

The Unwanted Wolf

Chapter 15

It was early when Mark woke me up the next morning. When he said we had to leave early to drive to the place the meeting was, hadn't realized he meant the middle of the night. Everything was ready for the trip already, thankfully, so all we had to do was get in the car and go. Scythe and Rie climbed into the back seat automatically, giving me the front seat. I didn't object, partly because I was too tired to and also because I wanted to sit closer to Mark.

"Is Doctor Zayla coming?" I asked after a yawn had escaped my lips.

"No," Mark said. "I thought it was best for her to stay with the pack in case anyone gets injured. I'm already leaving them on their own, so I don't want to leave them without all of their resources."

Mark's face was tight, and it suddenly hit me how torn Mark had been about this decision. He clearly cared for his pack members, and he was prioritizing me and my safety at the moment. That hadn't been easy for him to do. I reached over and grabbed Mark's hand and squeezed. I hoped I could comfort him, even if it was only slightly. He looked over at me and smiled softly. He squeezed my hand back.

Snoring poured in from the back seat, and I glanced behind us to see that Rie and Scythe were already fast asleep. "How can they possibly sleep so fast?"

Mark shook his head. "There's a reason I'm the one driving, and not them. All they have to do is close their eyes, and they are out. They are like children.

"In more ways than one." I quickly shut my mouth, not intending to say that out loud. I carefully looked at Mark to see his reaction.

Mark just laughed. "Yes, those two argue with each other more than I'd like. They both have their set ideas on how things should be done."

"Doesn't that get exhausting?"

Mark shrugged. "I think it's good. They both support the pack in different ways. I don't know what I would do without either of them.

Mark pulled out of the driveway, and the car fell silent after that. I tried to

stay awake for as long as possible to keep Mark company, but it wasn't long before sleep overcame me. I woke up to the sound of a hushed conversation. I didn't open my eyes right away because something piqued my interest.

"Mark, are you sure this is the right thing to do?" Rie asked.

"Rie, we've already discussed this." Mark wasn't harsh in his whispers, just firm.

"I know, but you fought so hard with Jori. You sacrificed so much, and now you are just going to give him the last thing you were able to hold onto." Rie was worried.

"It's not the last thing," Mark said quickly. "I have you guys, and now I have Adira."

This time it was Scythe who replied. "Rie has a point, Alpha. There has to be another way. You can't give Jori what he wants, not after everything that happened."

"That's enough. This is not up for discussion." Mark's voice slipped out of a voice and into his alpha tone.

My eyes snapped open, no longer able to pretend to be asleep. I adjusted in my seat and looked over at Mark.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" Mark asked. He bit his lip, and I wondered if he was nervous if I had heard their conversation.

I shook my head. "No, it's fine. How long was I asleep for?"

"A few hours," Mark said.

I looked at the scenery outside of the car, and I didn't recognize the area. It was flat compared to the mountainous region our city was in. It looked plain and boring, like a long summer day coming to an end.

"Do you want someone to take over driving for a little while? I'm sure you are tired." I felt guilty for falling asleep for so long while

Scythe leaned forward and wrapped his arms around the back of my chair.

"Don't worry. I will be taking over when we stop for gas." Scythe ruffled my hair before sitting back.

I looked outside again, mulling the conversation the three of them were having a few moments ago. What could Mark be giving up for me? I hated the idea that he was sacrificing even more for me, when he didn't even know me that well. I hated that I didn't know what he had already sacrificed either. I hated that I was going into this situation in the dark. I would have to find a time to ask Mark about his history, because I was tired of not knowing. I wanted to respect his privacy, but something told me that he wasn't going to tell me unless I asked.

I deserved to know the truth about him. If this was going to work out between the two of us, I needed to know what we were getting ourselves into with this meeting with his former pack. More than anything, I wanted to know why it was his former pack. Was he kicked out like me, or did he choose to leave?

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to calm my thoughts. There was no use in wondering about what could have happened. I would just have to ask Mark point blank.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the sun starting to peak over the horizon, and it was breathtaking. I had never seen the sun rise above a flat land with an open sky. It was practically red for the first few seconds. Then it faded to orange and then yellow. It wasn't long before the sun's brightness took over the sky, and I couldn't look at it for any longer. The whole thing had felt so fast, and I had to blink a few times to wipe the flash of yellow out of my eyes.

After a few more minutes, we stopped at a gas station to refresh, grab some snacks and switch drivers. I was going to sit in the back seat with Mark, but Rie insisted I take the front seat still. It wasn't long before we were back on the road. After a few minutes, I glanced back at Mark.

"He's out," Rie said. "He must've been tired."

"I don't think he has slept much recently," I said. I know he had been waking up early with me for work, and I doubted he went back to sleep after. His job as an alpha surely kept him busy.

"He cares about you a lot," Rie said. "Please don't hurt him."

I pulled my lips tight, my chest churning. "I don't want to hurt him."

"Good," Scythe agreed. "We only want positive things for Alpha. We want positive things for you as well."

I nodded, feeling uncomfortable. I loved that Mark's pack was so supportive of him, but I got a feeling that if things went wrong, they would blame me in an instant. I understood it, because that's how packs were. I was the outsider who could hurt their alpha. I didn't have anyone on my side. I slunk down in my chair, starting to question everything.

Mark was driving again now, and I was grateful that the end of the trip was near. As we started nearing the city the meeting was in, I started recognizing the city we were going to, which put me on edge. It was near the city I grew up in. I would often come to the city with friends for day trips to experience some of the things we didn't have in our small town.

"I recognize this city," I said quietly, feeling extremely on alert.

"Have you been here before?" Mark asked.

"It's near the town I grew up in." My chest felt tight, thinking about accidentally meeting my family here. It was a big city, so the chances were small, but I hadn't even come near my old town since I was kicked. In case my family's threat was real, it wasn't worth the risk of accidentally meeting up with them.

Mark reached over and placed his hand on my thigh. He could sense my worry. "I'll be by your side while we are here."

"How long has it been since you've been here?" Rie asked.

"Almost four years," I said. I tried to remind myself that I would be fine. The chances would be too small to run into them now of all time.s

"Did you ever plan on coming back here?" Rie asked. I hadn't told anyone else my story, so I didn't blame her for being curious.

"Never," I said, "I don't have a relationship with my family anymore." they found out there were issues with my family.

We took a few turns on surface streets until we pulled into a neighborhood that looked old. All of the buildings were made from red brick and looked like they were at least a hundred years old. They were well maintained, despite their age, and the yards were filled with greenery. The area looked amazing and seemed like it held its own history. After a few more minutes, we pulled up to a house that could have been a museum. It looked quaint, despite its size. Green vines climbed up the front of the building that was several stories tall. A large wooden door held the entrance to the building, like it's own secret that only a select who would be allowed to know. The building thrived with energy, and I could see children running around, happy as can be. If this was where Mark grew up, it seemed like a joyous place. It made it more difficult to imagine what had happened.

I looked over at Mark, and both of his hands were gripping the steering wheel with a death grip.

"It's not too late to turn back," I said.

Mark shook his head and let go of the steering wheel. "We've come this far. There's no turning back now."

"We'll be right by your side, Mark," Rie said.

"Your trusty sidekicks are here to kick butt!" Scythe added.

This made Mark smile. "I don't plan on getting in any fights. We would be at a major disadvantage. But if anything goes wrong, I'm happy you are here with me." He turned to me. "Are you ready?"

Chapter 16

We approached the building with Mark and Scythe leading the way. Mark reached up to the door to knock, but before his fist hit the door, it opened. A young teenage girl opened the door and looked startled. "Oh, can I help you?" She kept the door slightly cracked.

"We are from Pack Aphelion. Jori should be expecting us," Mark answered. "Uh, okay. I will let someone know you are here." The girl shut the door, and we waited outside for a response.

The door opened again, and this time a man with dark brown hair opened the door. "You're early."

Scythe froze on the spot and I heard his voice hitch. "Percy?"

The man in front of us looked at the ground. "I wasn't expecting you to be here, Scythe. You look well."

Scythe didn't take his eyes off the man in front of him. "Percy, I missed."

"Alpha Jori has prepared a meeting room for your pack," Percy said, quickly cutting Scythe off. He was avoiding eye contact with Scythe and looked guilty. "Please follow me."

Mark glanced over at Scythe, picking up on the same weird energy that I was feeling. Now was not the time to question him about it though.

We all followed Percy through the house. It felt even bigger once we were on the inside. He led us down a long hallway and opened a door near the end of the hallway. Inside there was a long table that could fit sixteen people. Percy gestured for us to sit down.

"Please wait here. I'll be back." Percy shut the door behind us, and left us in the room. I could feel the nerves lingering in the room.

"Scythe, are you okay? What was that about?" Mark asked as he sat down at the table.

Rie sat to Mark's left, and I took the seat on the other side of him. Scythe stayed standing, shifting on his feet.

"Don't worry about it. It's of little consequence." Scythe looked down at the ground, and I hadn't seen him with so little hype before.

He looked completely drained.

"Hey pretty boy, you don't need to sacrifice your own feelings. You're important too," Rie said. "Come sit down."

Mark added, "She's right. We are a few minutes, so if there is something bothering you, please tell me."

Scythe sighed and sat down next to Rie. "Okay, if you insist. Before we separated from the pack, I found my mate."

Rie's eyes went wide. "What do you mean? You never mentioned this before."

