in the least. She growls her approval, and Darragh's wolf replies with a preening rumble, comforting her in her nest against Darragh's chest.

We ride the dirt bike until we pop a tire, and by then, the engines and baying of dogs are fading. Darragh keeps running, though, faster now that his legs have gotten a rest.

I want to help—to run—but I can't even keep my eyes open. All my strength is sapped.

A little before daybreak, when the horizon turns rosy in the east and the sky lightens to gray, we come to a back road, single lane, tar patched, no painted lines. We track it, picking our way through the foliage alongside it, until it ends at a larger two-laned road. We don't see or hear any cars, but we follow the new road, staying in the woods parallel to the shoulder.

I don't recognize anything. There's no Salt Mountain in the distance, no foothills. Even the trees are different, taller, a different kind of evergreen. I have no idea where we are, but I know I've never been this far from pack territory. It doesn't feel right. Every bird's shriek and bullfrog honk jars me, and I jerk. Each time, Darragh reaches down and pats my flank through the sling, and for a few seconds, his chest will rumble.

The rumble is his wolf's. I know how he sounds now.

His wolf didn't kill mine. He killed everyone else, though.

I don't understand.

I remember the mindless rage in his wolf's eyes that night when he came after me. He wasn't warning me off. If Kennedy hadn't been there, I wouldn't have escaped with my life.

Has his wolf changed? Or is it my human form that he hates?

Very distantly, I'm aware that it's bullshit that I don't know the answers, but I'm still too out of it for normal feelings to hit with any kind of impact.

And also—

Yeah, Darragh's never talked to me about what happened, but I never talked to him, either, did I?

Because it was his fault.

Yeah—

And isn't it more than possible that he never talked to me because of his crippling guilt and his fear that he'd hurt me again?

I can't pretend not to know he doesn't feel that anymore, not when the bond is there, pumping in my chest like a second heart.

But for the past four years, I've been angry. I was doing what I had to do to hold myself together. I was being strong. I was young, alone, powerless.

I squint up at his grim, ashen face, his clenched jaw, his tired eyes, the brown dull, the gold gone. He seems every year of his age.

He's alone. More alone than I've ever been.

I squirm. He rests a heavy palm on my side. We run a few more miles when we come to a dark gas station. There aren't any cars in the gravel lot. It's very early, but they must be opening soon. Anxiety courses through my veins again, but I don't perk up. I'm too wrung out.

Darragh lifts the sling from his neck and rests me behind an air machine.

“Stay here,” he says, already trotting toward the gas station’s front door. He bends, grabs the metal grate, and rips it from the frame, padlock and all. Then he drives his knee into the glass. It shatters.

He steps through, barefooted, and I wince in my fur. My wolf whines low in her throat. We don’t like him out of our sight.

Minutes later, he emerges. He’s wearing black sweatpants with a red maple leaf on the thigh. The pockets are bulging. He’s ripping a plastic package open with his teeth. It’s a prepaid phone.

“Good girl,” he says like an afterthought when he sees I haven’t moved. He scoops me up, slips the sling over his head, and resettles me against his chest. My heart rate slows.

He takes off again, running alongside the road. He puts a good three or four miles between us and the gas station before he stops, picking his way up a steep bank and down into a wooded gulch before he collapses to his butt and rests his back against a thick oak.

He tips his head and stares at the sky for a minute before he unties the sling from around his neck and sets me on the ground between his bent legs.

My wolf wriggles loose from the fabric and stretches her forelegs, arching her spine until it cracks and thrusting her rump in the air. She wags her tail a few times to get the kinks out before she settles on her butt, propping her paws on Darragh’s thigh. She gazes up at him expectantly.

His grim mouth tilts up at the corners. “Hungry?”

She yips.

I didn’t even realize our stomach was growling, but now that I’m tuning in, I hear her belly gurgling and smell the meat in his pants. My wolf noses the bulge. He chuckles, gruff and creaky.

“Water first.” He takes out a bottle and pours it carefully into her mouth as my wolf laps it up. It’s cold and so freaking good. Her tail whaps the hard earth. When she’s had enough, he finishes it off and digs a bag of sausage sticks out of his pocket. The preservatives stink, but I can ignore it. I’m starving.

He opens the bag and before he can hold up a stick, my wolf snatches it from his fingers. Darragh barks a laugh. It’s a rusty sound.

“How about you help yourself?” he says and peels the plastic open, laying it in front of me like a plate. My wolf goes to town.

He focuses on the phone, puzzling out the directions, fiddling with the buttons. He doesn’t seem very familiar with how it works.

I could help, but I’d need my human skin, and nothing inside me wants to shift back yet. I feel safer with claws and fangs, even if I’m smaller in my fur.

And it’s easier like this—with Darragh. I don’t want to think about what we did, about the bite mark still throbbing on my neck. I need the comfort of not dealing with it. It’s become crystal clear to me that I am very good at blocking stuff out. I always thought it was a personal strength. Maybe my only one.

Is it?

I don’t want to search my soul as I snarf down meat bites on the run in the middle of nowhere, bone weary and beaten up, fur matted into knots with dried blood.

But it isn’t strength to close your eyes and plug your ears, is it?

My wolf turns away from the remaining sausages and tucks her snout to her chest. Darragh reaches past me and snags a bite as he mutters under his breath, “Left soft key press to access notifications.”

He’s baffled.

I can help, but I'm scared. I don't want to be naked in front of him again. Like when we did—what we did in that box.

“Your phone already has a Nano SIM card installed,” he reads. “Okay. That's good. What do I do with the SIM card?”

He's lost.

Oh, I don't want to do this. I stagger to my four feet. Darragh idly trails his fingers down my spine. My wolf shakes out her fur, wanders a few feet away, and I try to summon the energy to shift, but my every atom is wrung out.

In the end, I kind of ask my wolf to hand over our skin, and she's so exhausted, she sort of drops it like a heavy laundry basket on a bed.

For a few moments, I crouch, huddled to the ground, pressing my breasts to my knees, as all the aches and pains that were stifled in my wolf form reemerge. There are angry red burns along my sides. My shoulder sockets are sore.

My pussy is, too.

And there's a raw, aching bite mark in the crook of my neck. My fingers fly to it, stopping at the last second to hover over the broken flesh. Darragh tracks the movement, a light sparking in his drained eyes. The wound is giving off heat.

It's a different pain than the taser burns or my wrenched shoulders. I want to be careful with this wound. I want a mirror so I can see what it looks like.

“I'm sorry,” Darragh mutters. His neck bends.

An awful feeling blooms in my chest. Is he sorry because he wishes he hadn't done it? Because he doesn't want me, and now he's stuck?

“No, no.” Darragh raises his head immediately. “I'm not sorry, but it hurt, and I don't want to hurt you. Fuck, Mari.” He drives his fingers into his matted hair. “I'm not sorry, okay?” He catches my gaze, and he won't let go. The gold rings around his irises are back and bright.

“You're not?” I lower myself so that I'm sitting on my heels. I hug my arms around my breasts.

“No. I’m sorry I hurt you. Not sorry about anything else.” His jaw clenches, and for a few seconds, his temple tics. “I told you that I’m not good at talking.”

I remember. He said that he didn’t know how to talk to me that day behind the kitchen when he gave me the pheasant. Was that only a couple of days ago? It feels like a hundred years.

“I guess I’m not that good at it either,” I say grudgingly. I sigh. “I know phones, though.” I hold my hand out.

“Yeah?” Some of the strain eases from around his eyes. He hands me the phone and tries to pass me the instruction booklet.

“I don’t need that.” This is the same brand Una used to buy us before she mated Killian and got us all on the pack’s plan. I get it ready to go in no time. It actually has a twelve percent charge.

I pass it back to Darragh. He stares at it. He’s got to know how to use a phone.

He glances up at me ruefully. “Do you know anyone’s number?”

Well.

Shit.

I rack my brains. For several long moments, I draw a complete blank, but then I remember. “Yes! I know the commissary number!”

It’s so random, but when I was younger, after my mom died, I lived with Cheryl, our old alpha female, for a while. She would hang out at the commissary and have me call down when her mate got home so she could act like she’d just ducked out and hadn’t been gone all day, leaving me to watch the pups.

I rattle off the number. Darragh dials. He has a quick, clipped conversation, and the word GPS comes up, and I have to show him how to pull it up.

Everything seems to happen at double speed after that. Darragh helps me into the bloody jacket he'd used as a sling. It smells like deodorant and fear, but at least it comes down well past my thighs. We continue making our way southeast as the sun clears the horizon, slower now since I'm hoofing it on two exhausted legs. We're careful to stay far enough from the road that we can't be seen, but close enough that we don't lose it.

We see vehicles from a distance. Once, an eighteen-wheeler passes. The site of the container on its bed sends my heart galloping. Darragh slips closer to my side and brushes my hand with his.

"You're safe," he says. "I killed most of them. I'll find the rest and finish them. After you're home." It isn't bragging or even reassurance. He's telling me the facts.

A little past noon, we find a stream with a steep bank about a quarter mile from the road. There's a rocky outcropping with tall pines growing above, and we rest for a while, away from the sun, and finish a second bag of sausages and a last bottle of water.

I drowse afterwards, propped upright, but as my head nods and my arms go slack, Darragh reaches for me, tucking me against his side. I drift off into a dreamless sleep, and when I wake up, I feel clammy and dirty and achy and stiff. I peel myself off Darragh's chest and stretch my legs. His eyes are closed, but there's a rumble in his throat. The wolf is awake.

I crawl out of the overhang to stand by the stream. I want my own clothes. My bathtub. My bed. I want Una and Kennedy and Annie.

I have to pee, and my downtown is raw and ouchy from—

I don't let my mind swerve. I make myself think the thought—from mating with Darragh. Taking his knot. His seed. Cum. Whatever. All the words are embarrassing. Whatever you call it, some of it is still dried on my inner thighs, and my heat has broken.

Last time, after that horrible debacle in the guest cabin, there were days of discomfort, an itchy, crawly irritation that

wouldn't have been bearable if I hadn't been numbed by the wound in my side and the crush of rejection.

There's no discomfort now, at least not that kind. Does that mean I'm knocked up? That's how it goes, right? A knot, a bite, a baby.

I reach down and slip my fingers under the jacket to prod the padding that rounds my lower belly. Obviously, there'd be no change yet. I try to focus inside myself. I can't sense anything other than my wolf, who's conked out in a corner on her back with her legs sprawled.

There's a crunch behind me. I don't startle. It's Darragh's foot on the pebbled bank. Now that I'm aware of the bond, he's becoming something like an appendage—a floating one, but still. I'm aware of him in space, and when he responds to something I thought but didn't say, it's not fazing me.

I shiver. This is the opposite of alone, and so much more dangerous.

I wrap my arms around myself and try to sweep the worry away. We have enough to deal with, here and now.

Darragh comes to stand by my side. We both watch the current swirl small yellow leaves downstream. After several long moments, he clears his throat. "You're scared," he says.

I lift a shoulder.

"We lost them. Hours ago. I'd hear them if they were anywhere close. Smell them."

I nod and keep on following the leaves caught in a shallow eddy. New ones keep getting trapped and bumping others free.

"My, uh, wolf—he has a very good sense of hearing and smell."

I make myself smile, acknowledge the reassurance.

"I'm not trying to brag or anything." He sighs and frowns. "It's just how he is."

"I know. I can't hear them either." He seems so unhappy that I tack on, "My wolf doesn't have super hearing or super

smell or anything,” just to keep this strange conversation going.

“She’s a good wolf,” he says. In her defense?

My mouth curves, genuine this time. “Yeah, she’s all right.”

“She took that guy’s throat out in one bite. I wouldn’t have thought her jaw could open that wide.” His gruff admiration rings with sincerity.

My cheeks warm, and I shift on my cold, aching, bare feet. “Thanks. Your wolf was pretty badass, too.”

“Sorry about the whole thing with the, uh, skull,” he says, directing the apology to the ground.

I sneak peeks at him out of the corner of my eye. He’s filthy, bruised and beaten, covered in dried blood, his faint silver scars impossible to make out under the grime. He looks like a hardened warrior returned from the war, and also, at the same time, shy as hell with his head bent, darting glances at me from under his thick lashes.

He’s my mate.

Maybe. If he doesn’t bail again.

“I didn’t mind,” I say before that thought can get too far. “That guy had it coming. At least it wasn’t my head.” I try to laugh, but it comes out rickety and weak.

“My wolf—he was cool with your wolf.” He sounds as surprised as I was at the time.

“You didn’t know he would be?” I blink.

He jerks his head no.

“So he could have gone for me?”

The answer is yes—it must be—but Darragh raises his head and gazes into the middle distance, the furrow returning with a vengeance to his brow. “I wouldn’t have let him.”

“Would you have been able to stop him?”

The question's rhetorical, but he looks down, scanning my face, cataloging my eyes, my tangled curls, my flushing cheeks, my tongue licking my suddenly dry lips.

"Yes," he says, as if he's discovering the fact in this moment. Maybe he is.

Something about that quiet, certain "yes" undoes a knot in my throat.

"What if I'm pregnant?" I ask, my voice a whisper, and I don't know exactly what I'm asking, but everything is surreal and heavy and nothing is firm under my feet.

