

Font Size: AA+A++

---

“I’m here,” she breathes.

“Of course you’re here.” Is she losing her mind? Is that what’s happening now?

“The bread goes in at seven so it’s ready for the first customers. And then the cakes we sold out of the day before. Then it’s time for—”

“You’re not making any—”

A blow hammers my chest and drives me off my feet. I grunt as I fly back. My head cracks against something hard enough for the sound to echo in my head. And then nothing.

17

BRIAR

My breath emerges as a series of pants as I sprint through the forest, cursing every last cake I ever let pass my lips. After ten minutes of running, I feel like I’ve sweated out half my body weight, and I’m a second away from a heart attack.

But I don’t stop.

I have to know if Aunt Mel is okay. I have to.

I jump over a log instead of going around it. Big mistake. My foot catches on the top and I faceplant right into something soft and squishy that I pray isn’t what I think it is. Wrinkling my nose, I scramble back to my feet and take off, scrubbing at my face with the back of my hand.

Behind me, a twig snaps, but I push myself to run faster and harder.

Just a deer or a rabbit. That’s all it is.

I sent Keane crashing into a tree too hard for him to have caught up. He was out cold, and I only hope he stays that way until I get close enough to town so that I can find out what happened.

He was going to kiss me, and I wasn't going to stop him. It didn't even cross my mind to push him away, and it should have.

His face super close to mine, his amber eyes warm and soft, and the lightest brush of his lips against mine was just... I stumble over something and nearly fall.

Pay attention, Briar. Aunt Mel is the focus. Only her.

Tears well in my eyes, blinding me, and I brush them away.

The muscles in my legs burn with exertion, but I don't even think about slowing. If there was a time to run, now is it.

My foot catches on something, and I go flying. This time, I don't see what it is. A root? A twig? Asquirrel? I don't know, but it lays me out flat and I'm pushing myself to my feet, trying not to think about the already sorry state of my nightdress when a low snarl snakes through the forest.

I freeze.

Please let it be from the souls inside me, and not—

Another snarl, this one coming from my right, makes sweat burst across my temples and my palms clammy. Slowly, I climb to my feet, my eyes in constant motion. But no matter how much I probe the interior of the forest, no wolf eyes glint at me.

That doesn't mean I can't feel them.

My skin itches with the predatory stares. I don't know how wolves hunt in the wild, but they're coming at me from different directions, closing in on me. Is this how they hunt their prey? Am I about to become dinner?

For there to be more than one wolf hunting me, Liam Wolfe must know what I did. Maybe he picked up my scent from the wolf territory in the north wood?

It doesn't matter.

He doesn't need a reason to send his pack after me. He just has to wake up one morning because he had a dream that I did something he didn't like, tell his beta to deal with me, and that's me dealt with.

The wolves can eat me after I find out what happened to Aunt Mel.

As I run, I fight not to think about the wolves forming around me. Their steps are silent, nothing like my flatfooted 'never ran a day in her life' heavy slaps against the ground, but I know they're there. When something is chasing you, you just know.