"It's Percy, isn't it?" I said. The way Scythe had looked at Percy looked like a broken-hearted puppy.

Scythe nodded, but he didn't look at any of us. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Mark asked.

Scythe shrugged. "We discovered while everything... was happening. I had to go with you, Alpha, and Percy said he couldn't go. He begged me to stay with him, but I left anyway."

"Why didn't you tell me what was happening?" Mark was distraught at the news.

Scythe finally looked up with a frown carving out his face. "You had so much going on, Alpha. You didn't need anything else to worry about. I was hoping I wouldn't see him here."

"Scythe, you don't have to deal with this on your own. I want you to talk to me, even if it seems like I have a lot going on. My problems are not more important than yours." Mark was confident in his words, which showed me he truly cared about his other pack members.

Scythe nodded, but he didn't say anything. He seemed to shut down, not talking like his normal self.

After a few minutes of silence, the door to the meeting room finally opened back up. Percy led the way with another man who was a little shorter and wore glasses. The man had a stack of papers in his hands, and he was wearing a nice white button-up shirt. He did not

The two of them sat across from us, and the blond set down his papers and pushed up his glasses. Percy was the first one to speak.

Alpha Jori is wrapped up in matters at the moment. He will join us once he is done." Percy took a quick glance in Scythe's direction and quickly refocused. If I hadn't been watching him closely, I would have missed the gesture. "Before we begin, do you have it?"

Mark hesitated before answering. He shifted to pull something out of his backpack. "Yes." He put a black case in front of him, but he didn't hand it over yet. "Once you give us the information we need, I will hand it over."

"That wasn't the deal," Percy said, his voice not wavering.

"Percy, please don't make this more difficult," Scythe said, keeping his eyes glued to the table.

Percy hesitated. "Alpha Jori was clear on my instructions. I'm not going to continue the meeting unless you hand it over."

"It's okay," Mark said. He was treading in water, and he knew he didn't

have much control over the situation and didn't want to cause any more issues. He pushed the case across the table, and Percy quickly took it. Percy nodded to the other man sitting next to him.

"Hello, my name is Daniel." The blond was looking directly and held out his hand. "I don't believe the two of us have met before."

I grabbed his hand and shook it. "I'm Adira. It's nice to meet you."

He nodded. "I understand you have some questions for me."

"Thanks for meeting with us, Daniel," Mark said with a familiarity in his voice. "Doctor Zayla sends her regards."

Daniel smiled at the name of Doctor Zayla. "I hope she is well. So please, fill me in with what's been going on."

Mark began telling Daniel and Percy what was going on. He explained that someone had tried to poison me with wolfsbane and how I survived the attack. Then he went over Doctor Zayla's test results and her theory about my mixed heritage. He made sure to add the part that someone was still trying to kill me, but he conveniently left out the fact that I was his mate or how we met. After Mark was done explaining everything, Daniel was silent for a moment.

"I see. I have a few theories about what might be the case," Daniel finally said.

"What are they?" I eagerly asked.

"I would like to do a little more research before I confirm my thoughts," Daniel said. He started flipping through his stack of papers.

"I insist you share your theories now," Mark said firmly. "The deal was you help us and share what information you might have. Not get back to us later."

Daniel sighed and adjusted his glasses again. "The thing that sticks out most to me is the fact that Adira was able to disappear and her glowing eyes. Those are features of sorcerers. Some other races have those abilities as well, though, so I'm not confident that's the case though."

"Sorcerers?" I had repeated. I hadn't heard much about other races, other than vampires growing up. I didn't know what kind of things they were capable of.

Daniel nodded. "That's the most likely answer. I will have to do more research on them to verify it. I think I might have a source that could get us a sample of blood from a sorcerer. Doctor Zayla would then be able to compare her test results with that."

"Do you know what kind of weaknesses sorcerers might have? We want to

make sure we are prepared in case Adira's attacker knows her history." Mark was tense as he spoke.

Daniel continued looking through his papers for a moment, skimming the information on the pages. "Not off the top of my head. I promise I will get you more information with a little bit of time. Mark, I do not plan to betray our deal. I understand there is some bad blood between our packs, but I do not have any ill regards towards you. I am asking for some of your trust."

Mark relaxed a little. "Thanks Daniel. I was just hoping for more concrete information right away, but I understand that is asking for a lot."

Daniel finally paused and looked Mark in the eyes. "I understand the level of importance of this situation, and I'm happy to help if I can." He turned to look at me. "What pack did you say you were from again? I don't remember if you said, and I know you are not a part of Alpha Mark's pack." separated."

Daniel c****d his head at this information. "You were from Pack Lyna? I am familiar with them."

I nodded in response. I didn't feel it was necessary to say that I'm the estranged daughter who they likely pretended didn't exist. I couldn't imagine that was important to figure out what I was or who was trying to kill me.

"Thank you for your help, Daniel," Mark said. "How long will it be until we can expect an answer from you?"

"I should be able to get you some answers tonight, if not by tomorrow morning."

The door opened, and I instantly smelled an overwhelming scent that made me want to take another deep breath. It smelled of pine needles and dirt. My heart pounded against my chest, and I felt nervous as I looked up. I met the eyes of a tall man with dark hair. His eyes were a dark brown color and they pierced my soul. Tingles ran down my spine, and I couldn't break eye contact with this new man. He was staring right back at me.

"Alpha Jori, welcome. I'm glad you were able to meet us," Percy said. "We were just about to wrap up."

Jori didn't respond to Percy. He walked right over to me, and placed his hands on the table in front of me. He leaned forward, so his face was only a few inches from me. "Hello beautiful."

Agrowl escaped Mark's lips and he flung up out of his chair. "Stay away

from her.”

Jori smirked, not breaking eye contact with me. “Why would I step away from my mate?”

Chapter 17

Another growl emanated from Mark’s lips, this one more ferocious. “I said step away from her. She’s not your mate.” Jori smirked and reached out his hand stroking under my chin. “Why would I lie about that? Just ask her yourself.” Mark went to lunge forward, but Rie quickly grabbed his arm.

“Mark, calm down.”

Scythe was standing on edge, ready to step in if necessary. “Jori, unless you want a fight to break out, I suggest you take a step back.”

“He’s right,” Percy added. Percy was tense, ready to jump in if a fight broke out, but he looked slightly terrified of that as well.

Jori growled under his breath. He took a step back from me, but my hairs were still on end from his closeness. “Just because she’s a part of your new pack, it doesn’t mean you can control what happens with her.”

“She’s not your mate,” Mark spat.

I felt completely frozen, unable to move or speak. I felt Mark’s presence behind, but I felt Jori’s just as strongly in front of me. I didn’t understand what was happening. I felt like I was being torn in two directions.

“And how can you be so sure? You can’t tell how she or I feel?” Jori’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Mark.

“Because she’s mine.” Mark growled again.

Jori c****d his head, almost amused by Mark’s reaction. “She’s yours? I don’t think she belongs to anyone.”

“Adira is Mark’s mate,” Rie snapped. She still had a firm grip on Mark, not trusting him to do anything stupid. “She can’t be your mate since she’s Mark’s, so you must be lying.”

“Alpha Jori wouldn’t lie,” Percy quickly said. Rie growled in response.

“It would be silly to lie about something like this.” Jori said. He was the calmest one in the room. “It would be easy to verify. Just ask Adira.”

All eyes moved to me, and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t know what to say. Mark was my mate. I could feel his bond from behind me. I could feel the seething anger he felt towards Jori, and I was drawn to him. But I couldn’t say that Jori wasn’t my mate. I didn’t understand it, but I felt the same draw to Jori as I had to Mark. My

body felt the urge to go to Jori and Mark at the same time, and it left me torn.

“Adira?” Mark said, his voice calmer with me.

“I-I-” I stuttered. I couldn’t find the words. My breathing became labored, and I felt the panic starting to set in. No matter what I said in this moment, it wouldn’t be what anyone wanted to hear. It would hurt someone or everyone. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Rie said, horrified. “It’s a simple, ‘Mark is mate mate. Jori is full of it.’ What’s so difficult about that?”

“I’m not lying.” Jori said. “That’s why she can’t deny it.”

“Adira?” Mark said again, this time his voice cracking.

I wanted to go to Mark and tell him what he wanted to hear. I wanted to hold him in my arms and tell him he was the only one I ever wanted in my life, but there was another part of me that knew it would be a lie.

“I need to sit down.” I plopped into my chair, and the room seemed to be spinning.

“This is very interesting,” Daniel finally said, joining in on the discussion for the first time. He moved over to me and knelt on the ground. He grabbed my hands and looked into my eyes. “Adira?”

I looked up, finding his eyes. I felt like most of the air was missing from the room, and no matter how many breaths I took, it didn’t feel like enough.

“Try to take a deep breath,” Daniel said. “Good. You don’t have to speak, but you can just nod. Does that sound okay?”

I nodded in response. I was just trying to focus on my breathing, and I felt a little better.

I hesitated with my response. I didn’t have any other explanation. This time I nodded slowly.

“Just keep breathing, okay?” Daniel let go of my hand and stood up. He turned to Mark and then Jori. “You two should be ashamed of yourselves. This poor girl is basically having a panic attack because of the pressure you two put on her just now.”

“Daniel, what’s going on?” Percy asked. It was the question on everyone’s minds.

“I have a theory. Adira is of mixed blood. It’s possible that she has two fated mates because of it,” Daniel explained.