His gaze falls to my belly, his whole body tensing. His wolf rumbles.

"I won't let anything hurt him," he says. He thinks a second and the crease between his eyes deepens. "Or her."

It's not quite an answer, not a reassurance. It sure as shit isn't a plan or a commitment or a promise that everything is going to be okay.

But I think it's what he can give me right now. I think survival is the only thing on his mind, and that makes sense. We just barely escaped with our lives.

It strikes me as he touches me on the small of my back to guide me across the stream, and we begin the hike back to the road—we are vastly different people who lived through very different times. He was almost grown before I was even born. For years, I've hated him for doing something that even if I knew why he did it, I might not understand.

As we make our way back to the road, and he pushes aside the brambles for me, just like he did when he led me back to camp after my ill-advised unannounced visit when we first recognized each other, a question sifts up from the muddle in my mind. "Why were you always bringing me meat? 'Cause you had to?"

He squints at me over his shoulder. "'Cause I had to?" His jaw tightens. "Killian kept you fed." An ominous note enters his voice. "Didn't he?"

“Yeah. Of course.”

He plows forward like he answered me, but he didn't. Too bad for him, the female who would've accepted the dodge, the brush off, she's gone. She got left in a container box. “So why, then? Why bring me meat if you knew I was fed? Guilt?”

He braces himself midway up a slick, muddy slope and offers me his hand. I take it. As he hauls me up, he says, “At first. Yeah. That was part of it. Then—I thought maybe you'd say something to me about it.” He shrugs like it's nothing, but dark slashes appear on his cheekbones.

“Something like what?”

“I didn't care. Anything.”

“Why didn't you give it straight to me, then? Like the pheasant.”

“What if you were afraid of me?”

“That would've been so bad?” We're wolves. Our lives are ruled by who we fear, who we protect, and who will protect us.

“Yeah.” He doesn't say anything else, but as we come to the low brush along the road, he falls back to walk beside me, adjusting his stride to match mine.

I don't know what to feel. My emotions are shorted, as muddled as my ability to think more than a step ahead. I'm so tired that I'm past tired. I'm in that place where my body and mind are only keeping on out of inertia.

Darragh walks beside me, and in a way—for the first time since my mother died, and I got thrown to the mercy of the pack—I feel safe.

And in another way—as his hands brush mine, and maybe a new life multiplies cell by cell inside me, and our bond flows, growing stronger every minute—I feel like I've never been so uncertain with so much to lose.



BY THE TIME dusk falls and Darragh hides me in a tunnel that runs under the road while he stands in the open, waiting for Killian, I'm not feeling anything except pain and exhaustion.

They come in three trucks, armed to the teeth. All the A-roster males are present—Ivo, Tye, Dermot. Several others. Darragh fetches me, carrying me up the incline to the road in his arms like a baby. I don't argue. I couldn't if I wanted to. My teeth are clattering too hard. He tucks me into a backseat, covers me in one of those aluminum foil blankets, and slides in beside me.

As soon as we start moving, I pass out. By the time I wake up, we're back on pack land. I've never been so happy to see Salt Mountain in the distance until I remember the men tracking us with dogs.

Darragh, who had been resting his temple on the windowpane, blinks over at me with a frown. I can feel his concern through the bond. Could he feel my anxiety?

"Some of them got away," I say to him under my breath. Killian and Tye are up front with the radio on.

"I'll go after them soon." His frown deepens as he examines me. "When you've been looked at."

My heart lurches. "I don't want you to go."

He doesn't have the chance to answer me. The truck skitters to a halt in the commons, and we're surrounded by a crowd of elders and males. Mated females hang back, concern etched on their faces. I wouldn't have thought my disappearance would have caused this kind of outpouring, but they did take Darragh, too, and they're a clear threat to the pack. The females must be worried for their pups.

Someone opens the door and reaches in a hand to help me out. Darragh snarls. The helping hand disappears.

Darragh gets out, stalks around the bed, packmates backing out of his way like water flowing around a rock, and lifts me out.

"I can walk," I hiss at him.

“I know,” he answers, and he carries me across the lawn to the infirmary. Cheryl is there. She holds the door and gestures for him to lay me in a bed. A bottle of water is pressed into my hand. I guzzle it down, and as soon as I finish it, I’m given another. I’ve never tasted anything so sweet.

And then Una is there, shuffling into the room, and Kennedy and Annie are on her heels.

Una has tears in her eyes. She rushes to my side and lays her palm on my forehead like she’s checking for a fever, and she must realize that’s silly, because she smooths her hand up to brush my dirt and blood-crusts off my face.

Kennedy coughs from the foot of the bed. “Hot date?” she asks, her lip quirking, bruises under her eyes from worry.

“I kind of got carried away,” I say. My throat is raw, and my voice comes out husky.

“We chased you. The van—it all happened so fast.” Kennedy’s face is stone hard. She’s mad at herself.

“None of us saw it coming,” I say. Kennedy’s expression doesn’t change. She’s not going to stop beating herself up because I say so. She’s the most stubborn person I know.

“I’m sorry, Mare,” she says, low, back and shoulders as stiff as a soldier.

“I love you, Ken.” I give her a smile. She goes red, and her lips spear down as her chin hikes up. I love embarrassing her in public.

“That’s enough for now,” Una says, rolling over a tray of bandages and bottles. She replaces Kennedy at my side and tends to my wounds, treating my burns with a salve and wrapping them in gauze. She frowns at my claiming bite. I automatically protect it, tucking my head and lifting my shoulder to my ear. She goes back to fussing with my scrapes and cuts.

She’s cleaning up her supplies when Old Noreen bustles in with a tray of her own, and she shoos everyone away until I have a cup of hot tea at hand and a wet rag on my forehead. She settles herself in the chair beside the bed, takes out her

knitting, and glares at anyone she thinks is speaking too loudly.

At some point, Darragh disappeared, and I didn't even notice. I search the bond, and he's not far, so I force myself to relax. He needs to get cleaned up and seen to as well, although I can't imagine him letting anyone fuss over him.

A flash of irrational ire heats my cheeks. Would he let the crone bandage his wounds?

"Where's Darragh?" I call over to Una where she's returning things to a shelf.

"I'm not sure," she says. "When I finish with this, I'll find out, okay?"

I nod. I don't need to haul myself out of this bed to find him. Everything is okay now. This dread is just an aftershock from what we went through. I make myself breathe and focus on the room.

At least a dozen females are clustered among the empty cots, whispering in worried tones, casting me sympathetic glances. Haisley and Cheryl's concern is an obvious put-on for show, but the others seem genuinely upset. I wouldn't have guessed anyone beyond our cabin would be that concerned. Their red eyes and noses make me feel weird.

Where was this show of concern when I was little, and my mom was gone, and I needed to not be alone more than anything else?

But they wouldn't have been allowed to gather like this, would they? Not in Declan Kelly's time.

When I was very young, females kept out of the way. They stayed in their cabins; they kept their heads down. Nothing was spoken of. Nothing was looked at in the face.

In the far reaches of my memory, I recall my mother stealing quick conversations in the laundry, in the corner of the kitchens, on a path as we passed. Females didn't gather. That would have drawn bad attention. They didn't reach out past their own pups. Maybe they didn't have the bandwidth.

As I'm seeing it all in a new way, I accidentally catch my cousin Rowan's eye. She offers me a hesitant smile. I return it. Something like relief flashes across her face.

I don't know what to make of this.

I'd squirm if my body didn't feel like it's been mauled by a lion. Instead, I watch Una shuffle from group to group, listening to our packmates murmur their worries and questions, nodding, sharing a word or two of reassurance before moving on.

Una's transition to alpha female was so smooth, I can't pinpoint the exact moment when it happened. One day, Cheryl was in charge. She held court, and everyone sought her out. Then, there was the weird period of time where no one was sure what was going on with Killian and Una. After his wolf settled that question, even though Cheryl still held court, no one asked her anything anymore.

Now, folks wait for Una to come by in her quiet, gentle way and bend her ear until Killian or one of us rescue her. She's a different kind of alpha female, a listener, not a talker, but there's no doubt things are more peaceful now. Kidnapping aside.

I crane my neck and see if Darragh's out on the porch. He hasn't gone far. I know from the bond. But I don't like that he's left me here.

Things are different between us now, right?

So why is there a pit in my stomach? And what has changed, really? My fingers go to my bite mark.

"Don't fiddle with it," Old Noreen barks without looking up from her needles. "It's a fine mark. If you mess with it, it'll just take longer to heal."

I let my arm fall to the cool cotton sheet. It's so crisp, I feel twice as gross lying on it. I'm about to ask Una if Kennedy and Annie can help me back to the cabin when a hush falls over the gathered females. All heads turn expectantly toward the door.

My heart rises. Darragh?

Abertha sweeps into the room. My stomach sinks.

She's in full witchy regalia, flowing black skirt embellished with tiny diamond-shaped mirrors, purple brocade corset, long silver braid, gold bangles and hoops in her ears.

There's a whiff of Darragh about her.

My wolf drags herself awake, groggily stumbling to her front paws.

I try to sit straighter, but the bed is too far reclined, and I'm weak. Abertha glides over in her strange way. Females shuffle further away, even the ones already across the room. Old Noreen's clacking needles fall silent.

Abertha comes to stand at the foot of my bed. At least she isn't at my side, looming over me. My nose twitches. Darragh has definitely been with her. Not *with her*, *with her*. Obviously. He's only been gone a few minutes.

Ugh. I'm losing it. My wolf has fought her exhaustion to climb onto all fours, and she's got her teeth bared. She's too intimidated to growl, though.

Abertha arches a thin eyebrow, her quicksilver eyes flashing with wry amusement. "I told him you wouldn't be grateful for my help."

My stomach knots. I hate that she calls Darragh "him" like that.

"I'm fine," I say.

She scans me, head to foot. "You look like something the cat dragged in."

Someone took away the disgusting jacket when they slipped me into the bed. I'm naked, and I feel it. I firm my chin. "You should see the other guy. He doesn't have a neck anymore."

Abertha blinks before she lets out a cackle of delight. "All right, all right, Mari Fane."

She considers me for a long moment, and then she catches Una's eye.

“May we have the room?” she asks. It’s a formality. The females have been edging toward the door since she arrived.

The crone inhabits a unique role in the pack. We hold her in deep respect, and we’re also convinced that she’s cursed. Shifters are superstitious, and since no one knows what it takes for a curse to rub off, most of us tend to give her a wide berth.

Darragh doesn’t.

I try to shove that ugly, embarrassing thought as far down as I can, so it doesn’t show on my face, even though it’s probably useless. The crone sees everything. At least she acts like she does.

Kennedy helps Old Noreen to her feet, and Annie grabs her sewing bag. All three cast me sympathetic glances.

As the room clears, Abertha drags the chair so it faces the bedside. She sits with her trademark willowy grace, so strange for a female her age. She stretches her legs, crosses them at the ankle, and folds her hands over her hollow stomach.

“You won’t let me heal you,” she says.

I jerk my chin. I don’t like that she knows my mind, but she’s right. I don’t want to owe her anything.

“Your mate and I aren’t lovers, you know.”

My heart drops, but I’m such a physical mess, I don’t think it shows.

“I mean, back in the day, once upon a time, we, uh, were known to make the beast with two backs on occasion, but that was many years ago. At least, uh—” Her brow wrinkles, and she looks at her fingers. Is she counting back?

“I don’t need to know.” I feel sick.

She shrugs a shoulder. “Probably not. You were a pup. It was very casual. Very much two ships passing in the night.” She pauses like I’m supposed to say something. My eyes burn.

“Yes. Well. That’s all better left unsaid.”

Please, let her shut up.

She takes a breath and plows on. “But there *are* things you need to hear, and even though I’m much more hopeful now that things will, er, sort themselves out, I’m not inclined to” — her mouth twists in an odd smile— “to trust in Fate, as it were.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“To meddle or not to meddle, that is the question.” Abertha raises a hand like she’s on a stage before letting it drop back to her lap. She looks at me expectantly.

I stare back. “Is that a human saying?”

Her laugh quickly trails off, and she gets a faraway look in her eye. “It’s so hard to know what’s hurting and what’s helping. Maybe it’s impossible to know. Maybe Fate decides everything, and what we consider meddling is just us enacting the inevitable plan of a capricious god.”

This time, my brow furrows.

Abertha sighs, and then perks up and leans forward in her chair. “Or not. Like I said—so hard to know.” She locks her silver eyes on mine. “I’m going to tell you a story. It’s not mine. I have no right to it. And if you tell Darragh that you know, I don’t know what he’ll do.”

I push myself up in the bed, my arm muscles aching so much that I can hardly prop myself higher. “You shouldn’t tell me then.” I’m instantly dying to hear, but I don’t trust this female.

“Probably not. But let me ask you—” She leans closer. “If you could know—and I can’t tell you—but if you *could* know why your mother and father did what they did, would you want to know? Would you want to know the truth or would you prefer to cling to the story you’ve told yourself?”

The air has become thick. It’s choking me. The clean room with its pristine beds and neat shelves and silent machines feels cavernous and alien.

“How would you know what I tell myself?” My voice is thick, too.

