

## Owned by the Alphas | The Shadow by Jen Cooper

### The Shadow

“Wait...can we stop?” I asked breathily as the feeling tightened inside me. I had no idea why I felt it so strongly, but the shadows felt wrong. They didn’t match the trees.

“Why?” Nikolai asked.

I didn’t have an answer. I held my hand against my chest as the cold spread, and I shivered hard.

The shadow moved quickly from one tree to another, and just as I was sure I was making up shit in my head, two red eyes flicked open, staring at me from miles away, but it was like they were right there.

I gasped, shoving back from the window, my heart skipping as fear closed around me. I fell to the floor of the carriage, blinking hard, trying to get the image from my head. Those eyes.

“I saw... There was something out there,” I breathed.

Nikolai looked at me like I had taken crazy pills. So did the other alphas. Maybe I was delusional. Maybe it was the reflection of the water and the blood moon making the eyes seem red.

“It’s a full moon, wolves will be everywhere tonight,” Derik said, an edge to his voice.

I nodded slowly and climbed back onto the seat, yanking the curtain across the window.

“What do you think you saw?” Braxton asked warily, and I shook my head.

“Nothing. It was...just a shadow.” I inhaled deeply and tried to convince myself that’s all it was.

I held my arms across me as we were taken through the gates and through the city. It was less modern than I had expected— the paths were stone in the ground, the buildings all stone, wood, and glass.

All of the streets looked similar until they came to the mansion. It was huge, with a sprawling lawn that was hosting multiple orgies as wolves ran, nipping and chasing each other.

I tried to keep my eyes inside my head as we were let out of the carriages and led up the stone path toward the mansion.

Some of the people in the orgies paused, looking at the offerings with interest before going back to the entanglement of bodies they were in.

I looked straight ahead, the situation finally weighing on me.

It was just sex, but it was about to change everything. Fear tightened inside me, coiling around my stomach as I tried to keep my shit together. I didn't want to be the scared little virgin, but I was.

I knew it was going to hurt, and with all the games with Nikolai, I had forgotten why I was there. I remembered now as we were ushered into the foyer of the mansion.

It was grand and beautiful, nothing like my village at home. There were dark wooden floors with a double staircase on either side, leading up to a dark hall that led somewhere I didn't even want to guess.

I looked around at the big statues—all wolves—that surrounded the marble foyer.

Mom was right; it was more luxury than I'd ever see again. The wall lamps were made of glass and lit the place enough to see we were being led into a seating room.

The offerings from the other villages were already there, and after a quick count, there were about thirty of us.

Could werewolves really fuck ten girls in a row? I shuddered. Mom had said I would go last, and I hoped that was true and my theory about being tired worked out.

We were all in white: the Grasslands in the silk nightie, the Forests in long flowy white gowns, and the Water group in high-waist flowy skirts with a crop. All white for purity.

I huddled with the others as the alphas stood in the doorway, barricading us in. Not that it was a bad place to be barricaded in.

It was warm, with a bright fireplace and multiple plush seating options: couches, chairs, cushions... Even the rug looked comfier than my plain old seats at home that hadn't been repaired in way too long.

I was terrible at sewing. And a little lazy. Hope that wasn't going to be an issue for tonight's festivities.

That had me smirking. The idea of lying there like a dead fish while the alpha tried to get a rise out of me had me almost laughing out loud.

I held it in by some miracle and looked up, my eyes clashing with Nikolai's.

I stowed my threatening smirk to harden my stare as he stood at the front of the trio.

"Offerings of Wolf Territory," he said, and everyone stepped back in the large room.

I stood my ground, not letting him intimidate me. He was using my body; he wouldn't have my mind or my will.

He noticed.

"One by one you will be taken through the door at the back. Once you pass through that door, everything you see and do will be private information. Tell no one," he said.

Everyone turned to look at the door, every girl looking paler as the full weight of what we were there for hit us. The solid, dark wooden door with a silver wolf head on it seemed more dramatic than it needed to be.

"Stay in this room no matter what. The rest of the mansion is off limits. Step foot outside this threshold and you'll regret it," he promised, and it made me want to put my toe across the line just to see what they would do.

Then I realized that was a stupid get-yourself-killed idea and decided against it.

Braxton stepped forward, lining up next to Kai. “There are drinks on the table there. We suggest you choose the alcoholic punch. You’re going to need the liquid courage.”

He winked as if he was being charming, and maybe that’s what the other offerings saw because not a single one flinched at the hidden threat.

They were prepared to walk blindly into the unknown. I wanted more answers. But by the glare Nikolai gave me, I wasn’t going to get them until I went through the door.

Derik’s turn.

He stepped in line with the other two alphas, all three of them magnificent, feral beasts with muscles and tattoos, but it was the searing darkness in their eyes that got me.

The wise, untamed look that made me think the night wasn’t going to be as straightforward as my mom had made it sound.

And maybe that wasn’t going to be such a bad thing.

“There’s books and chess if you get bored,” Derik said, pointing to the bookshelves and chess table, but I didn’t care. I was all about the fireplace, inching closer to the flame, the heat warming my freezing skin.

I gulped as they moved, weaving through the girls, sniffing and scenting the strongest out.

I waited impatiently, holding my arms as I took in the blood moon spilling in from the glass panes in the ceiling. It covered our white clothes in red shadows and made me smirk at how appropriate that was.

Pillars lined the room, vines, water, and a rock path curving down them in stone.

The three alphas. It was ingrained in every part of the place. It was beautiful the way the history was kept.

The three families had joined forces, held Werewolf Territory for centuries since the great war. I had to begrudgingly give them props for that.

I sucked in a breath as a coldness wrapped around me. I spun to the feeling, but there was nothing there. The corner of the room felt wrong though, the same as it had outside.

I shivered, seeing a shadow kissing the wall that matched nothing in the room. Dread dropped in my stomach, that same heavy stone from before.

I walked slowly toward it, focused on the feeling, paralyzed by it. I was waiting for the eyes. I knew they were watching me, but I couldn't see them. I wanted to see them.

Before I could reach the corner, strong arms wrapped around my waist and yanked me back, shaking me out of my stupor.

Nikolai dumped me back by the fireplace. My eyes wide, I looked up at him, his body heating me as much as the fire behind me.

His face dropped as he looked between me and the corner he had snared me from. I backed away slowly, a weakness hitting me. I stumbled, and Nikolai caught me.

The world spun for a second, and I took a steadying breath.

"Lorelai?" he asked, his voice softer than I had ever heard it.

It broke through the spinning, and I forced myself to stand strong.

"I'm good," I bit, glancing over at the corner. I was losing my damn mind. Stupid werewolves.

"Kai. We've got to start," Derik said, standing by his first girl.

Nikolai hesitated before letting me go and grabbing a random girl from his group, pulling her to the door as Braxton picked his.

He looked to me and nodded at the alcohol table. "Drink the punch. It'll help," he bit, before looking back at the others. "Wait here."

Then the wolves disappeared.

Most of the girls huddled together, keeping to their respective villages, but I was winter born. Nobody cared where I went.

So, I found the alcohol. It was made up in a punch that swirled in my plastic cup, had a little fizz, and was a pinkish-orange color.

I had no idea what that meant, but I didn't care enough to question it. Instead, I gulped it back before grabbing another one to sip.

The bittersweet taste coated my throat, and I went to the fireplace, sinking into the closest plush chair to wait my turn.

I had just started to relax into the warmth with the help of whatever I was drinking when the screams started.