“I have never heard of that before,” Scythe said.

“I told you I wasn’t lying,” Jori smirked..

Mark growled again. "Let's get out of here." Mark grabbed my hand and started pulling me out of the room. I let him take me, since I felt like I couldn't think at the moment.

"You can't stop this! She'll be back!" Jori called out after us.

Before I knew it, Mark was ushering me into the car. The moment Scythe and Rie were in the car, he pulled out of the driveway. He was silently fuming and his driving was a little terrifying. The longer I was away from Jori's scent, the clearer my head got. I felt terrible for what happened, and I didn't know what to say. After a few minutes of reckless driving, Mark pulled over on the side of the street.

He turned off the car and tossed the keys to Rie. "We will meet you back at the hotel." Mark got out of the car, and I felt myself moving without thinking. Mark had stopped at a park and was power walking away.

I had to half run after him. "Mark!" I called out, but he didn't respond. I had to run a little faster. "Mark!" I was desperate for his attention. I finally caught up to him and grabbed his arm. "Mark."

He yanked his arm out of my hand, but he finally stopped moving. He ran his fingers through his hair. Quietly he asked, "Why?"

I took a moment to catch my breath. Mark was still facing away from me. "I wish I could tell you. I don't understand it myself."

"He has taken everything away from me, and now you?" Mark's voice was defeated.

"He hasn't taken me away from you." My heart was pounding. I knew Mark more, and I liked Mark. I couldn't imagine being without him, but there was something about Jori that drew me to him, that made me a little more hesitant with Mark.

Mark finally turned to me. "Then reject him. Say you'll choose me."

I chewed my lip and looked at the ground. "This is too much too fast. I can't just make a declaration like that. I don't even know what's happening."

"Do you want to be with me or not?" Mark asked.

My chest tightened, knowing my answer wouldn't be what Mark wanted. "I like you. I want you, but there's so much happening to me right now. Someone is trying to call me for crying out loud."

"If you can't definitively say you want to be with me, then how is this supposed to work?" Mark's voice was starting to rise.

"I don't even know you!" I snapped. Mark was putting too much pressure on me, and I was starting to lose my composure. "I don't know why you left Jori's pack. I don't know anything about your history. On top of that,

someone is trying to kill me. How can you expect me to just make a decision in an instant without even having a chance to think things through?"

"I don't want to lose you, especially not to Jori. Not after everything I have lost because of him." Mark's voice was softer again.

"Then talk to me. What happened between you two?" I hated seeing Mark like this, but I couldn't give him what he wanted just to make him happy. It would be a disservice to myself.

Mark was silent. It felt like forever before he spoke. "I can't. Not right now."

"Fine." My anger had dissipated at this point, and I just felt sad. "If you can't trust me enough with this information, then how can you sit here and expect me to just drop everything and choose you. You have become important to me in such a short amount of time, but I can't risk getting hurt."

Tears threatened my eyes. I waited for a moment for Mark to say something, and when he didn't have any kind of defense, I turn and walked away. Part of me hoped Mark would come after me and apologize, but part of me wanted a minute alone. I needed a moment to breathe and think about everything that had happened and wrap my mind around everything.

was the moment that Mark wouldn't choose me. I understand that he wanted more from me, but he said he would be patient. I guess there was a reason to give up on me.

Silent tears streamed down my face. Why was I here in this strange city all by myself? What did it matter that I was mixed blood anyway? Someone was trying to kill me, and now I was by myself with no one to count on. I felt stupid for trusting Mark so easily. I thought this time would be different, but it never was. The more other wolves learned about me, the less desirable I was.

None of this was working out the way I wanted it to.

"Hey," a familiar voice called out to me.

I looked over and saw a car driving next to me. It was hard to see the driver, so I stopped and squinted. "Jori? What are you doing here?"

"Why are you by yourself?" Jori returned. He stopped the car next to me.

I paused, not answering him. He avoided my question. "How did you know where I was?"

"Get in the car, and I'll tell you." Jori leaned over and opened the passenger side of the car.

I stood frozen, unable to decide if I should go. Mark would be upset if I went

with Jori, but Mark also hadn't come after me. I didn't want to be alone, either. I started walking towards Jori's car and got into the passenger seat. "Okay, are you going to tell me now?" looked at Jori expectantly. I didn't know much about him.

"Mark and I used to come to this park all the time when we were growing up. I had a feeling he would take you here, since he was upset," Jori explained.

"You and Mark grew up together?" I had never imagined they used to be friends.

"Mark didn't tell you?" Jori scoffed at this. "Typical. We used to be best friends."

"If you used to be best friends, what happened between you two?" I asked. I was eager for any information I could get.

"Has Mark told you anything about what happened?" Jori asked. He was looking at me carefully now.

I shook my head. "No, he hasn't told me much at all."

"Yet he acts so defensively about you being his mate," Jori said, shaking his head. "He doesn't deserve you."

"That's not fair," I instantly said, feeling defensive. Even though I was upset with Mark, I didn't like the way Jori had said something like that. "Mark has been really helpful to me recently."

"Then why were you alone?" Jori asked.

The question stabbed my heart, and I didn't have a response. "I'm not sure."

"Tell you what, why don't I take you back to the packhouse, and I tell you what happened between Mark and myself? Maybe we can even get to know each other a little better."

I looked at Jori carefully. Something told me this was a stupid decision that would cause more issues, but I found myself saying, "Okay."

Chapter 18

Jori took me back to the packhouse, and I felt nervous entering the building again, especially with the way we had left last time. As followed him through the hallways, I felt better as no one took a second glance at me. This time around, I noticed just how lively the packhouse was compared to Mark's. There were people everywhere, having their own private conversations. There was constant movement with people trying to get somewhere. It felt alive and homely. Jori led me to an area that looked like a little breakfast nook. The chairs

were white with blue cushions. The walls were gray with simplistic decorations. A large window hovered over the little nook, which opened up to a large backyard. I could see children running around, kicking balls or playing tag. The sky was gloomy above them, but that did not stop them.

“Would you like something to drink?” Jori asked.

“Um, do you have any coffee?” I asked. I was still looking outside, almost afraid to make eye contact with him.

“Sure. Have a seat, and I’ll get you some. Do you want anything in it?” Jori asked.

“Cream and sugar please.” I sat down while Jori went to get my drink. I took a deep breath. I felt better in some ways, but I still hated the way Mark and I had left things. I didn’t understand how sitting in this packhouse felt so right and so wrong at the same time.

My phone buzzed, and I saw a text message from Mark, making my heart leap.

Mark: Where are you? I’m sorry...

I paused before responding. I was still angry with him, and part of me wanted to completely ignore him, but I knew that would be petty. Someone was trying to take my life, and I could only imagine the panic he would have if I simply didn’t answer.

Adira: I’m safe. Don’t worry.

I hesitated to tell him where I was. I could only imagine his anger when I told him where I was. It made my stomach churn, and I felt like I was betraying him. Jori promised me answers though, and I had too many questions in my life right now. I needed some answers, even if it wasn’t about me.

Mark: Please tell me where you are. I’ll come get you.

I put my phone away, deciding that was enough for now. After Jori told me what I wanted to hear, I would tell Mark where I was, but he could wait until then.

Don’t ignore our mate, Shadow said in my head.

I jumped at her voice. She had been quiet recently. “He hasn’t been honest with us.”

He’s hurting. Don’t make him hurt more, Shadow pleaded.

I could feel Shadow’s sadness adding to my own. She pulled my heart towards Mark, and something told me that she wanted nothing to do with Jori. I stood up, ready to run to Mark.

“Are you okay?” Jori asked. His voice rang through my ears, and I stopped. He’s ours.

That voice didn't belong to Shadow. I had never heard that voice before in my waking state. I had only heard it in my dreams, and I still didn't understand who or what it was. Whoever it was needed Jori. I felt pulled to him once again.

I sat down, feeling a little dizzy. "I'm fine."

Jori walked over and set two cups on the table, one in front of me and the other where he sat shortly after. "Are you sure? We could have the pack doctor take a look at you?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm fine, really. I'm just nervous." I wrapped my fingers around the cup of coffee, grateful for the warmth it provided my fingers. I looked at the cup, not wanting to make eye contact with Jori. "I promise there's nothing to be nervous about. I would never hurt my mate."

I looked up at Jori when he said the word "mate." It was a little weird hearing it out loud, and I couldn't decide if I liked it or not.

Jori frowned at the mention of Mark. "I'll tell you about what happened between Mark and myself, but I want something from you in exchange."

My chest tightened. I didn't like the idea of an exchange. "What do you want from me?"

"A chance," Jori said. "I want you to go on a date with me and truly consider me as a possibility of being your mate. I know you met Mark first, but I want a fair chance. I know the two of you haven't marked each other yet, so it's not too late for me to swoop in and steal you for myself."

No!

Yes!

gulped as the voices in my head opposed each other. "A chance? That's it?"

Jori nodded. "Mhm. Imagine being rejected before even being given a chance?"

His words struck a chord with me. I knew that feeling all too well. "Okay. I'll give you a chance, but I'm not going to make you any promises."

Jori smirked, and his dark eyes narrowed. It made his normally sexy features drip with sexiness. "Excellent. Now what do you want to know?"

"Everything," I instantly said. "You said Mark and you used to be best friends. What happened? Why did Mark leave the pack, and why do you two hate each other so much?"