“When we’re young, we all tell ourselves the same thing. We were wronged. Those who hurt us had choices. We weren’t enough for them to choose differently.”

“And that’s not the truth?”

“Hardly ever.”

I hug my shoulders. The sheet is too thin. “What do you know about me?”

“Very little. But Darragh Ryan and I go way back.”

My wolf growls. Abertha’s lip twitches, but only once.

“So do you want to know, sweet little Mari?”

A sense of foreboding settles on my chest where the bond pumps like another artery. No, I don’t want to know. I want to be the small, sweet one tucked away in the farthest cabin, ignored, protected, but from a distance, lost in daydreams, secure.

I want to be one of the ones who barely remembers life under Declan Kelly, who’s untainted by the past, who has no shadows behind her eyes.

A pretty doll with a princess canopy, fairy lights, and little fucking *bows* on my little pink *shoes*.

I want it to be a fairy tale. Beauty and the beast, at the beginning, when Beauty’s intentions are pure and nothing is her fault, nothing is complicated. It’s a good premise—the innocent girl and the terrible beast—but that’s not how the story ends, is it?

And I’m not that sweet little doll anymore. I never was.

“Okay,” I say. Under the sheet, I draw my knees tight to my chest.

Abertha gazes across the bed at a window. The blinds are closed. Somehow, the angular planes of her face soften like when you’re looking at someone at dusk on a hazy humid summer night.

“You know that Darragh’s parents died when he was young?” she asks.

I nod. “Wasting sickness.” Another specter from the past that haunts the older packmates.

“His mother died from wasting sickness, but his father fell in a challenge to Declan Kelly.”

I lift my chin. “I didn’t know.” I hate that the witch is telling me about my own mate, and I feel petty for being hurt about it.

“You remember that back in those days, there was no unprotected female cabin.”

I remember. That’s why I was passed from family to family after my mom was gone.

“You were young. Do you know how unprotected females like you ate in those days?”

I shake my head.

“The lucky ones found a good mated fighter who’d keep them on the side. The unlucky ones ended up in the lodge basement.”

I’ve heard whispers, quickly hushed. Jokes that I never understood that would make a female burst into tears, or a male throw a chair or his fists.

“The basement was Declan Kelly’s personal harem. He’d reward his sycophants and punish the females who ran afoul of him. Take out his aggression. He didn’t need much of a reason. There were many days the females who did time down there didn’t eat. Many days they didn’t see daylight. More than a few who never came back up the steps.”

“I didn’t know.” I knew the broad strokes of what used to happen down there, but I guess I thought it was survival—females doing what they had to do. Horrible like so much in those days, but not—not this.

Why would I have thought it wasn’t an unspeakable horror? Because the females who endured it have never spoken of it? And why would they? Why should they rip themselves open so a pup who’s never had it that hard can understand?

Shame bites at me.

Abertha continues, “When Killian became alpha, he resettled many females who’d spent time in the basement with other packs.”

The weight on my chest grows heavier. Darragh’s sister lives in North Border.

“But the story I’m going to tell you happened long before Killian became alpha.” Abertha’s gaze drifts toward the ceiling like she’s calling up an old memory. “It was the winter we ran out of heating oil right before that bad blizzard. Darragh would have been nine. His sister, Iona, would have been fifteen. That full moon, their father, Cormac Ryan, had lost his challenge, and his entrails were still settling in Declan Kelly’s stomach. Declan, of course, didn’t waste any time sending the new unprotected female to his basement. A warning to any male who considered doing what Cormac had done.”

My stomach hurts. A sour taste floods my mouth.

Abertha lowers her gaze to meet mine. “And of course, Iona’s brave little brother fought his way down with nothing but his pocket knife to bring her back up again.”

My torn nails dig into the bedsheet.

“He was outnumbered, but he was as fierce then as he is now. He put out Declan’s second’s eye. As the story goes, he came a hair’s breadth from the alpha’s own throat before he was pinned down by Declan’s lieutenants.”

Dread coils around my throat.

“Declan Kelly was an uncommon evil. He didn’t have the villain’s usual blind spots—the narcissism, the hubris. He could see clearly into the hearts of males. And females.” Abertha’s gray eyes go vague. “He gave Iona a choice. Darragh would get a beating for his crime, but who would deliver it was her call—his males or the females in the basement.” Abertha’s thin lips quaver. “And who do you think she chose?”

“The females,” I whisper.

“Of course. The females. It’s hardly a choice, is it?”

“What happened?” My heart already aches.

“They didn’t fall on him at first. They hung back, and when the males shoved them at Darragh, they pulled their punches, protected him with their bodies from the more feral females. Declan lost his temper. He warned them—if they didn’t give Darragh a beating he wouldn’t forget, his males would give him another he wouldn’t walk away from, and each of them would get one, too. Several of the females had sisters with them down there.”

I’m going to throw up. I don’t want to listen, don’t want to hear, don’t want to know.

“Declan backed the females into a corner. He opened Pandora’s box, and when they had no choice but to use their claws, all their rage, all the pain and anguish and despair that they were never allowed to show, that would have been death for them to show, came spilling out like flushing a septic wound.” Abertha stops, blinking her eyes. “They say that by the end, the males couldn’t pull the females off of him. They gave Darragh up for lost.”

My stomach lurches. “His sister?”

“Declan had her held back. She would’ve protected her brother, and the females would’ve torn her limb from limb.”

“But Darragh lived.”

Abertha nods. “It was a miracle—although I don’t think he would call it that. At the very last moment, by some power that I do not know and have never seen or heard tell of since, his wolf burst out of his skin.”

“But he was a pup.” Males don’t shift until their voices have dropped and their facial hair is at least starting to come in.

“He was. Too young to control the wolf. And the wolf—it was huge, but it wasn’t fully formed.”

I think of the great, golden-brown beast and his glowing, unfathomable stare as he dropped the bloody head of the man

who hurt me at my feet.

“What’s wrong with his wolf?”

Abertha tosses her shoulder. “I can’t see into every mind, especially a wolf like that. Maybe he’s insane. Maybe he has a justifiable thirst for revenge against a people who forced him too early into a cruel world.”

“But Darragh isn’t mad.”

“No, he’s not.”

“The man and the wolf are two sides of the same coin.” That’s what the elders teach us.

“Are they?” Abertha raises an eyebrow.

I answer without hesitation. “No.”

They can’t possibly be. Darragh’s wolf is arrogant, vicious, a monster with a lust for blood. Darragh—Darragh tries to feed me apples. He doesn’t want me to chip a tooth on buckshot. Nearly mindless from rut, he still coiled his own arms in chains so he wouldn’t hurt me.

“That’s blasphemy.” Abertha’s lips curve in a sly smirk.

I shrug. I never paid much attention when the elders sat us down on full moon days to drone on about Fate and the purpose of creation and the duality of our nature. I was always daydreaming, and whenever I did listen, what they said was either demonstrably untrue, or if it was true, too mean-spirited for me to get behind.

Abertha smiles. “You’re quicker than most to accept that you’ve been taught bullshit.”

“Darragh is nothing like his wolf.” And his wolf is nothing like him.

“But you don’t get one without the other.”

A spark of irritation brings me back into the moment. “I know that.” I don’t want this female telling me anything about my bond.

I hate that he has this whole past, that he's lived this whole life, and that I have to be told about it by his friend with benefits.

"His wolf is cool with me." It's a stupid thing to claim, and I only say it to cover how stupid I feel.

"You've met his wolf in your human form?" Abertha's eyebrows rise.

My face burns. That's what I get for bragging that I have some kind of special connection with the mate who I hadn't spent more than a half hour with before we were kidnapped.

"No," I admit.

"But your wolf has met him?"

I nod.

Abertha sinks back in her chair, speculation in her eyes. "What did he do?"

"Gave me a human's head."

She bursts out in a cackle. "Well, that's an auspicious beginning." She sobers. "I wish I knew how to fix a broken wolf, but I don't. I do know it's foolish to think love will do it. Or wishful thinking." She leans forward and seizes my gaze, her brief amusement gone, replaced by a hardness that sends shivers down my spine. "Don't go near his wolf in your human skin. If his wolf kills you, he won't survive it. Do you understand?"

I jerk a nod. I wish she would leave. I get it. She knows him. She knows his past. I don't. He might have claimed me, but he can never be a real mate to me.

We went through hell together, and it won't change anything. Our mating was made impossible years before I was even born.

When I don't say anything, Abertha collects herself, rising from her chair, smoothing her skirt.

"I'll tell him you're feeling better. You didn't want the healing," she says.

I stare past her at the empty beds, lost in misery, feeling all the burns and scrapes. Abertha's almost to the door when a question pops into my head out of nowhere.

"Hey," I call after her. "In the basement, did his wolf kill all the females except his sister?"

Abertha stops, and for a second, I think she doesn't want to tell me, that she might dodge the question, but then she firms her jaw and says, "None of the females died from their wounds. His wolf took out four of Declan's lieutenants, though. It was sheer luck that none of the females were lost."

There's no doubt in her voice.

She sweeps out of the infirmary, and the air lightens. Kennedy, Annie, and Una hustle back in, trailed by Old Noreen and Rowan and a few other females.

I let Annie fuss over me, dabbing at the caked-on blood in my curls with a warm washcloth, promising that she'll get it all out when we get home.

The females chatter in low tones, and my mind drifts.

Abertha is so confident, such an immense presence, that when she speaks, I believe her to my bones. But now that she's gone, and my nerves are settling down, and I really think about what she said—

There is a whole lot of stuff she doesn't know—like how to fix a broken wolf. What magic allowed Darragh to shift so young. What exactly is wrong with his wolf. Whether she should meddle or not.

Maybe she shouldn't.

Maybe she knows more about Darragh than I do, but Fate gave him to *me*.

Even if he isn't here.

Even if my heart breaks for what he was turned into before I was even born.

DARRAGH

I stare at the infirmary door from the porch of the purser's office across the way. Females murmur amongst themselves in undertones on the lawn, clustered in front of the building where Mari's resting. They show no signs of dispersing.

Part of me wants to get the fuck out of here.

My skin crawls when I'm this close to so many packmates. My wolf prowls the edge of the border between us, growling menacingly at the back of my throat. The females cast me anxious looks and shuffle closer to each other, but they don't leave their self-appointed stations.

I'm exhausted. If the wolf fights me for our skin, I'm not a hundred percent sure I'll win, and I swore years ago that I'd never risk it. I should leave, but I don't.

Mari's here, and she needs water and medicine. I can give her that, but she needs her packmates. She needs that comfort. I taught myself not to need the pack years ago, but I remember it. The illusion of safety. Belonging.

I want to be back in my own territory. Fuck talking to the human government and waiting to "liaison" with the other packs like Killian wants. If I can get back to where they held us, I can track the fuckers. End them. *Do* something.

I start for the path, but the second I make a move, Killian emerges around the corner from the direction of the lodge. He looks like I feel, but at least he's clean. I still have dried

human viscera all over me, stuck in my hair, my ears. Well, it's mostly human viscera. My lips peel back from my teeth as Killian saunters over, and he reads the expression correctly as a smile.

“You look like shit,” he says.

I grunt.

“Go get a shower. I'll hang out here for a bit.”

Instantly, the urge to bail is replaced by an unshakable determination to stay right fucking here. I cross my arms.

Killian shrugs. “Suit yourself, but I'm standing downwind. You smell worse than you look.” He circles to stand at my left. “We're gonna need you at the lodge before long. The human bureau has to fly in, but they'll be here within the hour.”

My wolf rumbles.

“I don't like 'em either, but we can't leave 'em to Madog Collins this time, even if we wanted to.”

“Why not?” Madog handles the humans, and we let him think he's in charge of all of us. That's the deal.

“He's gone off to find himself or some such shit.” Killian snorts. “Or Moon Lake offed him around the time Cadoc took off to start his new pack, and they've managed to keep it quiet.”

“Seriously?” Madog Collins is as close to a king as North American shifterdom has. He's an institution, and a canny, vicious motherfucker to boot. I can't imagine anyone taking him out. I wonder if Abertha's heard anything. She was born to Moon Lake pack, and she keeps a place there. There seems to be no love lost between her and Madog, though. She spits every time she has to mention him by name.

“I guess the whole plan for a united shifter nation under Moon Lake is a bust.” Killian smirks. “What with Madog M.I.A., and his own pup founding a new pack. It's anarchy now.”

“You like to see it,” I say.

Killian nods. “You do.”

We stand for a few moments in silence, listening to the murmurs of the females and the nighttime animals taking up in the woods surrounding this cluster of cabins. I neither scent nor hear anything that doesn't belong, but my nerves don't unwind. They can't. I can't see Mari, and there is a raw pain flowing through the bond. Abertha's supposed to be healing her.

I should go in there.

And do what? Say what?

We're back here, and everything that for a moment in time seemed so clear—protect Mari, keep her safe at all costs, keep her calm, soothe her fears—none of that is necessary now, at least not in this moment. So what do I do?

Who's the bigger threat to her now—the humans behind the kidnapping, or me?

I feel as trapped in my indecision as I felt when I was chained in that box, and the claustrophobia riles my wolf, his growl rising, unsettling the females. Killian's wolf hears a challenge, and his reply rattles Killian's ribs. Unnerved, the females inch even further away.