Jori stretched back. "I hope you're ready for this. It's probably not what you would expect, and it may not paint Mark in the best light."

"Just tell me," I said. I wasn't in the mood for him to draw this out more than necessary.

"All right. I warned you though." Jori took a sip of his drink before beginning his story. "Mark and I grew up together. We were only a couple of months apart in age. We did everything together for most of our childhood. We played sports together, trained in combat, even went on group dates together. We were inseparable. We always talked about how we would run this pack together. I was to be alpha, and he would be my beta. My father had been the alpha of the pack, so it was natural that I would take his place and take over the pack. Mark had been fine with being my second in command. We were best friends after all."

"What changed?" I was focusing on listening to the story and holding my judgments until the end.

"Suddenly, Mark decided that he was meant to be the alpha and take over the pack. When he was eighteen, he discovered he had the alpha gene as well," Jori explained.

"How is that possible? Wouldn't you guys have known he had the alpha gene much sooner?" I remembered what my father had taught me growing up. Only certain families had the alpha gene in their bloodline. Families without the alpha gene usually joined packs with an alpha in it. The alpha gene was dominant, so a son of an alpha was almost guaranteed to have an alpha gene and take over the pack when the older alpha relinquished their power.

"Mark was an orphan. His parents were killed when he was only a few years old. My father graciously took him into our pack, but we didn't know much about Mark's family," Jori explained. "We became his family. He was practically my brother, but when he turned of age and discovered that he had the potential to be an alpha too, he decided to betray us. He declared he was the rightful heir to the pack and that he should be alpha over me. I tried to convince him to relinquish his rights to be alpha and run the pack by my side, but he refused.

"He tried to gather enough people to take the pack by force, but when he realized not enough people supported him, he left with those who supported him." Jori stopped talking and picked up his drink. "I let him leave peacefully, even though he tried to steal everything from me. I didn't want to harm him. He used to be my best friend

after all.”

I didn't have anything to say in response. The Mark that Jori described didn't sound like the Mark I knew. The Mark I knew was loyal and caring, but it was hard to know if that was the true Mark. I had only known him for less than a week. I didn't know who any of these people were. I didn't even know my true self apparently.

“I'm sorry I was the one who had to tell you the truth,” Jori said. “Mark should have been the one to tell you all of this, especially if I shook my head. “It's not always easy to talk about your past when it's filled with hurt. You only want new people in your life to see the good. I still wish he had told me though.” I looked down at my coffee cup again. It was still untouched. I lifted the cup to my lips and took a small sip. The sweetness hit me first, coating my tongue with a pleasant sensation. Then the cream took over, but when I finished swallowing, I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth. Everything about the drink should have been right, but something just felt off.

The sun was starting to set, and darkness encroached on the backyard. I looked at my phone, and it was around dinner time. The ten new text messages from Mark told me he was starting to worry about me.

“I should call Mark and tell him where I'm at,” I said.

“Even after all of that, you are going to run back to him?” Jori said. He did his best to keep his tone flat, but I could tell he was irritated.

“That's not what I'm doing.” I felt defensive. “I just want him to know where I am so he knows I'm safe. He deserves that much.

Jori reached across the table and grabbed my hand. “Don't tell him. He'll come running here and drag you away from me. Just stay with me for tonight.”

I looked at Jori's pleading eyes. There was something pulling me towards Jori, and his offer to stay here was more than appealing.

But I couldn't just leave Mark in the dark like that. He had done so much for me in the past week that I couldn't do that to him, even if I was upset with him.

“I have to tell him. I don't have to go with him. I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet.” Jori's hand was still on mine, his grip firm.

“If you go with him, you're not giving me a real chance.” Jori's eyes were pleading.

I frowned. “I have to tell him where I am,” I repeated. “I won't go back with

him though.”

Jori finally let go of my hand. “Promise?”

I nodded my head, my chest tight from the decision. “I will be back.” I stood up and walked away from the breakfast nook. I didn’t want to make the phone call in front of Jori. I wanted to have a clear head when talking to Mark.

I walked down the hallway until I found the door that looked like the back yard. I stepped outside. The children were no longer outside, and it was much quieter out here. I imagined their parents had called them to dinner. It was almost completely dark by now. I felt at peace for a moment, just breathing in the chilly air. I pulled out my phone again and pulled up Mark’s contact. I took a deep breath

before hitting call. I listened to the phone ringing, terrified Mark was going to be furious with me.

“Adira?” I heard Mark’s breathless voice say on the other side of the phone.

“I’m okay, Mark,” I quickly said. I knew he was worried.

“Thank god. I was worried your attacker had...” Mark’s voice trailed off.

“Where have you been?”

“Don’t be mad, okay?”

Chapter 19

“Don’t move. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Mark said. I heard the familiar click of the phone call ending.

I let out a big sigh. Mark hadn’t yelled at me or gotten mad at me. He had just gotten quiet for a moment. Somehow, that almost felt worse. I leaned back against the door for a moment, not ready to go inside. This is not how I wanted to spend my day. I didn’t want two guys fighting over me. It was scary enough accepting one guy who liked me, and now there were two who wanted me. I didn’t want to deal with this. I just wanted to stop whoever was trying to kill me. It felt easier to process somehow.

The door I was leaning against suddenly opened, and I found myself falling. I hit the ground, and the wind was knocked out of me. I lay there for a moment, catching my breath. I looked up and standing above me was Daniel. He was looking down at me curiously.

“I was not aware you were right there,” Daniel said. He held out his hand to me.

I sat up and took his hand. He easily helped me to my feet. “Oh hi. What are you doing here?”

Daniel shut the back door and then turned to me. “I was told I could find you outside. I found some information that I thought

would interest you.”

“Have you found out more about what I’m mixed with?” My heart started racing at the thought.

“Not exactly. Follow me to my office.” Daniel started walking down the hallway. He led me to the second floor of the building and into a small office.

Despite it being small, it was extremely organized. Three of the walls were lined with a bookshelf that was completely filled with books. The last wall held various filing cabinets. There was a desk in front of the filing cabinets. The desk had surprisingly little on it, which was completely opposite from the state of Doctor Zayla’s office. I sat in the chair in front of the desk, and Daniel went to pull a few files out of the cabinet before sitting down in front of me.

“I started looking into the history of sorcery and some different aspects,” Daniel began. He handed a folder over to me. “I didn’t get as far as I would have liked with this information. There was no mention of glowing eyes, so I’m not able to confirm if that is in fact a trait of a sorcerer.”

“So can we rule that out?” I asked. I opened the folder Daniel had given me, but the notes weren’t very legible.

“No,” Daniel said firmly. “I did find some information that was interesting. Just like how werewolves have key turning points in their maturity. The first one is at sixteen. Did you notice anything happen at the age of sixteen?” I swallowed hard at this and then slowly nodded.

“Care to expand on that?” Daniel asked.

I took a deep breath. “I didn’t feel any different on my sixteenth birthday, at least not that I noticed. My father took one look at me and kicked me out of the pack. The rest of that day is a bit of a blur.” I started chewing on my lip. That was the worst memory I had, and I hated thinking about it.

“Interesting. Do you know why he did that?” Daniel asked.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes down. I had asked myself that question a million times.

“I may have a theory about that,” Daniel said. He handed me a second folder. This one also had a bunch of quickly written notes that I could barely make out. “When you said you were originally from Pack Lyna, that piqued my interest. Years ago I heard several rumors about the pack.”

This got my attention, and I looked back up from the papers. “You know my family?”

“Not exactly. I have never met them, but they are the largest pack in the nearest city. It’s important to be aware of packs nearby. I know the former alpha had a relationship with the pack as well.” Daniel clasped his hands together and placed them on the desk.

“I never knew that,” I said.

“We haven’t heard anything from them for almost five years. They cut off all contact with us without much explanation. It sounds similar to what happened to you.” Daniel paused to let me say something, but I didn’t have anything to say. I was on the edge of my seat never thought any of them were true. I don’t like assuming things without evidence.”

“What kind of rumors were going around?” After I left my pack; I didn’t hear anything from them. I had gone as far away as I could imagine, and I didn’t talk about my family to the few werewolves that came into town, so the topic was never broached with them.

“There was a rumor that the alpha’s daughter suddenly died. One said that the alpha never had a daughter. Another one said a sorcerer whisked his daughter away. I even heard a rumor that the pack was attacked by a sorcerer because Pack Lyna had broken a deal with the sorcerer. There are many more rumors that went around. You can see them in the notes you have in front of you. Some are completely ridiculous, but there are a few things that consistently come up in the rumors,” Daniel elaborated. “A sorcerer was involved and something happened to the alpha’s daughter.”

“Something happened to me,” I said.

Daniel nodded. “Since that part turned out to be true, I’m thinking that there is truth in regards to the sorcerer as well.”

“So you are thinking I am part sorcerer then?” I said.

“I can’t come to that conclusion without concrete evidence, but it seems that might be the case. Perhaps your father realized you weren’t a pureblooded werewolf when you were sixteen, and that’s why he kicked you out,” Daniel concluded. “This is purely conjecture, though. There are other possibilities.”

I leaned back in my seat. This was the second time someone had come to a similar conclusion, and it was hard to believe. Out of all of the reasons I thought my father had to kick me out, I had never thought about the possibility of not being my father’s daughter. That made more sense than anything I have ever thought about. I had done nothing wrong. I had always been the perfect daughter, and I couldn’t think of a single thing I had done that would make my father want

to kill me, except for the fact that I was not my father's daughter.