“Maybe you should take a minute. Walk it off.” Killian gestures toward my rumbling chest.

“Maybe I should,” I say. I fold my arms tighter.

After a few more moments of quiet, except for our vocal wolves, Killian clears his throat. “I saw the bite.”

Out of nowhere, a wave of pride warms my chest.

“So you're gonna take her out to your place, now?” he asks.

My whole body tenses. The urge to run rides me hard. Mari's so small. The tips of her fingers can barely curl between mine when we're palm to palm.

And in case I'm in danger of letting myself forget, my brain casts up the memory of my wolf's claw slicing through

her soft skin, the horrible scent of her blood in the air.

But then I think about walking away, and I want to puke. I want to fight something that can fight back. I glance over at Killian.

Immediately, he takes a step back. “No way, man. I got G-men landing in fifteen, and Moon Lake nerds plugging all kinds of computers into the outlets down the lodge, and when they trip the breaker, Dermot’s gonna lose his fucking shit. I don’t have time to regulate your emotions with my fists.”

Regulate your— “What?”

“That’s what Una says your deal is. She says you use violence and aggression to regulate your emotions.”

I don’t know where to start with that. “You don’t?”

“I do, but it’s different.”

“How?”

“I do it in a ring. You roam around the foothills, killing shit. That’s just a little more badass.”

I raise an eyebrow.

He tosses a shoulder. “I can admit it. I’m evolving as a male. Ask my mate.” He pauses. “Actually, take my word for it. Stay away from her until you get that business tamped back down.” He gestures again at where my wolf’s growls are vibrating my pecs.

“I should get out of here,” I say, but still, I make no move to go.

“Do what you gotta do, but you need to talk to the humans. I know you’re thinking you can track the hunters, but it’s been almost a full day, and we’re dealing with an organized and well-funded operation. There’s not gonna be signs; I don’t care if you are The Mercenary.”

“That’s a dumb fucking nickname,” I say.

Killian grunts in agreement.

“I don’t do it for money.” It’s always bothered me that the young ones make up shit to call me, but I understand the impulse. Haunt of the Hills is less scary than the reality that exile sometimes isn’t punishment, it’s necessary.

Killian slides his cool gaze from roaming over his people to rest on me. “You do it for her.”

I do.

“And for us,” he says.

My jaw contracts.

“Your pack.” His shoulders square, a grimness falling across his face. “Listen, man. The past—it happened. The scars—they’re real. The past made us what we are. It broke shit that can never be fixed. I will never deny that.”

It’s undeniable. I live with that fact rampaging inside me, every moment of every day.

“But, you know, other shit is true, too. Some broken shit heals with time. Some scars, man, we give them to ourselves.” Killian rests his hands on his hips and arches his back, stretching. “And you know, all these years, you never left us. Not you. Not your wolf.”

A fist clenches my heart and squeezes. “And your point is?”

“You think you should bail.” He chuckles even though I don’t try to deny it. “You know what they say about a dude who only has a hammer?”

“No, what?”

“Every problem looks like a nail.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re saying.”

“I’m saying—how well did bailing work out last time?” He jerks his chin toward the infirmary. “For her?” He shakes his head like he’s out on a limb without a net, and that this isn’t a conversation he knows how to have. Do any of us?

“Man,” he says. “The one thing I know about females is that you might think you’re doing the right thing, but you

should just—” He struggles for the word. “Just think better.”

“Think better?”

He’s really flustered, his face all tight and mean, and despite all the garbage rattling around in my brain, it’s entertaining.

“You know what I mean,” he says.

I don’t. I have no clue.

We fall back into silence. He gets on his phone and starts tapping. After a few minutes, Abertha emerges from the infirmary. She gives me a somber nod, but she doesn’t come over, instead making her way toward her cottage. She’s probably feeling itchy from being around so many folks. We’re similar in that way. She’d let me know if there was something wrong with Mari.

Mari doesn’t like Abertha. Mari’s suspicion has always flowed clear through the bond. It isn’t like that between the witch and I, though. I was a young male when I took out a feral who’d messed with her cat. Abertha was grateful—lonely and bored and hot as shit, no matter her age, which I’ve never been able to figure out.

As for me—well, I was nineteen or twenty, and she was willing.

Mari’s not gonna want to hear that, though, and I’d rather peel my own skin off than see her blue eyes go big and shiny when I try to bumble through that explanation.

I cannot wrap my brain around taking Mari back to my place, caring for her, *talking* to her.

It’s not that I don’t want it. I want it so fucking bad.

But how do you do something like that?

I’ve been alone since I was a nine-year-old pup.

How do you feed a female and bed her and leave her during the day to hunt when at any minute, she could be taken from you—you could not be strong enough, you could let down your guard for a second—and then you have to live in

an empty place again, but you know what it feels like for shit to be different?

I stare at the infirmary door as the females filter back inside to watch over my mate. I've never felt so lost, and my wolf has never been so restless, tetchy, and inscrutable.

The question is kind of moot—I'd never hurt Mari to avoid pain myself, and it'd hurt her if I walked away.

But how can I keep her safe if I stay when I have this beast inside me?

There are no answers, and I can't be here anymore, standing around, ruminating about shit I cannot and never have been able to change, and wishing shit was different than it is.

I clap Killian on the back. "You'll stay here?"

He eyes me. I keep my face carefully blank.

He nods. "When I need to go, I'll have Lucan and Fallon guard her."

My wolf growls. Killian raises an eyebrow. I swallow the sound, jerk a nod, and set off into the woods where late evening shadows are gathering.

MARI

After I sleep for a few hours and wake up stiff as a board, Una and Cheryl agree that I'm recovered enough to leave the infirmary. Kennedy and Annie help me back to our cabin. Lucan and Fallon follow us, wearing shoulder holsters. Kennedy says Killian has ordered that all the males be armed, and he's tightened patrols.

I didn't think Lucan could hold any more swagger, but that was before they let him carry a gun. He's strutting around like Wyatt Earp in a ribbed tank and low hanging athletic shorts.

Una says that Darragh is at the lodge with Killian, his lieutenants, and Cadoc Collins, the new alpha of Old Den Pack, and his council. Ivo and Tye tracked our trail back to where the container was. Apparently, it's gone, as well as the bodies we left behind. They did find a burn pit, hastily covered with dirt and leaves, filled with the charred remnants of clothes and shoes.

They're figuring out the logistics of how to analyze the clothes, give some peace to the folks who've lost people, but the priority is tracking the humans who've been hunting us.

We're hearing all this from the packmates who drop by to check on me. I've never gotten this much attention in my life. Kennedy had to kick people out so I could bathe, redress my wounds, and eat. I don't have much of an appetite, but I can't drink enough water.

I curl up on the sofa, drifting off and startling awake. Hydrating. Waiting.

When will Darragh come?

Will he come?

As it gets later, the stream of visitors tapers off. Annie excuses herself to bed. Kennedy changes into her comfy sweats and puts on a movie. Out on the porch, Lucan and Fallon shoot the shit in undertones.

Is Darragh just going to leave me here? Go back to his shack in the woods like nothing changed?

Did anything change?

My fingers skim the hot skin surrounding my claiming mark. The bite itself is an angry red, but it's already hurting less. I didn't bite him. Will that make it easier for him to walk away? For me to get left again?

I ease onto my feet, shuffle to the kitchen, open the refrigerator door and stare at what I already knew was in there. I hate this feeling.

So why am I feeling it?

Screw this. I hobble down the hall to my room and change into a pair of soft leggings and a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt. As I move, the stiffness eases although I still feel battered and bruised. I slip on a pair of boots and tell Kennedy I'm heading down to the lodge. She jumps up to come with me, but I tell her that I'll take Lucan and Fallon. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she's chewed the skin beside her thumbnail raw. She needs a break.

Fallon and Lucan don't want me to leave the cabin, but when I walk past them and head down the path, they fall in behind me, grumbling about how Darragh is going to beat the shit out of them, and it'll be all my fault, and they'd haul my ass back, but then Darragh would tear their heads off for touching me.

A memory of Smith's dented skull dropping into the dirt flashes in my mind, and my stomach goes queasy. I pick up my pace, a sense of urgency coming over me.

I listen to the bond, following it as I trip down the path past the A-roster cabins across the lawn to the lodge. Unfamiliar males are clustered out front, grim-faced, speaking in hushed tones. I smell Moon Lake, Salt Mountain, and an earthy variation of Moon Lake that must be the new Old Den Pack.

North Border must not have gotten here yet.

As I pass the strangers, whispers follow me. *That's her. The lone wolf's mate.*

Warmth sparks to life in my chest. My wolf lifts her head.

I climb the steps, Lucan and Fallon in my wake, and for the first time, I feel like the center of attention. It's strange, but I'm not worried about it. I'm worried about my mate. He's here. I can feel him through the bond, but I can't tell which version I'm going to find—the cold and silent male who cast me aside four years ago or the male who recited plot summaries to keep me calm and called me brave and beautiful.

I know which one I want. I know how quickly and irreversibly my foolish heart has pinned its hopes on him. And I also know how many times in my life fate has broken my way.

I open the glass door, my heart speeding like everything is riding on this next moment, like I've got no hard shell left, like I've shed whatever resilience I once had, and now I'm raw and pink and exposed.

There are twice as many males in the lodge as were gathered outside. Some are on laptops and phones, some sitting or hovering as if they're waiting for orders. Up on the dais, someone has pushed together two tables, and a dozen males surround it, gesturing at a huge map.

Darragh is up there next to Killian, talking to two males in black suits. A harsh chemical scent assails my nose, and my stomach churns. Humans.

My wolf growls as my claws extend, snicking through my fingertips. Darragh's gaze flies to mine. My pulse skids to a halt.

Without a second's hesitation, he stops mid-sentence, steps down from the dais, and strides across the floor, straight for me. My wolf yips, and my claws slide back.

He's had a shower. His skin is marred like mine with scrapes and bruises, but he's clean. His hair is combed and his beard is trimmed. He's wearing a fresh flannel and a different pair of his same old blue jeans. My heart pitter-pats back to life.

This male is my mate.

As he passes, our packmates pay him the homage they would an alpha, the quick lowering of eyes, the subtle dip of the head. The overhead lights catch the flecks of gray in his hair and beard, and when his gaze catches mine, I can't help but notice the creases in the corners of his eyes and bracketing his lips have deepened from exhaustion. No one looking at him—at how he carries himself—could doubt that this male has been through it and emerged from the other side, not once, but many times.

Yet, despite that, in the wide-open brown of his irises and the way he holds himself when he stops inches from me, tense and stone-faced and vibrating with nerves, I can imagine the nine-year-old, alone except for the sister taken from him, fighting his way down the stairs that are still just over there, on the other side of this very lodge.

I know how he would have fought.

He fought that way for me.

I shiver.

He shakes himself off and begins to unbutton his flannel.

I watch with a cat holding my tongue. He peels off the shirt, revealing a tight, worn undershirt that clings to his pecs, and drapes the flannel over my shoulders, nudging me to stick my arms in the sleeves. I do. He steps closer to button me up, and I smell sunshine in the middle of the night.

Tingles begin low in my belly, and a wave of shyness creeps over me. Even with my eyes cast down, I know everyone's looking at us.

“I didn’t want to interrupt you,” I say, my cheeks heating, as if that isn’t exactly what I did.

“You were sleeping.” His fingers haven’t left the placket of his shirt. He smooths it down, his hand hovering over the place where the bond flows from him to me and back the other way.

“You haven’t slept yet,” I say. It’s a guess.

He shakes his head.

We stare at each other, flushing and awkward as hell, and I vaguely register that the others are going back to their conversations and devices.

Is he thinking about the container? About what we did?

My fingers fly to the bite mark. He tracks the movement, and before I can lower my hand, he’s gently tugging my collar away from my neck, and our fingers tangle.

He sucks in a breath. “It’s red. Is it supposed to be red like that?”

I have no idea. “It doesn’t hurt as bad as it did.”

He tenses and drops his hands to his side. “You wouldn’t let Abertha touch it?”

My stomach turns. “It’s my mark.”

His shoulders relax. The answer seems to assuage his displeasure. “She’s a friend, you know. She just wants to help.”

I take a step back and fold my arms. “*Your* friend.”

Slashes of color appear under his cheekbones, and his gaze darts around the lodge, like he’s looking for an out or an assist.

I don’t know why I’m pressing the point. I understand how things were between them, and it’s not like we’re a normal mated couple, and even if we were, you don’t get to be upset because your mate had experiences before you found them. That’s way outdated thinking.

I still hate her, and there’s no way she’s touching my bite mark.

He takes a step forward, leaning closer. No one is near enough to overhear, but still, he pitches his voice lower when he says, “There’s been no one since I noticed you.”

Blood floods my face. Part of me wants to change the subject, but I don’t know what to change it to, and I don’t know what I’m doing here except I couldn’t stay away from him any longer.

Is this how it’s going to be from now on? Me chasing him?

My frightened eyes cling to his vaguely panicked ones, my brain clinging to what he just said so I don’t spin into a full-blown freak out. He hasn’t been with anyone since he noticed me? “That morning at Abertha’s cottage?”

He blinks, the line between his eyebrows reappearing. “It was before that.”

It’s my turn to blink. “Before that?”

He shifts in his boots, scrubs his neck, and glances over his shoulder at the males conferring on the dais. “Let’s get out of here for a while, eh?”

The change of subject throws me, but I’m quick to nod. I don’t like being around this many strange males. It’s the opposite feeling of the females gathered around me in the infirmary.

“Wait here,” he says. He goes to talk to Killian, and one of the humans interrupts, showing him something on a phone. He shakes his head, cutting him off, and returns to me.

While he was preoccupied, no one came over or even shot me a glance. It’s like there’s a bubble around me or an invisibility cloak. I’m female, the only shifter with blonde curls that I know of, and I have boobs. Males always look, especially those from other packs. But not in this room, not now.

It’s a weird feeling. I kind of like it.

As Darragh strides back to me, it hits me hard. My life is different now. Even if we go back to pretending each other doesn’t exist, I’m not going to be little Mari anymore, going

about my honey and craft business, more or less background scenery for the high-ranking wolves in this pack.

I'll be Mari, the lone wolf's rejected mate.

My stomach sours.

"Want to go somewhere?" Darragh asks when the door of the lodge shuts behind us.

"Yeah."

He takes my hand to lead me across camp and blood roars in my ears. Is he taking me back to the guest cabin from the night we mated?

But we turn off past the commissary and up the path to the garage, and I calm down, but not entirely. My wolf is on edge, too, pacing our boundary, whining.

It's late in the afternoon, and the sun is lower in the pale blue sky. It's a perfect fall day, yellow and red leaves rustling, air so clear that the caws of crows ring out like bells.

When we get to the garage, Liam's there as usual. He gives me a wave, but instead of wandering over like he usually does when I come by to borrow a vehicle, he hangs back by the truck he's working on.

Lucan and Fallon followed us from the lodge, and unlike when they escorted me earlier, now that I'm with Darragh, they hang back, too.

I can actually scent their unease. It's not fear, exactly, but it's damn close. They keep Darragh in their sights, and like the males at the lodge, they give him a wide berth.

It strikes me, hard in the sternum, how freaking lonely it must be to be him. It stops me in my tracks.

Darragh pauses, too, stopped short by my hold on his rough hand. He casts me a concerned frown. I squeeze his hand, as tight as I can, my small hand enveloped in his, his grip easily strong enough to crush my bones, but so gentle, so careful. His lips curve, bemused.

“Don’t be scared,” he murmurs in his deep, gruff voice. “It’s safe. Killian has doubled patrols, and we’ll take the pups with us.” He means Lucan and Fallon.

I watched this male decimate a half dozen trained, armed men in a matter of minutes. I’m not scared of any humans, but it’s not because of the “pups” and their guns.

We must be leaving camp, though. I’m grateful. The pack’s attention—and the studious distance of the males—is fraying my nerves.

Darragh goes to speak to Liam, and in short order, Liam rustles up keys to three of the ATVs that the pack keeps in an outbuilding behind the garage. Lucan hops on his first and guns his engine, shooting off to the north like he knows where he’s heading.

Darragh mounts a four-wheeler and offers me a hand, helping me climb on behind him.

“I haven’t ridden one of these before.” I laugh, nervous.

My thighs are cradling his hips, and unless I suck in my stomach, which I can’t with all the aches and pains, I can’t help but press my front to his back. He smells like soap and dust motes floating in a lazy ray of sunshine. I have no idea how that scent is stored as a memory in my mind, but it is, and it’s the perfect description.

I rest my cheek against his shoulder blade. He revs the engine, but he doesn’t tear off like Lucan. He drives carefully, zigzagging to avoid ditches, making the path as smooth as he can. Fallon follows us at a distance. He zigzags, too, but he does it so he can hit more jumps.

It’s a long ride, but I don’t mind. Pretty soon, I realize that we’re heading toward his shack. I’m not super excited about going back there, but we’re almost alone again, and that soothes the unsettled feeling I’ve had since we came back to Quarry Pack territory, and he left me at the infirmary.

As we approach his clearing, the trees are thick, so I don’t see what he’s done until we’re there, and he’s cutting the

engine. I stare up and up, squinting, shading my eyes as I half slide, half push myself off the wide seat. My jaw drops.

I gape, and Darragh comes to stand beside me.

“You built a treehouse,” I mutter, gobsmacked.

He grunts, strides forward, and looks up at what he’s done.

It’s amazing. The shack is still there, leaning starboard, mushrooms sprouting from the moss on the roof, but in the tall oaks in the tree line beyond it, a freaking treehouse rises from the stout branches. And it’s not the sort of thing a male would make for a pup or like you’d see in a picture book, nothing like that.

It has *levels*. It has *architectural details*.

I saw a movie once at the Moon Lake school when the teacher was sick, and they’d wrangled a random elder to watch us. The movie was about a family who was shipwrecked on a deserted island, and they built a treehouse with a skylight and running water and a parlor with a piano.

This is like that if it’d been made by a lone wolf shifter and not a set design crew.

Like the shack, the steep-pitched roofs tilt a little to starboard. The eaves are hung with white gingerbread trim. On the lower levels, the design is a simple scallop, uneven in places, but at the very top, the design is as delicate and as elaborate as snowflakes.

It’s like a nursery rhyme treehouse. The shutters and siding are a motley mix of bright red, yellow, and green, and at the top, there is a round turret with a big window and a flower box filled with gold mums.

Darragh turns to face me, his expression battened down, his shoulders squared, his spine ramrod straight.

The incongruity strikes me, searing the image into my mind. This male with his gray-threaded hair and bristly beard, rugged in his worn jeans and scuffed boots, strong and proud despite the obvious toll of the years, standing tall, almost

defiant, in front of this fairy tale cottage he's built with his own hands.

The hands that tore apart the men who hurt me.

"You built it for me," I say, my voice strangely soft.

"I got the idea the first time I noticed you," he says.

I remember what he said earlier. "Not the morning at Abertha's?"

He shakes his head. "No. Way before that. Down in camp. I was heading out from dropping off a kill. You were up in a tree with a book."

Oh, I remember. "You gave me a dirty look."

"You were hiding up a tree to sneak something on your phone. You were so fucking young."

"You knew then?"

His jaw clenches. "I stayed away."

I crane my neck to check out the top of the treehouse. It's mostly hidden by leaves, but the very tip top clears the canopy, and above a white cupola, there's a copper weathervane, tarnished green, and where there should be a rooster, there's a mermaid, her tail pointing east.

It's everything I would have loved back then. Before.

I don't know what to say if I don't want to cry.

I approach the hanging rope ladder. Darragh holds it taut so it's easier to climb, but I'm still short of breath by the time I reach the first platform. I sit on the edge, dangling my legs over, to catch my breath. Darragh lowers himself beside me.

We're silent for a while. Up this high, I can pick out the lodge's roof and some of the more exposed cabins in camp from the fall foliage. In the far distance, the steeples of the churches in Chapel Bell rise into the washed out blue sky.

Lucan and Fallon's vehicles are parked down by the shack, but they've made themselves scarce.

It's peaceful out here, but it's also lonely, being able to see camp, but too far to make out packmates walking about their business or scent them on the wind.

Again, my heart hurts, thinking about all the years Darragh spent out here alone. I shift so my leg presses against his. His thigh tenses, but he doesn't move.

After a few more minutes of quiet, he exhales, and like I've drawn a confession from him, he says, "I needed to build something where you'd be safe from the wolf. He can't get up the ladder."

The ache in my heart stings a little worse. "You meant for me to move up here?"

He growls low in his throat and stares straight ahead. "I didn't know how to talk to you, so I just kept on making it bigger."

I twist my neck. The crooked levels rise into the branches like something out of a picture book. The words "you could have talked to me" come to my lips, but for some reason, I bite them back.

He could have come by the cabin. He could have ripped his trauma open for me to see, so I'd understand, so I'd forgive him. So that maybe, I'd never look at him without pity in my eyes again.

The male who'd exiled himself to protect the pack, but who never left, who ranged the foothills protecting us despite everything—he could have sat eighteen-year-old me down and explained to the girl knee-deep in daydreams and her own unresolved grief that sometimes we cannot be other than what we are, even when it breaks our hearts.

That the past has claws. That it casts a long shadow. That its shackles feel unbreakable.

Would he have been able to make me understand?

I don't know.

I don't really know how I'm getting it now. It didn't come over me all at once. There was no epiphany. But when I try to

track it back, I think about how he never quite disappeared. I remember a hundred packages wrapped in white butcher paper with my name printed in careful block letters.

At first, I threw them in the trash. Then, I tossed them in the fridge with the rest, called it guilt, counted it for nothing.

I never *questioned*.

Because I knew about the past, didn't I? I learned from my mother about its claws, its inescapable shadow. How impossible it is to carry your own pain and the pain of the person who hurt you at the same time.

But I understand now.

I wind my arm over Darragh's and twine my fingers in his. Through the bond, I feel his tension seep away.

He couldn't talk to me, and I couldn't listen. A fated pair.

He coughs. "I was going to dig a tiger pit. With stakes, you know? But then I thought that wouldn't be good. If there were pups. They could fall." Darragh's head bows as he considers the ground beneath our swinging feet.

"Pups?" Something quickens in my stomach, and it's gone so fast, and I'm still so shaken from the past forty-eight hours that I'm not sure whether it's excitement or terror.

He grunts and rises to his feet, offering me a hand. I take it. He helps me up and guides me through an arched hobbit door to a room with glowing wood floors and what looks like a homemade rocking chair, also polished to a shine.

"I thought this could be the living room," he says. I rock the chair. It doesn't squeak at all.

He leads me through a back door, up a pair of floating stairs to a platform with no walls, only a peaked roof and a carved railing. His battered trunk sits in a corner with a few crates and his rolled up sleeping bag.

"This is where I've been sleeping." He doesn't let us linger in this room, hurrying me on up a flight of circular stairs to a large room with a high ceiling. There are fairy lights wound

around exposed wood beams, and with dusk beginning to fall, they make the space cozy and warm.

“There’s electricity?” I scan the floorboards, and yes, there are outlets.

“I had help with that.” He says it grudgingly, like he’d rather not admit it. “An outfit out of Moon Lake. When I finish the bath house and summer kitchen, they’re going to hook them up with plumbing, too.”

“There’s a bath house and a summer kitchen?”

“There will be.” Darragh shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’ve still got work to do.”

Darragh hangs back by the door, and I wander around, exploring. There’s a big brass four poster bed with no mattress and a dark oak bureau with a beautiful antique mirror. The silver backing has worn off in a way that would have sent eighteen-year-old romantic me into raptures.

On the far side of the bed, there is a stack of boxes. The instant I see them, my eyes prickle, my heart lifting like a balloon. They’re mine.

I sink down on the floor, cross-legged, and take the lid off the top box, already knowing what I’ll see.

It’s like a time capsule, everything as neat as I packed it. The embroidered wall hangings I traded a human woman for at the farmers’ market, one with every species of North American butterfly, the other with every variety of wild mushroom. The dried flower crown that Annie made me for my sixteenth birthday. My teacup and glass perfume bottle collections.

A hot tear overflows my lashes as my hands hover over my old treasures. It doesn’t feel like stuff I had a few years ago. They feel like artifacts from a lost civilization, the me before I got older and wiser, the me that knew things I can’t remember now, but wish with all my heart I could.

With cautious steps, Darragh crosses the room and squats so we’re on a level, the box between us.

“You took them from the commissary,” I say.

“Yeah.”

A tear dribbles down my cheek. Darragh tenses, a vein popping in his neck.

“You built this house for me.”

He jerks his chin.

“And for our pups.”

He nods again.

“You thought it would end up like this?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not in a million years.”

“But you built this anyway.”

He glances away, toward the open door. “If you don’t want to live all the way out here, I can build another one. Closer to camp.” His brow creases. “Trees aren’t as tall down there. I might need to dig the pit.”

I gaze up at him in profile, marveling, memorizing the strong lines of his nose, his jaw, the stubbornness of his chin, the piercing ache of his warm brown eyes. This male belongs to me.

He came for me.

He bailed, but he didn’t leave me. He’s been around.

I sit back flat on my butt, dig the crown out of the box, and set it on my head. Baby’s breath falls like confetti on my shoulder. Darragh looks at me like I’m a terrifying and unpredictable creature that could bring him to his knees at any time.

Slowly, he follows my lead and lowers himself to sit on the floor, too.

I take a teacup out, unwrapping it from the brown paper I packed it in. It’s bone china with blue roses and a gold trim that’s rubbed off in places.

I hold it up. Darragh duly considers it, his mouth a straight line, brows contracted.

“This was my nana Doreen’s. She was my dad’s mother.”

He nods, very serious. It’s so strange, a male as dominant and rough and weathered as him, sitting on the floor with me in this girly room, intent on whatever I say. It makes me feel strange.

Cracked open.

Precious.

“I never met her. She passed from grief a few years after my da was killed. Anyway, that’s what my ma said.” An elder brought a box of her things to our cabin, but Ma wouldn’t touch it. She told me to take what I wanted and haul the rest down to the white elephant table at the commissary.