I felt myself tearing up at the thought. I was relieved. I thought there was something wrong with me for years that made me feel unwanted, but it wasn't anything I had done.

"Thank you, Daniel," I said, wiping my eyes before the tears could escape.

"You have no idea what this means to me."

"None of this is fact," Daniel reminded.

I smiled at this. "I know, but it still explains a lot, and it makes me feel better."

Daniel nodded. "I am happy that this makes you feel better, but this doesn't explain why someone is trying to kill you."

"I know, but it's a start." I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

"There's one more thing," Daniel said. He handed me the last folder that was in his hand.

I took the folder and took a look at the notes. When I couldn't discern them, I looked back at Daniel. "What else could there be?"

"If you are the daughter that disappeared five years ago and you were sixteen at the time, that means you are twenty-one, correct?"

Daniel asked.

I placed the folders back on Daniel's desk. "Tomorrow's my birthday actually. I turn twenty-one. Why does that matter?"

"That makes sense. I read that sorcerers come into their full power on their twenty-first birthday. That could explain why you were able to shift yesterday," Daniel said. "Perhaps your powers are starting to show."

"Shift? You mean that disappearing thing that I did?" I asked. I still didn't fully understand what happened in those few moments.

"Likely based on the text I read about sorcerers. It wasn't very detailed, though, so I can't tell you much. Usually sorcerers and werewolves do not mingle," Daniel said. He stood up and moved over to a bookshelf. He pulled out a small book that was leather bound and tied together with a string. He handed it over to me.

"This is all of the information I have on sorcerers. It's not much, but it might help you," Daniel said.

I grabbed the book and took a look at it. It looked like some sort of diary. "I appreciate your help with this. With all of this." I stood up, holding the diary tight.

“It’s my pleasure. I enjoy doing research and solving mysteries. I’m just sorry with how little information I was able to discover.”

I moved forward and hugged Daniel tightly. “It’s more than anyone has been able to find out for me, so I really appreciate it.”

Daniel awkwardly hugged me back, and I got the feeling that he didn’t get hugs very often. “You’re welcome. I have reached out to a few of my contacts who might know more, so hopefully I can discover more for you.” I released Daniel from the hug. “You are a good guy, Daniel.”

“You seem to be good yourself, Adira.” Daniel smiled back at me, and it was the best smile I had seen him attempt since I had met him earlier. “Jori is a good guy as well. He is a little rough around the edges, but he is a good alpha.”

I pulled my lips tight. “I will take that into consideration.”

A door slammed downstairs, drawing my attention away from Daniel. I heard a commotion, and once again my chest felt tight. I knew Mark was here, and I was afraid of what was about to happen. I was running out of Daniel’s office and down the stairs in a heartbeat. When I got to the front of the building, I saw Mark pinning Jori against the wall.

“Stop!”

Chapter 20

“Mark, what are you doing?” I shouted. I was shocked to see Mark acting so aggressively. He had always been so gentle and so caring with all of his actions, but Jori brought out something different in him. I wondered if this was the old Mark that Jori had told me about.

“He’s saying you won’t leave with me,” Mark snarled. “He’s acting like you belong to him.”

I ran over to Mark and placed my hand on his shoulder. “Please put him down.”

“She doesn’t want you to hurt me because she might pick me after all.” Jori smirked, despite the position Mark held him in.

Mark let out a growl and slammed Jori against the wall again. “Stop trying to make decisions for her.”

“I’d say the same thing to you,” Jori returned.

I gripped Mark’s arm harder, terrified. “Jori! That’s not helping. Mark, please put him down.”

Scythe moved to Mark and grabbed his other arm. “Alpha, we don’t want to cause any issues in another alpha’s packhouse. Please listen to Adira.”

Mark groaned in frustration. Finally, he released Jori, who fell to the ground. Percy was instantly by Jori's side, helping Jori to his feet.

Mark grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me out the door. "Let's go." I pulled my arm out of Mark's grip. "No."

Mark stopped and looked at me surprised. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you don't own me, and you can't just drag me around. You need to stop to think about what I want." My voice cracked as I scolded Mark. I was beyond upset with his behavior.

Mark froze, his eyes wide. He swallowed hard. "Do you want Jori?"

I sighed and my shoulders dropped. It killed me seeing Mark look so defeated. "I want to stop thinking about this for just a moment.

Someone is trying to kill me, and I can't handle you two fighting over me right now." Tears threatened to spill out of my eyes.

Jori and Mark both looked at me with sheepish looks. They had forgotten about the reason I came here in the first place.

"You're right," Mark finally said. "We should make sure you are safe before pressuring you into anything."

"You would be safe in this packhouse," Jori suggested. "There are wolves everywhere, and we always have fighters on patrol."

"I can keep her safe," Mark instantly said.

"I will stay here on one condition," I quickly said before Mark and Jori could get into it again. "Mark, Scythe, and Rie will stay here as well." I turned to Mark. "I know you don't like this, but Jori has a point. If we are going to stay here for a little longer, wouldn't it be safer to be surrounded by other wolves?"

Mark's jaw was tense. He glanced over to Jori. "I will agree to these terms if you do."

Jori's eyes narrowed. "I think I can handle your presence for a few days, but Adira will have her own room. I'm not going to let go of her without a fight."

"I won't either," Mark returned. "Shouldn't it be Adira's decision where she sleeps?"

Jor smirked. "You better be careful with what you say."

"I think it's best to be in my own room for now. I'm not even going to think about making a decision between the two of you until my life is safe, and I want you both to respect that," I said.

"Speaking of keeping you safe," Daniel said, walking down the stairs and joining us all. "I'm a little worried there might be another attack on your life tomorrow."

“Why tomorrow?” Mark asked.

“It’s Adira’s twenty-first birthday,” Daniel said flatly. “If she is in fact part sorcerer, supposedly she will come into her full powers on birthday, there are suddenly multiple attempts on her life. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“You didn’t mention this before,” I said, looking up at Daniel.

“I thought about it after our conversation,” Daniel said.

“Wait, tomorrow is your birthday?” Scythe asked. “I didn’t know that. We need to make sure you celebrate.”

I hadn’t mentioned my birthday to any of them deliberately. Celebrating my birthday usually brought back bad memories, so I stopped celebrating it a while ago. “I don’t really feel like celebrating.”

“You should celebrate,” Scythe insisted. “I know a lot is going on, Adira, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get to celebrate yourself.”

“It’s settled then,” Jori said. “We will have a party for Adira here tomorrow.”

“Oh goodie!” Scythe clapped his hands in excitement.

“If Daniel thinks someone will attack Adira tomorrow, don’t you think it would be better to put off celebrating?” Mark said. He turned to me. “It’s not that I don’t want to celebrate you, Adira. I think you deserve the best. I just don’t want to put you in any unnecessary risk.”

“I agree with you,” I said. “I don’t think we should celebrate.”

Jori waved his hand. “Nonsense. We will have a party tomorrow. As long as it’s in the pack house, you’ll be safe.”

I bit my tongue, feeling that it would be pointless to argue against them.

“There’s so much to plan for,” Scythe said, his mood practically glowing. I smiled at him. It was good seeing him as his more chirpy self. “Rie, can you handle getting Adira a dress?”

“Sure, we can go shopping,” Rie said.

“Make sure to bring an escort with you,” Mark said. “I don’t want you guys going alone.”

“I have an escort you can bring with you,” Jori offered.

I waved my hands. “No, no, I don’t need a new outfit. Really guys, we don’t have to do anything fancy.”

“We should probably go shopping tonight,” Rie said. “It would probably be safer than going tomorrow if Daniel’s theory is correct.”

“Excellent. I can work on decorations,” Scythe offered. “We will need to figure out food as well.”

“Percy will help you with that stuff,” Jori said.

Scythe paused and looked at Percy. Percy was looking at Jori with wide eyes, avoiding Scythe's gaze. I could feel Scythe's pain as he looked at his distant mate. His eyes were wanting and lonely, and all he wanted was to be near his mate and hold him tightly. I wondered if Jori knew they were estranged mates or if Percy had kept it a secret from everyone, just like Scythe.

"Is that really necessary?" Percy asked.

"I'm not going to have their pack plan this party on their own. I want you to be involved." Jori's alpha voice came out, and there was no arguing with that.

"Let's go," Percy muttered, clearly unhappy. He walked away with Scythe following behind them. I hoped those two would be okay together.

"We should get going soon," Rie suggested. "It's already dark, and we don't want to be out too late."

"I will have someone meet you outside," Jori said. "Bring her back safe."

"That has always been the plan," Rie sassed. She gave a dirty look to Jori. Then she turned to me. "Are you ready?"

"Can I have a moment before we go?" I asked.

I found myself looking back at Mark, and there was a deep pain in them. This wasn't easy for me, but it made me realize that this couldn't be easy on him either. He was looking back at me, and even though we were only a few feet apart, it felt like miles. It was wild to imagine that just twenty-four hours prior I was resting peacefully in his arms. There was a longing inside of me for his touch and his warmth. The safety he made me feel.

Mark's aggressive behavior earlier was shocking and seemed so unlike what I knew about him. Jori's explanation on top of that showed me there was a side of Mark I didn't know. I wasn't sure if it was that feeling of uncertainty or the pull towards Jori that stopped me from approaching Mark in that moment.