“I didn’t know her. She kept her distance.” I turn the cup in my hand. Besides being well-used and old, there’s nothing special about it. The gold is probably paint. “I don’t know why. Maybe she was ashamed of what her son tried to do to me. Or maybe Ma held her responsible somehow.”

“He’d gone moon mad, hadn’t he?”

I blink up. How old would he have been back then? I was a baby. He would’ve been seventeen or eighteen. When did he move out to the shack in the foothills?

“Were you living in camp when it happened?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I heard tell of it.”

“I guess he was moon mad. He was definitely drunk. Ma always cursed him for what he did. She wouldn’t have if he was sick.”

“He attacked you and mauled Una. Either way, it was his fault.”

I hear him, and I know he’s not talking about my da, or at least, not *just* about my da.

“I don’t blame you anymore for what your wolf did.”

Darragh’s teeth clench. He doesn’t respond, doesn’t meet my eyes. It’s clear, he doesn’t give himself any grace.

“I don’t think he’d do it again.” I’m not sure why I think it, but as soon as the thought pops into my head, my gut knows it’s true.

His wolf isn’t mad. He’s ferocious and bloodthirsty and unmerciful, but he does things for a reason, and he likes my wolf. More than likes her. And he’s not stupid. He would understand that hurting me would hurt her. He wouldn’t do it.

A growl sounds in Darragh’s throat, and by the timbre, I can tell it’s him, not his wolf. Now, his flashing eyes find me. “No,” he says. “You’re wrong.”

“How do you know?”

He strikes his fist to his chest, hard, and scowls. “He’s in here, isn’t he?”

I tuck my hand between the buttons of the worn flannel I’m wearing, pressing my hand to my own chest, to the place where the bond flows between us.

“He’s here, too,” I say. “Isn’t he?”

He’s already shaking his head. “No, Mari. Don’t get ideas. I’ll keep him away. You don’t worry about it.”

I raise myself up on my knees, pushing the box to the side so it isn’t a barrier. “He’s part of you. That means he’s mine, too.”

He’s going to argue. His lips are forming the words, but then his brain must catch on to what I said.

“He’s yours, too?” The gold rings around his irises light up.

I nod.

“I’m yours?” He rumbles the syllables.

I nod again.

For a second, we balance on a precipice, lungs frozen, gazes locked, trying to read the truth in each other’s eyes. Longing to believe. Scared to reach out, scared to hold on.

Everything gets taken away. Nothing is guaranteed.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you again,” he says, and I know he means himself, too.

“I know.” I reach out and brush my fingertips across his soft bottom lip, and I smile for him, so he knows what I mean—he’s not alone anymore. “You’re my mate.” I’m his. I choose him. This. Us.

A sharp growl erupts from his throat, and he crushes my curls as he grasps my head, holding me in place as he takes my mouth, stealing my breath, knocking my flower crown onto the floor. He tastes hungry and sweet and warm and like home.

Prowling over me, as fierce and relentless as his wolf, he leans me back, lays me down, his lips not leaving mine for a second, his weight settling on my chest, his hard thighs parting my legs.

“You’re mine,” he whispers against my cheek. “You’re mine,” against my temple. “You’re mine,” on my forehead, along my hairline.

“Yes,” I exhale, my fingers fumbling at his waist, tugging his undershirt free, popping the button on his jeans. I want to touch him. I want him inside me, making my body believe what he says, that I’m his, that he’ll never leave me again.

He bats my fingers away, shucking his pants and stripping me of my leggings, greedy in a way he wasn’t even when he was going into rut. Our legs tangle, smooth against rough, and his forearms pin mine to the hardwood, his palms enveloping mine, his lips quivering against the tender skin around his bite.

I feel how desperately he wants me in the tension of his muscles, the pressure of his weight, the raggedness of his breath. The knowledge makes me want things. Gives me ideas.

I nip at his lower lip, wriggling my arms until they’re free. I shove at his chest. His eyes fly open, a question shining through the gold.

“Roll over,” I tell him.

It takes him a second, and then his brow smooths and his mouth curves. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I push him as he rolls, following until I’m straddling him, spread wide, open and vulnerable in a way I’ve never been before. His happy trail bristles against my wet, swollen pussy.

I straighten my spine. My knees barely reach the floor, and my hip sockets ache. His rough hands are resting on my splayed thighs, and he’s smiling, broad and dopey and gently amused.

“What are you going to do now, Miss Mari?” he asks.

He’s so big, I feel like I’m on top of a horse. His hot cock rests against the cleft of my ass, huge and thick and insistent, and I’m not sure what to do next.

I fold forward and crush my needy breasts to his chest, pinning his forearms to the hardwood. I twine my fingers with his and gaze down into his face, drawn tight with self-restraint and bemused at the same time. His wolf rumbles, and my nipples stiffen impossibly harder.

“I guess I’m not going anywhere,” he says. His voice is happy and ragged. I do this to him. I make his eyes sparkle and his heart thump.

I lean down and kiss him, softly, licking his mouth open, sliding my tongue inside, his tortured growl buzzing my lips.

He could flip me back over as easy as pie or grab me by the waist and hold me in place as he slams his cock into me. Perched on top of him, it’s never been clearer how much bigger and stronger he is.

He’s not going to, though. He’s keeping himself very still, as if he’s afraid the slightest move will frighten me away.

I sit back up with a happy sigh. I love this. The wild male is completely tame for me.

I rock, rubbing myself against his hard lower belly to assuage the throbbing need between my legs. He groans, the creases in the corners of his eyes deepening as if in pain.

I prop myself on his chest with one palm, slipping my other hand through my legs to find him. When I do, he tenses

under me and sucks in a breath.

I notch the head of his hot cock into my aching entrance, and I smile down at him. I lean forward. My hair tumbles into my face, a curl catching in the corner of my mouth. He reaches up, freeing it, spinning it around his finger.

He smiles up at me. “So what are you gonna do, beautiful girl?”

I wriggle my hips, but I don't sink down. His smile freezes into a grimace.

I hover above him, close but not close enough, and I growl, “Say it.”

“Say what?”

I let my wolf's voice join mine, and we bend lower, our cheek brushes his, our lips dusting the crook of his neck.

“Say it.” We scrape our fangs across his skin.

He folds his arms around us.

“I'm yours,” he says, and we sink our teeth into him, taste his blood as he bucks his hips, driving in to the hilt with a snarl of victory.

He works me, and I ride him, sending the waves cresting inside me higher and higher as I lap at my mark, and he digs his fingers into my shoulders, holding me to him as if nothing in the world could ever make him let go.

“Say it again,” I pant.

“Yours,” he rasps. “Always yours.”

I wrap my arms around his straining neck, clinging for dear life, taking him, taking it all, trusting him with everything, knowing I own him, heart and soul.

The waves inside me crash, and I sob my release while Darragh snaps his hips a final time and spills inside me with a hoarse shout. Dazed and trembling, I straighten on top of my mate, my bleary gaze rising from the abandoned flower crown up to the tiny white lights strung around the sanded, stained, and polished wood beams.

In this hazy, blissed out state of mind, it looks like I always imagined happy ever after would look. The exact aesthetic.

A cold, sober thought snakes into my mind.

It can be mine.

I can be a princess in a tower.

I can have a perfect happy ending.

All I have to do is ignore the monster inside the man. Accept this perfect approximation of what I've always wanted and avert my eyes from the part of my mate that's broken and lost in the past and doomed to be alone.

Just do what this pack did. What Darragh himself did to survive.

What I did instead of fighting for us—turn away, cling to the pain, and throw up a wall so high that nothing can ever be resolved or healed, only forgotten, but never for long.

It's not good enough.

Not for me.

And not for this beautiful male smiling lazily up at me as if I'm as lovely and liable to fly away as the dried petals lying beside us on the floor.

As I gaze down into his eyes, my palms propped on his pecs, I see a flash of pure gold.

It's the wolf.

He's watching me, peering out from wherever he's been banished.

There's no rage or bloodlust in his gleaming gaze, not like the night I fled from him. He's calm. Interested.

He wants this, too. To be close. Held. Trusted.

I don't know how I can tell. The bond? Wishful thinking?

I smile into Darragh's face and curl my fingers, lightly pricking his skin with my nails. The gold glitters. My wolf purrs under my ribs. My bite is vivid and raw on his neck. For

a moment, I catch a glimpse of what perfect would actually be.
All of us. Whole. A family.

It's a dream.

I don't have them anymore.

But I could.

If I were brave enough. If I dare.



I WANT to stay at the treehouse, but Darragh doesn't want me sleeping away from camp at night until we know who the humans are who kidnapped us, and he doesn't feel like Lucan and Fallon are enough security. I'd agree about the guys, but Darragh's not counting himself.

The only reason the humans were able to take Darragh down was because they had me, and he was out of his mind. Without that advantage, there's no way they'd have a chance against him or his wolf. He'd scent them well before they could get anywhere near shooting range.

Darragh also wants to check in with the command center set up in the lodge. He says that the humans are from the branch of their government that "administrates" us. I have no idea what that means, but apparently, they're more on our side than the hunters, and they have resources we don't when it comes to tracking them down.

Darragh drops me off at my cabin. It takes everything I have not to beg him to take me with him, and it takes him a few false starts before he can leave me. He says he'll be back in a few hours. When he goes, Fallon and Lucan are at a respectable distance out on the porch, but as soon as he disappears down the path, they slip inside to play video games with Kennedy.

I'm distracted. I shower, reapply cream to my burns and put on fresh bandages, and excuse myself to lie down. Despite the exhaustion I'm still feeling as my body finishes healing up all the scrapes and bruises, I can't nap.

Now that I've got the thought in my head, I can't stop worrying at it—what if Darragh's wolf isn't mad?

Or what if he used to be, but he's changed?

Or what if he never was, but he's been made that way from the years of solitude?

Shifters are pack animals, especially in our wolf form. What would it do to a wolf if he shifted too soon, no more than a pup, ripped from his only family and sentenced to a life in exile? What does that kind of loneliness do to a soul?

I think it's made Darragh rough on the outside and burnished as smooth as diamond in his heart. Why should his wolf be so different?

I should let it go, focus on the fact that I might have a real mate now, and a new home, and maybe, possibly, a little critter in my belly. That's enough to freak out over, for sure, right?

But I keep flashing back to that moment when I was strung from the tree, suffocating and scared out of my mind, and Darragh blew through the tree line, bolting for me without a second's hesitation, arms thrown wide to protect me from the darts he must have heard coming, knowing it was a trap, knowing he didn't have a chance, but still racing for me full tilt, brave and stupid and unstoppable.

I don't know what love is. I had ideas when I was young that mostly revolved around a palette of faded pastels, bittersweet acoustic songs, and the vague notion that love would be pretty and delicate and simple.

I don't think I had it right at all. I think it's the opposite—ugly and messy and tough as gristle. It's not a miracle, not a gift out of nowhere, not a *vibe*. You make it out of thin air, from nothing, by what you do.

Like when I was a baby and Una threw her body over mine.

I think you can crush it, too. If you aren't strong enough. If you don't hold onto hope hard enough.

I lay in bed and stare at the bare walls where my fairy lights used to hang, my hand resting lightly on my stomach where maybe there's a new life growing, another love conjured up out of nothing at all, and I know in my bones that Darragh would die for us both.

I am not leaving half of him behind.

Not like I was left.

Like my mother left me.

I close my eyes, but I don't sleep. I plot, but mostly, I pray, and when Darragh's wolf howls from the path outside for my wolf to join him in the wee hours of morning, I know exactly what I'm going to do.

I only hope that once it's done, he forgives me.

DARRAGH

All those times I drove my ass out to Salt Mountain and let my wolf run, knowing he'd be too run down by the time we reached Quarry Pack territory to fight me for our skin—the fucker was paying attention.

He's been biding his time with his head down, waiting until I'd been up for almost seventy-two hours, pumped full of tranqs and descended into rut, until I'd made love to my mate twice and been forced to talk for hours to a human from the government named "Dan" and another named "Steve" who ask the same fucking questions over and over, each time like they're expecting a different fucking answer—oh, did I notice tags on the truck bed? Why, yes. I didn't tell you the first ten times because I'm a dumbass, but here you go—

The whole time, my wolf was skulking, and the instant he smelled an opening, the second I nodded off on my feet for a split second, standing in front of the lodge for a breath of fresh air, he busted out of our skin like the Kool-Aid man and tore off for Mari's cabin.

I dig my heels in, straining to wrestle him back, figuring he's gonna throw himself through the picture window or ram through her door, but he doesn't.

With a few bites and claw swipes, he runs off the two young males stationed on the porch, taking a hunk out of the slower one's ass, and then he circles the place a few times, sniffing the foundation and pissing on the flower beds.

He doesn't like that there's a male wolf in there, but he remembers his scent from the night four years ago when he saved our mate, so he's letting it slide. He wants Mari's wolf out here now, though, but he doesn't howl to the sky. He's proceeding with a caution he's never shown before. He doesn't want her mad.

That's his concern. Not that he'll terrify her small animal, but that she'll be pissed at him, and she won't want to come with him.