"I will see you later, Adira. Let me know when you are back safely," Jori said. "I will go make sure all of your rooms are prepared." Jori left the room with Daniel following behind him.

Rie got the hint as well and said, "I'll be waiting outside for you." When she was gone, it was just Mark and myself left in the room.

"Mark, I'm so sorry for all of this. I didn't want to hurt you. I wish I could give you the answer you want to hear from me, but it wouldn't be fair to myself if I did." I felt so torn and confused by everything,

but I didn't want to hurt him ever.

"No, I'm sorry. I lost sight of what's important: your safety and your happiness. I just can't stand the thought of him taking you from me, too."

Mark's voice was soft and defeated. "But I need to stop thinking about what I want."

I looked back at him. "You deserve happiness too."

"You should join the others. They are waiting for you." Mark forced a smile and walked away, leaving me feeling empty and alone.

Chapter 21

When I left Jori's pack house, Rie was waiting outside for me by the car. There was a large man standing next to her. Rie's arms were crossed, and she was glaring at the man.

"Hey," I said, approaching the car.

This grabbed Rie's attention. She unlocked the car. "Let's go. You can sit in the back, big guy."

I climbed into the front seat. I looked over at Rie. Her face looked pretty neutral. "I'm surprised you offered to take me dress shopping."

Rie glanced over at me. "Why?"

"Well, I didn't think you liked me very much," I admitted. Especially after the conversation I had overheard in the car, I felt pretty nervous being around Rie.

"Because Mark's my alpha, and you might break his heart?" Rie was so straight forward with her words.

I winced at her words. "Yes." I didn't have a defense, and even if I did, I was sure there was nothing I could do to change Rie's mind.

She had known Mark for much longer than me, and I imagined she saw me as the harpy trying to destroy Mark's heart.

"Look, I will forever and always be on Mark's side, but that doesn't mean I am going to shun you. I can't even imagine what you are going through right now, and I'd like to think you are doing your best, right?" Rie pulled out of the driveway and started walking.

I looked over my shoulder at the guy behind us. He hadn't said a word to us, and Rie was acting like he wasn't there. "I don't know if I am, honestly. It has all been a lot to process."

"Do you want to hurt Mark?" Rie asked.

"Of course not!" My response was instant. Even if I didn't want to think about the whole mate situation, I knew I didn't want to hurt

Mark. Or Jori.

“Then that’s enough for me right now.” Rie smiled.

“What if I do end up hurting him? I’m not sure if there is something I can avoid in this situation.” I was terrified of making the decision. I knew in the end someone would end up getting hurt, and I hated the idea of being the person who caused that.

Rie thought about this for the moment. “Of course I want you to pick Mark. All I want is to see him happy. He puts other people before himself all of the time, so for once, I want him to get his happily ever after. But that doesn’t mean I want you to sacrifice your happiness for that.”

I laughed in response, which felt like the wrong response. “Sorry. I’m just surprised. I thought you would react very differently.”

Rie chuckled in return. “Did you expect me to give you the typical, ‘If you hurt him, I will hunt you down’ speech?”

“Kind of,” I admitted.

“I think that’s a ridiculous thing to say, especially because it’s not true. Feelings get hurt, and sometimes it’s unavoidable. Unless someone is being malicious to another person, there is no reason to hate someone or go as far as threatening them.”

“You’re very wise.” I looked out the window and the feeling of nostalgia washed over me as we pulled up to the town mall. It had been over five years since I have been here.

Rie laughed again. “There’s a reason I’m tied for Mark’s second in command.”

Rie pulled into the parking lot, and the three of us climbed out of the car. Jori’s protective detail followed us closely, not saying a single word. It felt a little weird since I didn’t even know his name, but Rie was acting like he wasn’t there. I decided to follow her lead, since I didn’t know how to act exactly.

Rie grabbed my hand and pulled me to a store. She let go when we were inside. I looked around and was surprised with how fancy all of the clothes were. Normally I avoided going into stores like these. It was way above my budget, and I never needed anything this fancy.

“Are you sure this is a good store?” I asked. “Aren’t we just going to have a small party?”

Trust me, this is the perfect store.”

I chewed my lip feeling nervous. I didn’t like the idea of a big party, but if it was going to happen, it would be a waste of energy to continue fighting it.

Instead, I walked deeper into the store, flipping through the various dresses. I lost Rie in the racks of clothes, but I didn't mind it. I forgot how comfortable I felt going clothes shopping. I used to go all of the time with my close friends in high school.

Jori's bodyguard was following me closely, making sure he was only a few feet away from me no matter where I went. I tried to ignore him for a while. I grabbed a blue dress that had silver sparkles and looked floor length.

I looked back at the man. "Hi, I'm Adira." I reached out my hand to him. He looked at my hand for a moment before grabbing it. His grip was firm and borderline hurt. He let go of my hand and went back to his sullen stance. I waited, expecting him to introduce himself, but when he didn't, I went back to looking for clothes. I wasn't going to force the interaction.

I saw another dress that was silver with a tulle skirt that went down to my knees. I grabbed those two and went to look for the dressing room. On my way to the dressing rooms, I heard Rie calling my name. My jaw dropped when I looked at her. She had an arm full of dresses already.

"How did you find so many things?" My eyes were wide as I tried to count the number of dresses in her arms.

"It's easy." Rie shoved the clothes into my hand. "Time for you to try them on."

I went into the dressing room and tried on the blue dress first. I went out to show Rie. She instantly gushed over the dress, but when I looked in the mirror, I pursed my lips. It didn't feel right. It seemed like it was for something way too formal, and I didn't feel comfortable in it. I tried on the silver dress next, and that one felt like it belonged on a high school dance floor. As I went through the rest of the dresses, none of them felt right.

I found myself standing in the last dress Rie had brought me with a frown. "Sorry, none of these feel right."

Rie pulled her lips tight. "Don't apologize. Wait right here. I have an idea." Rie skipped away into the store.

I stood in the middle of the dressing room, shifting my weight. I looked over at the bodyguard, and he was scanning the room carefully. I wondered what was going through his head. Finally, Rie skipped back with a single dress in her hand. She shoved it into my hands.

“Here, try this on,” she said.

I took the dress back to the dressing room and pulled it on. When I left the dressing room, Rie’s jaw completely dropped. She ran over to me and grabbed my hands.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” Rie gushed. “Look for yourself.” Rie let go of one hand and twirled me towards the mirror.

My eyes widened, and I couldn’t believe the person in the mirror was me.

The dress was a soft peach and the bottom of the dress hung close to my body. However, when I moved, the bottom of the dress

flowed like water. I twisted back and forth to make the dress sway around. The top of the dress was a sweetheart neckline and was

made out of a silky material. My hands ran over the dress,

“This is perfect.” I couldn’t stop looking at myself.

Rie walked over to me and looked over my shoulder into the mirror.

“Happy?”

“Very much.” I was beaming.

“Good. Then this is it. We are officially getting this dress,” Rie declared.

“How much is it?” I asked. I had been avoiding the prices of the dresses so far.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s on me.” Rie pulled out her credit card and waved it in front of my face.

“No, I can’t let you do that.” I frowned, feeling guilty at the thought.

“Nonsense. Consider it a birthday present. I don’t want to hear any arguing either.” Rie raised her eyebrows and gave me a look that stopped my words before they even hit my tongue.

Chapter 22

On the way back from the mall, the three of us stopped to get dinner. It was getting late, and I hadn’t had a chance to eat all day with everything that happened. We stopped at a small diner that was mostly empty. Rie and I sat in the booth across from each other, and our bodyguard was standing a few feet away, scanning the diner for anything suspicious.

“Why won’t he talk to us?” I asked Rie, looking over at the bodyguard.

“Oh Bruce there?” Rie said. She pointed at him with her thumb. “He’s always been mute.”

“You know him?” I asked.

Rie nodded. “I know most of the pack members still, at least anyone who has been with the pack for more than a year.” _

“I didn’t realize you were so close with everyone.” I chewed on my lip, thinking about the conversation I had had with Jori earlier.” What made you

decide to leave your pack and join Mark?”

Rie set down her menu and looked at me carefully. “Mark has always been there for me. In the end, there was no choice for me. I was always going to follow Mark.”

“Jori told me a little bit about what happened,” I admitted. I quickly looked down at my menu, not wanting to see Rie’s reaction.

Rie was quiet for a moment. “I’m not sure what he told you exactly, but please don’t judge Mark based on word of mouth, especially Jori’s mouth.”

“What happened exactly? I keep picturing what Jori told me, but I can’t help but feel like there’s a piece missing. It doesn’t make sense to me,” I said. I finally looked up at Rie, and she had a contemplative look on her face.

“I think you should really talk to Mark and get his side of the story. All I will say for now is things got messy and mistakes were made on both sides. I don’t think anyone should be defined by a mistake they’ve made. No one knows the right way to handle everything.” Rie pulled her lips into a tight smile. “Are you ready to order?”

“Yeah,” I said. I made a mental note to ask Mark about everything that had happened again. I would have to ask him about it when he was calmer.

When Rie and I made it back, Jori was waiting by the front door for us. I wondered how long he had been waiting, or if he had come down when he heard the car pull up.

“Your rooms are ready,” Jori announced. “Let me show you.” He held his hand out for me to take.