He's so different than he's been my whole life. The rage is there, bubbling under the surface, the need to hunt down the humans who paid to terrorize my mate and eat them, feet to head, but he's not driven by it. He wants something else more.

He pads to the front of the house, plants himself in the middle of the path, lifts his muzzle, and howls, but only once, and with what I can only call restraint. If he could speak, he'd be calling her name. Respectfully.

I tighten my grip on the reins, bracing myself, ready to heave back with all my might if she refuses to come to him, or worse, if she's foolish enough to step out on two legs.

But she doesn't make him wait long. A hidden person cracks the door, and her little white wolf wriggles out and dashes down the steps, right up to my wolf, fearless and panting with excitement, her tiny pink tongue dangling from her mouth.

My wolf stands still as she bustles around his legs, running her nose along his flank, checking to make sure all his limbs and tail are accounted for. He leans down to bump her with the flat of his head. She nips his neck. He tenses, and very deliberately, bares it to her, waiting on tenterhooks, a raw growl resonating in the back of his throat.

She casts him a sidelong glance, paces a few steps away, sits as if she's at a tea party, and lifts her snout in the air.

My wolf chuffs, amused. He shakes his fur like he's not bothered, and then herds her down the path, away from the commons and toward the foothills.

She fusses, yaps out a few barks, but soon enough, she falls in beside him. Just like he did when we were fleeing the hunters, he matches his pace to hers, but since she's going at a gentle jog now, he's basically walking. He doesn't mind.

We're totally alone. My wolf has long since cordoned off Quarry Pack territory to predators of any size, and even the smaller rodents scurry off when they catch my beast's scent. There's no living being to see Mari's wolf trot at my side, but my wolf is as puffed up and proud as if we were running with the pack.

He keeps darting glances at our bite mark, the pink peeking through her clean white fur. He's pleased that she's not matted and bloody anymore, but he wishes it wasn't healing so quickly. He considers sinking his fangs in again, matching the marks, but even before I lunge for the skin, he discards the idea. She'd fuss. He doesn't want that.

As we make our way through the woods, I let myself relax a little. He's a different animal with her. I'd call her a leash, but her company doesn't chafe. She's more like a balm. She eases the clamor in his brain, cools the rage that I thought came part and parcel with his soul.

He subtly guides her to the northwest, and at first, I think he's taking her back to our home, but then I realize he has a closer destination in mind. The dens.

My chest constricts. I feel for our skin, but I can't even get a handhold. Silent, he bares his teeth at me. If I force the shift, he's going to fight me, and I might not win.

No. Don't do this. You'll scare her. She'll run.

He ignores me. Mari's wolf is distracted by the scents carried on the breeze and the gnats swirling in our steps. She doesn't realize where he's taking her.

I'm dead on my feet. At this point, I feel like a sack of meat kept upright only through sheer force of will, and here's my wolf, impervious to exhaustion and pain as always. We run along the river for a spell, and then I drop behind Mari's wolf,

urging her to scramble up the crooked trail to the ridge leading to the old dens.

Mari's wolf is excited. She catches the scent of our kind from the packed earth and the old fire circles that are only lit these days on solstices. She turns into a ball of energy, dashing from cave mouth to cave mouth, poking her head in each opening and racing back to me, fur bristling with her daring.

My wolf herds her toward the furthest den where my grandparents lived when I was very young, before Declan Kelly forced them down to the camp to live most of their time in their human skins and abandon the old ways. The memories are so old that they don't seem like mine, more like a dream I had once and half remember.

I loved it up here. During the day, we'd run the woods, hunting and tracking, and at night, I'd curl up between my grandparents in a pile of packmates and pass out with my head on a furry flank and meaty breath in my face.

That was a long time ago.

I urge Mari inside, and she's keen enough to go. The entrance is low, but the cavern opens up, and there's enough light filtering through the opening and cracks in the roof for our wolves to see.

In my grandparent's day, tapestries hung on the walls and woven mats lined the stone floors. Now, it's bare except for plastic bins shoved against the walls filled with blankets for building nests. Some packmates still come up here to mate. They think it's good luck.

Is that why my wolf brought her here?

No. Don't try it. You'll scare her. Take her home.

Ignoring me, my wolf takes off for the back of the cavern, rumbling for Mari's wolf to follow. She does, obedient in a way I've never seen her human self be. When we get far enough from the mouth that all natural light fades, the tunnels begin to glow with light from the bare bulbs Killian's had strung up along the walls so that no adventuresome pups get lost.

When I hear the drips, I know where he's taking her. The pool. My grandmother would bring me down here when I was beginning to wear on the other elders' nerves. I thought it was magic, a pool so deep underground, perfectly clear and still and cool, the stalactites hanging down like moonstone curtains.

As soon as Mari's wolf catches sight of the water, she dashes for it, losing her footing, her claws skittering over the smooth rock floor. She lifts her paws to the side, tail flicking back and forth, and yips at me over her shoulder to join her.

My wolf stalks over to her, much more nonchalant than he feels inside. He's amped up. Totally stoked. He lifts himself next to her. They both gaze into the pool, watching their pants ripple the water. Mari's wolf leans over, lowering her muzzle to take a closer sniff.

Without warning, my wolf takes a paw and bats the surface, splashing Mari's wolf in the snout. For a second, she blinks at him, water dripping from her small black nose, betrayal in her big, round eyes.

My wolf is immediately horrified by what he's done. He actually seems to be considering handing back our skin. He's drawing back when Mari's wolf lets out an indignant yip and scrambles up and over the side, toppling into the pool with flailing limbs and yelps. She immediately begins to shake her coat, sending a spray of water in all directions, including my wolf's. He opens his mouth to howl a warning and gets a cold, wet mouthful.

Again, I brace myself, squeeze the reins, but I don't pull, not quite yet.

He raises his head, howls to the high ceiling, and then he leaps into the pool, straight over Mari's wolf, even skinnier now that she's sopping wet, and lands with a huge kerplunk, drenching the little white wolf huddling against the side of the pool. She sneezes and shakes her muzzle.

He stands stock still. The water is halfway up his legs. It skims her chin.

He lowers himself to his belly.

She narrows her eyes.

He sinks further under until the water comes just below his nostrils.

She gives herself another vigorous shake and sets off toward me, her paws slipping. She goes under twice before she makes it to my wolf to give him a nip on the shoulder out of principle. My wolf takes it without batting an eye, stretching his back legs so he's even lower, and like she's reading his mind, Mari's wolf scrambles up his side and splays herself across his back, tucking her nose into the crook of his neck.

She yips in his ear. Like a huge aquatic animal, he launches himself forward, floating across the pool. She wriggles until she makes herself comfortable, and then she lets a paw fall into the water to skim the surface. The vibration in her chest hums against my wolf's spine. He makes slow, lazy circles while she lounges, and in the elsewhere that I'm consigned to when he takes our skin, I hold my breath.

He's never been like this before. Content. Happy. At peace.

Eventually, Mari's wolf gets restless. She nips my wolf's shoulder, and he makes his way back to the edge, pulling up parallel so she can clamber out without getting wet again. He follows her out.

The wolves shake out their fur, and then they sit back on their haunches, considering each other. Mari's wolf's neck is arched back; my wolf's is curved down. Their eyes meet. It's silent deep in the cave, but it doesn't feel lonely. It feels secluded. Like nothing else exists but us. Nothing threatens.

My wolf relaxes, sinking to his belly.

And then, out of nowhere, with no warning, like a crack of thunder on a clear summer night or an earthquake, Mari's wolf changes.

She rises, her back legs elongating, spine snapping, her muzzle receding. White fur becomes pink flesh. She reaches out a trembling hand, palm up, her soft mouth curving, tentative, hopeful.

An unholy scream bellows from my wolf's throat.

Terror seizes my heart. It stops mid-beat.

I don't pull the reins. I explode from my wolf's skin, render the muscle, shatter his bones. Staggering, brain roaring, I heave my body away from Mari's soft, trembling skin and sprint for the exit, as fast and as far as my splintered legs can go.

I run.

My bones knit back together as I pump my legs, fleeing, fueled by sheer desperation. I head south towards camp for no other reason than it's downhill.

My heart knocks closefisted against the wall of my chest. I have to put as much distance between the wolf and Mari as I can, as my body can handle. I push it past its limits, straining every muscle, my lungs fighting for air.

I have to protect her. It's the only thing that matters. Get this horrible thing that lives inside me as far from her as I can. Don't let it touch her. Her perfect, precious body, so soft, so fucking defenseless.

Totally unaware, I find myself bent with a cramp, gasping, on the ridge above Mari's cabin, near the tree where I first noticed her, too damn young, hiding her phone behind a tattered copy of *America's Vanishing Folkways*. I still remember the cover—a woman in a dress on a bicycle, a man in a suit raising a top hat.

I hold my aching side, bracing myself to keep going, run it off, when I notice two things at once. A few feet away, under the tall oak where Mari had been perched, there's a white rabbit, upright on her haunches, staring at me, frozen in place.

And my wolf isn't fighting me for our skin.

The rabbit's tiny heart flutters under its smooth fur, racing. Its pink and white ears point skyward.

My wolf notes the little critter, his mouth instinctively watering, but he dismisses her as quickly as he notices her.

Go back.

There is no way. I'm not letting him near Mari.

Go back.

My wolf speaks louder, but still, he's not pushing for our skin.

I force myself to straighten, stretch backwards, deepen my breath despite the cramp. Cool air fills my lungs. A stiff breeze blowing down from the hills begins to clear the chaos from my mind.

Mari's safe. I got us away in time.

You left her. Go back.

Fury, hot and swift, rushes through me. My burning muscles seize with the force of it. I want to fight him, shove him out of our body, kill him so he can never hurt her, so I will never be that fucking terrified ever again.

I kill her enemies. He flashes an image of Smith's skull into my brain.

"You're fucking mad," I spit.

The rabbit startles at my voice, and despite her paralyzing fear, she bolts. My wolf idly tracks her escape through the dark green underbrush, calculating the few leaps it would take to catch her. He rumbles in my chest, but he lets her go.

And he doesn't deny the accusation. He accepts it without argument. Without shame.

I had to be.

He falls quiet. The only sound in the woods is the rustle of leaves. Like the rabbit, every living thing has flown. We're alone—the wolf and I.

But that's not exactly true.

The bond still flows into and out of my heart. Mari is still there as she has been since the moment I first noticed her. As she will always be.

My mate.

I picture her in that moment after she shifted, her bare skin, her halting smile, the tremble in the arm she reached out to me. Brave and beautiful.

As long as we live, I am going to be terrified for her.

But that isn't all, is it?

I will also be grateful to my bones for what Fate has given me, and no matter what, I will watch over her and protect her and care for her and provide for her, and since I don't have a choice, I have to do it with a mad wolf inside me.

I have to be what I am, too.

And I am Mari's mate.

I belong with her, and she belongs to me.

My wolf snorts as he settles himself onto his side, relaxing for the trek back to our mate, not a bit worried about our reception.

For once, he wasn't the one who fucked up.

He flicks his tail and yawns, stretching his legs and bending his back.

And before he fades away, content that I'm going where I'm supposed to go, he throws an image of the rabbit and a suggestion into my head.

Bring her meat.

And he lets go, and for the first time in our lives, we walk forward together in peace.

MARI

I am alone and naked and cold. The cave is silent. My hands shake.

I've been here before.

Four years ago.

And another time, years before, the night of the full moon when Ma didn't come back to fetch me from the knoll where the unmated females watched us little ones. I sat in the dew-wet grass, forgotten, while a male gasped out the story to Deirdre Sullivan.

"Her wolf just leapt," he'd said, still stunned, not bothering to lower his voice. "No hesitation. There was no way she could have thought she was going to make it. No way."

Her wolf.

My gaze careens around the empty cavern. Shadows collect in the corners. The bare bulbs hanging from a wire cast haloes on the rough, damp walls, the darkness hardly held at bay. I shiver.

My heart skids on the edge of crashing into a hundred pieces.

I made a terrible miscalculation.

Darragh's horror and rage echoes through the bond, hammering, shattering.

I broke this thing between us. The wet stone floor is icy on my bare soles. On numb feet, I stumble toward the tunnel

leading out.

I tried, and he ran, and now I'm alone again, left again, because that's the carousel I'm on in this life. I'm a magnet the wrong side 'round. Easy to reject, easy to abandon, easy to leave behind. Not worth trying. Not worth the risk.

Fuck Darragh Ryan.

Fuck this.

I speed up, pick my way back the way we came, cross the wide cavern that still smells like pack and woodsmoke, teeth chattering. I wrap my arms around myself, but the cold is in my bones.

The dumb, tragically hopeful part of me whispers, "He'll be outside, waiting."

When I duck through the opening, the sun is just sinking behind Salt Mountain in the distance. It's warmer than in the den, but not by much. A brisk night breeze sweeps down from the foothills. Goosebumps pucker my arms.

There's no sign of Darragh. I can't scent him on the wind.

He's gone.

I drove him away.

He didn't even try to stay.

I fucked up. I pushed too hard.

No, no, fuck *him*. I'm done. This is over. No more. I can't pick my pieces up again. I can't reach out and grab nothing. Again.