I looked at his hand nervously. “I’m right behind you.” I didn’t want to take Jori’s hand. Holding hands with him somehow felt wrong, and I was afraid of Mark potentially seeing us like that.

Jori took his hand back and faked a smile. “Right this way.” He led us to the third floor of the building. There was a large common area at the top of the stairs where people were playing various games like ping pong and pool. On the other side of the game room, there were two hallways, and Jori led us down the one on the left. He gestured to one of the first rooms. “Rie, this will be your accommodation. Scythe and Mark have rooms near you as well.”

“Thanks,” Rie said, but she didn’t sound thrilled. She opened her door and hesitated in the entryway. “Where’s Scythe? After I get settled, I want to help him out with the party planning.”

“He’s in the kitchen with Percy,” Jori said. “I’m pretty they have everything handled though.”

“Insist on helping,” Rie said flatly. She turned to me. “If you need anything, don’t be afraid to reach out to me.”

“I won’t.” I smiled, feeling a little better about my dynamic with Rie. While she was clearly loyal to Mark, it helped knowing that she wasn’t against me.

Rie hesitated to go into her room. She looked at Jori, and I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “I guess I should put these away now.” Rie held up a couple of bags of things she had bought while we were at the mall and then disappeared into the room.

hallway and took me to the other hallway on the right.

“Why am I over here?” I asked. I would have felt a little better being closer to the others. I knew them better than I knew anyone else in this pack.

Jori stopped in front of a room about half way down the hall. “Because my room is at the end of the hall and Bruce is down this hallway as well. I will feel safer knowing we are near you; although, I would prefer it if you were in my room with me.”

I frowned at Jori’s statement. “I’ll be fine in my own room.”

Jori hummed a bit. “I know. I just don’t like the idea that someone is trying to kill my mate. I would rather be closer to you because of this.”

I didn’t know what to say in response to this. I appreciated Jori wanting to protect me, but he almost felt a little pushy. I reached out to open the door we had stopped in front of. I was still holding the dress Rie had bought me, and I was ready to set it down. “Well, I should get settled in as well.”

Before I could open the door, Jori leaned forward, pressing his hand on the door frame and moving closer to me. I could feel his hot breath against my lips. “Go on a date with me.”

I pressed my back against the door, trying to put some distance between Jori and myself. My heart was racing with his proximity, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. Part of me wanted to close the distance between us. Without Mark around, Jori’s presence was overwhelming. Jori’s energy was very different compared to Mark’s. He was oozing dominance and confidence, and it drew me towards him.

My mouth felt dry. “I don’t want to think about going on a date right now,” I croaked.

Jori licked his lips. "I want to show you what it would be like to be my mate." He touched my cheek with his free hand, and his touch caused my skin to erupt with goosebumps. "I promise you won't regret it." I could feel my pull towards Jori growing. It took every ounce of willpower to not give into Jori at that moment. I felt like I hardly had any control, and that scared me a little. I reached my hand back, grasping for the door handle. I knew if I didn't get some space I would make a decision that I would regret. I finally found the door handle and turned it. I stumbled back as the door opened behind me.

Taking a deep breath, I felt my senses clearing just a little bit. "I told you I don't want to think about any of this right now."

Jori hovered at the door, not moving from his position. "If I promise to figure this out for you, will you promise to go on a date with me once this is all over?"

I hesitated in my response. I told Jori I would give him a fair chance and wouldn't just pick Mark because I met him first. I nodded slowly. "I can promise you that."

Jori smirked. "Perfect. I promise it'll be like nothing you will ever experience with Mark." Jori's cockiness was filling the air, and it made it difficult to breathe.

"Well, I should settle in and call my work. I don't think I'm going to make it back to work in time." I reached for the door and slowly started shutting it.

Jori took a step back. "Okay, I'll see you later. If you need anything at all, I'm here for you."

I smiled and shut the door. Instantly, I found myself leaning against the door for support. My legs felt weak and my body was shaking. I didn't know if this was from good excitement or bad excitement, but I was happy to finally have a moment to myself to process.

I looked around the room I was standing in and once again I found myself in a strange room by myself with a pack I wasn't part of. Just a week ago, life had been normal. I was comfortable with my little apartment and my steady work schedule. I missed that life, but it felt like it belonged to someone else completely. It was a simple life and I was making it work, even though I was lonely.

Now I was surrounded by people, people who wanted me, and it almost felt like too much. I didn't know how to process it all or decide who was the right choice to make.

With a deep breath, I stood up straight and hung my dress up in the closet.

I looked around the room and saw the small bag I had packed for the trip sitting on the bed. I sat next to it and pulled out my phone. I had the day off work tomorrow as well, but I didn't think would be leaving this town for a few days at the very least. I wanted to give Lana a heads up about my absence as soon as possible, but I didn't know what to tell her exactly.

Finally, I called Lana and let the phone ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey Lana. Sorry for calling so late." I imagined Lana sitting at home comfortably.

"Don't worry hun. It's not late. What's up?"

"I just wanted to give you a heads up that I may not be at work for a bit. I had a family emergency and had to go out of town. I'm not quite sure when I'll be back." I held my breath for her response. I never talked about my family, so I didn't think she would know it was a

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. I hope everything is okay."

"Yeah, me too." I really hoped I would be able to return home and return to work sooner rather than later.

"Where did you go by the way? I don't think you have ever mentioned your family to me before."

Chapter 23

After I hung up the phone with Lana, I left my room. Despite it being later in the day, it was still too early to sleep, and I didn't want to hang out in my room by myself. When I went through the game room, it was mostly quiet, except for two teenagers sitting on the couch. I quickly went downstairs, not wanting to interrupt the teens in whatever it was they were doing.

I didn't know where Mark was, and I felt the urge to talk to him. I wanted to ask him about everything that happened to him, and I wanted to talk to him about everything Daniel told me. I hadn't really had a chance to be near him ever since Jori declared I was his mate, and I missed his presence.

I wandered around the pack house, looking for a familiar face. It seemed that some people had retired to their rooms, and overall the house was much quieter than when I first arrived. I made my way to the kitchen, since that's where Percy and Scythe were according to Jori. Maybe Scythe knew where Mark was.

As I approached the kitchen, I heard a sonorous laugh echoing down the hallway. I moved slowly, not wanting to distract whatever happiness was happening. I peaked around the corner and saw Scythe and

Percy sitting across from each other at the table. I didn't see Rie, which surprised me, since I thought she was going to be joining them. "No, no, no! There's no way we can pick that as the theme. You're mad," Percy said, shaking his head.

"Please. You know we can pull it off, and it would be so cool!" Scythe was practically glowing as he spoke.

Percy laughed, and it was the deep sound I had heard down the hallway.

"You're a madman. Okay, if you really think we can pull it off, we'll give it a shot."

I smiled as Percy and Scythe continued planning. All of the tension between them from before seemed completely gone. I wondered if they had talked to each other about Scythe leaving. I really hoped they worked things out because they seemed perfect for each other as they sat there talking.

"They are pretty adorable together," Rie said, approaching me from behind. She had a teacup in her hand.

"They do," I agreed. "I wouldn't have guessed they were mad at each other earlier today."

"I know. I was going to join them because I was worried that they would be arguing or sitting here in awkward silence, but when I saw them laughing together, I didn't want to interrupt them," Rie explained.

"I don't blame you. I was going to ask Scythe if he knew where Mark was at the moment, but I couldn't bring myself to enter the room." I took another look at the couple, and I couldn't help smiling. Their happiness was almost infectious, and it made me long to be that happy.

"Mark went for a run. He wanted to let his wolf out and get out some of his frustration." Rie took a slow sip of her tea,

"Oh." I was a little disappointed. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"I don't. I'm sorry. He can be gone for hours sometimes. Want me to tell him you were looking for him?" Rie asked.

I shook my head, feeling silly. Mark probably wouldn't want to talk to me about his history right now anyway. He wouldn't tell me earlier today, so I don't know why I thought now would be any different.

"No, it's okay. I'm sure I'll see him later. I think I'm going to do some research." I smiled at Rie and started walking away.

I returned to Daniel's office. I had left the book he gave him in there when all of the commotion began earlier. His door was open,

but I knocked on it before entering anyway. I looked inside, and Daniel had his nose deep in a book.

“Oh, Adira, what brings you here?” Daniel asked. “I don’t have any updates for you yet. I’m still waiting for my contact to get back to me.”

I walked into the room. “I think I left that book you gave me in here.”

Daniel closed his book. “Oh yes. I meant to tell you that, but there was a lot going on.” He grabbed the small journal and handed it over to me. “I didn’t tell you this earlier, but please take all of the information in the book with a grain of salt. It seems to be a diary of some sort, so all of the information in it is from the account of a person. It’s best to verify the information in the book with other

I laughed a little at this. Daniel seemed overly concerned about accidentally spreading false information, and I thought it was pretty adorable. “I will make sure to take that into consideration. Thank you, Daniel.”

“You’re welcome, Adira. Please be sure to share anything you find might be useful. I skimmed through the diary, but some of it was uninteresting to me.”

I nodded my head. “Will do. Have a good night.” I waved to Daniel and headed back to my room to start reading. If Daniel was right about my twenty-first birthday, I was curious if anything in this journal might give me a clue as to what I was facing. As I made it to the third floor, I saw that the teenagers had vacated the area, and it was completely quiet out here. Instead of hiding in my room, I thought it would be more comfortable out here.