I'm going back to *my* cabin, and I'm bolting the door. I don't care if he comes and stands in the path, wooden and tortured. I won't even know. I'm not peeking through a curtain. I'm not lying awake listening for his wolf's howl. No more neatly wrapped packages of steaks. No more leaving but never being gone.

No more bruised heart that never heals.

I stand in front of the den, hands balled, arms stiff at my sides, desperately summoning my old anger to me so I can walk away. My wolf is strangely quiet. She's waiting, but not for Darragh. For me?

I need to walk away.

Why won't my feet move?

Why does my mind keep coming back to memories of those slabs of meat wrapped in white paper, my name written in grease pencil? All caps. MARI. MARI. MARI.

Sometimes he scrawled a date as well, but always, he wrote my name, his script blocky and careful. A male's awkward handwriting.

For the first time, I think backward, like a film in reverse. Darragh at the roughhewn table behind his shack, carefully forming the M, the A, the R, the I. Before that, wrapping the steaks, lining up the pieces of freezer tape so they cover the seams evenly. Earlier, butchering the deer or the elk or sometimes the wild hog. Skinning it. Field dressing. Tracking the animal. Alone. Waiting up in the stand or lying on his belly in a hollow, alone.

Walking down into camp to give it to me, even though I wouldn't take it. Walking home. Alone.

No acknowledgement. No encouragement.

And who could blame me? I don't. He's the one who rejected me. That's the story, right?

He's the villain. I'm the poor victim—easy to reject, easy to abandon, easy to leave behind. Not worth trying. Not worth the risk.

Right?

In this moment, with the sky darkening from denim to midnight blue, the rosy gold fading in the west, it doesn't feel right.

It feels like the kind of garbage I've outgrown.

Overhead, Venus appears, and then another white pinprick, and another. An airplane. A star.

The world feels vast, roofless, dark, and forbidding. My wolf longs to return to the den and hunker down. In my chest, the bond is loud and furious, a burst of static, a scrambled signal, but somehow, it's also a tether, like astronauts use on spacewalks.

How many treks did Darragh make to camp, gift in hand, to leave with nothing? More than a hundred at least.

He came back.

Because my mate is strong.

I am, too.

I square my shoulders and close my eyes, listening, for the first time, *really* listening to the bond singing in my heart. *From* my heart.

Where are you?

I reach out into the night, perk my ears, and turn toward the rush of fear and anguish and ferocious love. I follow the trail, and every minute, a dozen stars pop on, lighting my way.

My wolf settles, down for the ride. She knows we're heading in the right direction.

I'm not surprised when a heavy tread sounds from the direction of camp. I felt him coming back to me.

He rounds a bend in the path and comes to a stop, standing tall and proud, chest rising and falling from running, in a pair of black athletic shorts. His face is stone, his brown eyes gone black. Something's draped over his arm.

In a split second, a tsunami of feelings I can't stop—can't push down, can't think away—crashes through me, knocking my new certainty onto its ass, casting up old memories, a deserted child's fear, a rejected female's devastation. The bitterness. The desolation. The weight of hiding it, day after day, long night after long night.

I clench my shaking hands. Tears flood my eyes, blurring my vision. “You left.”

“I did.” He doesn’t move, doesn’t say anything else, only stands there stock still, as if he’s steeling himself.

As if this doesn’t hurt him, too, but it does. I can feel that it does, but he doesn’t show it, and it’s unfair that we both feel this, and it crushes me, but not him.

I take a step, and then I break. I fly at him, flailing my fists, beating at his stone chest, trying to pound my way inside, make him hurt so I won’t be alone in this anymore, so we won’t ever be alone again.

He drops to his knees. Thrusts his shoulders back. Offers me a clear shot. My fury spins faster. I hit him, hard, harder, but I can’t hurt him. I’m nowhere near strong enough. The side of my hand collides with his steel jaw, and a pained whimper escapes between my ragged sobs.

He grabs my wrists, snatches them midair, and tucks them to his heart. “Enough, Mari,” he says. “I’m back.”

Tears and snot run down my face. I feel like a tornado has roared through me, and everything’s shattered, but the air is clear again.

I snuffle. “I shouldn’t have shifted like that on you.”

He doesn’t say anything. He lets go of my wrists and inspects my hand, gently testing the bones.

“Aren’t you going to tell me I shouldn’t have done it?” I ask.

He jerks his chin no.

“Why not?”

He looks up from my hand, the gold rings around his irises blazing, and when he finally speaks, he does it through clenched teeth, like he’s in pain. “I’ve wanted him not to be broken, too.”

His face hardens, darkens, his gaze shifting over my shoulder. He drops his arms to his side.

I rest my palm on his solar plexus where our bond connects, and it flows over my hand. Strong. Certain. No matter how much we mess up, it doesn't stop. The reality of the bond has never comforted me before the way it does now.

I sniff and scrub my eyes, blinking at Darragh. He's kneeling in front of me, muscles bunched, mouth turned down, his brow furrowed as deep as I've ever seen it. There's dirt on the hems of the basketball shorts that he's wearing.

"No jeans?" I ask.

He glances down at himself, surprised. "I had to borrow these." He holds up the fabric he was carrying. He'd dropped it when he went to his knees. It looks like one of Annie's long corduroy dresses. "I brought you this."

"Thanks." I take it and slip it over my head. It's definitely Annie's, too long and too tight in the boob and butt. You're supposed to wear it with a shirt underneath, but this is it, so I hook the loops, grateful for the cover.

He rises to his feet and reaches for my dress straps, fiddling with the buckles even though the buttons are snapped in tight. He's doing it because he wants to touch me.

I want to be touched.

"You didn't bail," I say.

"I did." His rough fingers move to smooth the corduroy straps on my shoulders. They're already lying flat.

"But you came back."

"I'll always come back." His fingers still, and his eyes find mine. "I will fuck up, but I'll come back every time. If you'll have me." His jaw tightens. "I'll come back even if you won't."

"Because I'm your mate."

His brown eyes shine. "Because you're the light of my fucking life. I would do anything for you. Stay away. Come back. Anything. You're my heart, Mari Ryan. You make it beat."

The corners of my lips float up, a lightness filling the space the earlier emotional tempest left in my chest. “Mari Ryan?”

He grunts, and I know he means, “Fuck yeah.”

I’m smiling now, and his brow is furrowing away, and the dark sky is scattered with twinkling diamonds, the starlight outlining the willowy limbs of bare autumn trees. My gruff mate is wearing what—upon more careful examination—I do believe are Kennedy’s shorts with tan workman’s boots and no socks, and I’m stuffed like a sausage in a beige kindergarten teacher dress.

I just made a huge mistake, and my mate lost his mind on me and ran, but he came back, and I waited for him. We both know that nothing’s solved, nothing’s fixed. We’re a mess.

But it’s perfect all the same.

“Let’s go home,” I say, holding out my hand.

He takes it, and we walk together into the foothills, moonbeams catching his patches of gray, my blonde curls bobbing against his shoulder, mismatched, on our own but not alone anymore, and I know—

If he leaves, he’ll come back.

I’ll go after him. I’ll fight for him.

He’ll fight for me.

Whatever happens, we’ll never be alone again. He belongs to me, and I belong to him. We chose.

Trust.

Hope.

Each other.

EPILOGUE

MARI

I thought the hardest that treehouse living would get was being nine months pregnant, hauling my ass up a rope ladder with Darragh crowding me from behind so I don't fall. I was wrong.

Staring into the sleeping face of our six-week-old baby girl, daydreaming about first words and first steps, it occurs to me that it can get much, much worse.

“Darragh,” I whisper.

He grunts. “I'm awake.”

I know. He won't let himself fall asleep up here in bed with us. He waits until Cait and I are both dead to the world, and then he heads down to his bedroll in the shack.

Sleeping with us in the family bed is one of our two perpetual disagreements. The other one is about cell phones. I think that he should carry a charged cell phone at all times. He says the bond is good enough. He can hear what I'm feeling. I say sometimes I want to send him an eggplant emoji or a picture of Cait while he's out patrolling or hunting, and the bond has limits. He just doesn't know how to work one, and he's being stubborn.

“Mari?” he prompts.

Oh. I lost my train of thought. It happens a lot these days. The sleep deprivation is really kicking in.

“What about when Cait starts walking?”

“What about it?” He rolls to his side to face me and props his head in his hand. My belly flips. The abs, the biceps, the hair he’s growing back out since I told him I like it longer. I lick my lips. His chest rumbles. It’s a blatant invitation.

We haven’t done it since Cait was born. Abertha said to wait for four weeks to “however the hell long I want” before having sex again after the delivery. I’ve been nervous, and probably if Darragh made a move, I’d be all over it, but he feels my hesitation through the bond, so he keeps things casual.

“Babe?”

Crap. Drifted off again. “What was I talking about?” I ask him.

“When Cait starts walking.”

“Yeah. We live in a *treehouse*. That’s gonna be a disaster.”

He’s nodding. “I’ve been thinking about putting up a net.”

“A net?”

“Like under a tightrope. And I’m going to be installing safety gates in all the doors as soon as they come in.”

“You ordered them already?”

He grunts in the affirmative.

My eyes narrow. “How?”

He reaches out to tug the zipper of Cait’s onesie even though it’s zipped all the way up. He’s ducking the question.

“You borrowed a phone, didn’t you? Whose?”

“The skinny kid’s.” He knows Lucan’s name, he’s just stubborn about using it. Darragh’s the one who insists that Lucan and Fallon still watch over Cait and me when he’s away. The human government and the task force Moon Lake is leading hasn’t gotten anywhere with finding the human hunters behind the kidnapping ring yet. Extra security is a necessity, but Darragh still doesn’t like having other males in his territory.

“Hah! See, you *do* need a phone.” Cait screws up her face like she’s going to sneeze or howl, and I immediately regret how emphatic I was when I said it.

“See, I don’t,” he whispers back. “I can borrow one.” He flashes me a soft smile so I don’t get too mad.

I love his smile. It took a while for it to show up on the regular, but now, I live for it. It’s so shy, and it turns him from this rough wild man to a complete charmer.

I’m happy we spend most of our time out at our place. I wouldn’t like the pack females seeing the smiles, figuring out he’s the world’s biggest teddy bear, and losing their fear of him.

Apparently, I am insanely jealous. Earlier in our cohabitation, I’d blamed it on the pregnancy hormones, but here we are, and I still struggle to smother the warning growl when Abertha shows up to check on me and the baby.

I always welcome her up and make a pot of tea, though. She saved Cait’s life during the delivery. It got hairy with the cord, and she did a thing, and Cait went from blue to bright pink, so now I have to get over the fact she was my mate’s first and be friends.

“We could move into my old cabin for a while,” I suggest, my mind wandering back to the toddler-in-a-treehouse problem.

Since Annie and Kennedy moved out of our old place, it’s been empty. The pack is going back to having unprotected females live with families. This time, it’s more of a volunteer system, and Una’s overseeing it, so it’s better than it was when I was a pup.

Darragh’s face darkens. He doesn’t like the idea of living close to people, but I know he’d do it, for Cait and me.

“Wait until you see the gates installed?” He reaches across our baby and winds a curl around his finger before he tucks it behind my ear. I snuggle into the feather pillow.

“Okay.” It’s getting dark, and soon, one of us will have to get up to make dinner. I already know it’ll be Darragh. He

takes care of everything except cleaning the breast pump. He gets really ham-handed and flustered, and after he broke one, we decided it was best if I handled it.

I yawn so big my ears pop. “Are you really going to put up a net?”

He hums. I’m having trouble keeping my eyes open.

“That’s ridiculous.” I smile, thinking about Cait bouncing in a circus net as Darragh climbs in after her.

“It’d be a backup.” He reaches across our baby to trace my curved lips. I nip the tip. His rumble deepens, and something swirls in my belly.

Maybe I’ll be ready soon. Tonight. After a nap.

I quit fighting it and let my eyelids stay shut. “I love you, mate,” I mumble. I tell him all the time. He says it less often, but he shows me every minute of every day.

“I love you back,” he says, his voice low and gravelly with exhaustion.

“I’m the light of your life.” Sleep steals over me like a shadow, but before I fall, I hear him answer.

“You’re my everything.”

I wake up in the middle of the night with a start, searching for Cait with my heart in my throat, but she’s right there, arms thrown over her head, snuffling in her sleep. I slept straight through dinner. I rub my eyes, and for the first time, my gaze shifts past my sweet little baby to where Darragh had been lying.

He’s gone.

His gold and bronze and brown patchwork wolf lies there in his place, sprawled on his side, wide awake. He’s watching Cait, his tail flicking back and forth.

He raises his bright eyes to me. My body tenses, my adrenaline spiking, but I’m not afraid.

I know this wolf.

He knows me.

We belong to each other, too.

He twists his neck, idly licking his flank, and then he lays his head back down, stretching his legs across the bed to knead my thighs with the rough pads of his paws. He yawns, snaps his jaw shut, and slowly, his golden eyes drift closed.

After a few minutes, he starts snuffling in his sleep, too.

I lie there for hours before I join them, listening to my baby and my mate's soft snores, wondering at the mystery of Fate and the blessings that only come with time.



THE FIVE PACKS saga began with *The Tyrant's Alpha's Rejected Mate*.

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