I sat on the couch and pulled my knees to my chest. I opened the book to the first page and saw a tagline that read, “This Journal Belongs to: Finnegan Stronghold.” Something about the name tugged at a memory from long ago, but I couldn’t think of where it actually came from. I let it go and started reading.

January 1, 2000

It’s the beginning of the new millennium and a new year, and I can already tell this is the beginning of a new life for me. I met this amazing woman today by chance, and I think I’m in love. She was wild and lovely, and she was a... Sorceress. I know this is wild to say, because it is forbidden for a werewolf to mingle with a sorceress, but after meeting her, I know I have to spend the rest of my life getting to know her.

Before I could get her name, she disappeared before my eyes, but I know I have to find her. I have to talk to her and get to know her.

This is my promise to myself for the year. I will find the woman who stole my heart, and I will find a way to have her show me hers.

January 28, 2000

I still haven't found her, but today I got close. I found a man who spoke of a woman with silky black hair with unworldly powers. He told me where he had seen her. When I went to that spot, I didn't see her, but I found a strand of black hair. I have a feeling that if I keep coming here, I will find her.

February 6, 2000

I spoke to her today! Her voice was even more melodic than I had imagined. Her name is Sonora. She told me it was too dangerous to speak here, but she agreed to meet me at the waterfall in the forest tomorrow night. I'm counting the seconds until/see her face again. This is it. This is the beginning of everything. I can feel it deep in my bones.

February 8, 2000

She was there! Just where she said she would be last night. We ended up spending the entire night together, and I know she is my mate. I don't know how to explain it, because werewolves are supposed to be mated to only other werewolves, but even my wolf agrees. She is my mate. She told me her familiar felt the bond to me as well, which is why she agreed to meet with me, even though I was just a filthy mut.

Sonora is absolutely incredible. She showed me some of the things she could do, and it was much different than everything my mother had told me growing up. My mother said that sorcerers were wretched things who sucked the life out of innocence and used it to power their gifts, but it was nothing like that. Sonora brought life into the world, not the other way around.

I could feel my eyes start to grow heavy, so I closed the journal, despite wanting to read more. I would just rest my eyes for a moment before reading more.

The sounds of growls jolted me from my sleep, but when I opened my eyes, I wasn't in the pack house. I was in the familiar place where I had been talking to Shadow. There were no walls anywhere to be seen or anything else for that, except a fog that swirled around me. When I looked a little closer, half of the fog was white and the other half was black. In the middle where I was standing, it swirled together, turning gray.

Another growl drew my attention, but I still couldn't see where it came from. When the growl turned into a whimper, I found myself running

“Shadow!” I called, but the whimpers continued. “Where are you Shadow?” I froze when I saw Shadow lying on the ground in front of me. I could hardly see anything, but the outline of her body with all of the fog. I squinted my eyes, but it didn’t help much. I approached slowly, scared of the fact that I didn’t hear any noise. When I got closer, I realized there was a second body shaped like a cat. The cat was all white and almost glowed in the fog. It was standing over Shadow’s body.

I released my breath when I saw Shadow’s chest moving up and down with breaths. “What did you do to her?” I tried to demand, but my voice was shaky.

The cat looked up at me, and its eyes were glowing. “Don’t worry, Adira. Shadow is just fine. I just need a moment to talk to you without her interrupting.”

I recognized the voice as the one from before. “Who are you?” I had yet to receive a concrete answer to this question, despite asking it several times.

“You know who I am, Adira. We met years ago.” The cat stood up and slowly walked over to me.

I opened my mouth to reject her statement, then it came to me. “You’re my familiar, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She looked up at me and purred.

“But I don’t remember meeting you before this week,” I said. I didn’t know her voice until I heard it in my dreams.

The cat reached up and licked her paw. “I’m not surprised you don’t remember me. I came to you on your sixteenth birthday. That’s when familiars are supposed to appear. But because your father rejected you, I couldn’t get through to you. You were so overcome with grief that you suppressed me. I stopped trying after a while, too weak to get your attention.”

“I don’t believe that man is my father.” Even thinking about the father I knew growing up made me feel spiteful. Even if I wasn’t his daughter, we had had that kind of relationship for years. That’s not something you throw away just because you are not blood related

“I suppose you’re right on that account. I’m Moon by the way.”

Chapter 24

“Moon,” I repeated, soaking in the information. If Moon was my familiar, it meant there was no doubt about my heritage. “Why are you able to reach

me now if you haven't been successful for years?"

"Your powers are growing stronger, even though you've been suppressing them," Moon explained. "If you let them emerge, there will be more you'll be able to do than ever before."

"But how do I do that? I didn't even know I had powers. I don't know how to control them." I thought about when I shifted when being attacked. I hadn't even known what happened.

"Unfortunately, I can't help you with that. I can't get your powers to emerge, or else we would have been speaking years ago. That mut has been keeping me at bay, trying to protect you." Moon glanced over at Shadow. I moved over to Shadow and knelt next to her. She was still unconscious. "Shadow is not a mut," I said defensively. Shadow had been there for me ever since she emerged. I stroked her head. "Shadow, wake up."

"She's okay," Moon assured. She sauntered over to us and sat on the other side of Shadow. "I just needed a chance to speak with you one on one. Besides, she doesn't know what she is talking about, trying to say Mark is our mate."

"Mark is our mate," I said quickly. "And wasn't this a little overboard?"

"Jori is our soul mate," Moon said. "And you have suppressed me for too long. It required drastic measures. You need me now more than ever. Your life is in danger, and you won't get out of this alive without me."

"Do you know who is trying to kill me?"

"Adira? Adira? Wake up."

I heard Mark's voice and looked around, but I didn't see him. "Mark?" Moon purred and started rubbing against my leg. "The one trying to kill us is the one who stands to lose the most."

I looked back to Moon. "What do you mean by that? Can't you stop being cryptic for once?"

Moon stopped and looked at me. "I can't tell you what we don't already know." She pressed her head against my hand. "Please pick Jori. For my sake."

I opened my mouth to say something, but Moon and Shadow disappeared. Everything went dark again, and this time when I opened my eyes, I was back in the game room. I felt pretty disoriented. It didn't feel like I was waking up from sleep. It was more like being transported from a different location.

"Adira? Are you okay?"

I blinked a few times and then rubbed my eyes. I sat up, and Mark was sitting next to me with his eyebrows furrowed. There was no

one else in the room, and the lights were dimmed.

“How long have you been here?” I stretched my neck, feeling a little sore from falling asleep on the couch. Mark smiled sheepishly. “A little while. I was heading back to my room when I saw you sleeping here. I didn’t want to leave you by

yourself like that. I was just going to let you sleep, but then you seemed distressed. I can go if you.”

My eyes widened with realization. “It all makes sense now. The pull in different directions. Feeling like an internal battle going on.”

“What are you talking about?” Mark c****d his head.

I turned to face Mark directly. “I’m part sorceress. Sorcerers have familiars, similar to how werewolves have their wolves. Werewolves have mates, but sorcerers have soul mates. That’s why I have two. Moon said that Jori is our soul mate, but you’re my mate.”

Mark seemed uneasy with the conversation. “Who is Moon?”

“My familiar,” I said. I stopped, looking at the confused look on Mark’s face.

Was I just spouting nonsense? “Sorry. I just had a weird...

dream? Maybe. I’m not sure if it was a dream really. But things make more sense now. At least to me. I don’t know if I’m confusing you more. Sorry.”

When Mark said my name, it made me freeze. Something about his deep voice saying my name churned something deep inside of me. I took a deep breath and felt a little better,

“Good. I will admit that I don’t fully understand everything you were saying, but if you feel better about it, I’m glad.” Mark smiled at

me, but then his smile slowly faded. “I should probably leave you be.”

My hand grabbed Mark’s arm before I could even think. “You don’t have to go.”

“Until we figure out who is trying to kill you, I think it’s best if I stay back. I don’t want to cause you any more turmoil than I already have.” Mark tried to stand up, but I kept my grip on him firmly.

“Don’t back off. I know I said I don’t want to make a decision yet, and that’s still the case, but don’t go. Don’t leave me. Fight for me,”

pleaded. “Please.”

I could see the pain in Mark’s eyes as he stared at me. “Adira, do you even know what you’re asking me? If I start fighting for you, won’t be able to stop. Ever.”

I stood up so I could look closer at Mark. “Fight for me.”

That was enough for Mark to break down his barriers. His hand snaked around the back of my head, and he pulled me in, kissing me

like he was going to lose me. I could feel his passion and his desperation as his lips moved with mine. I never wanted to let go of that moment, but Mark stopped himself before he went too far.

He pressed his forehead against mine. "I won't stop fighting for you. I promise you that."

I pulled back from Mark, my heart racing. I wanted more of him, but there was a small voice in my head, telling me I was betraying Jori. It was Moon's voice. I couldn't hear her like I could with Shadow, but I simply knew what she was feeling. I smiled at Mark, longing for this all to be over so I could move on, but something told me it wouldn't be that simple. Moon was a part of me just as much as Shadow was, and while I hardly knew her at all, she wouldn't be going anywhere. I wouldn't let it happen. I wanted to get to know her and every part of myself.

"I promise I will do my best to figure this out. Just give me a little time," I said, staring into Mark's eyes. It was easy to get lost there.

Mark nodded in acknowledgement. "You should get to bed. It's late and you have a big day tomorrow, birthday girl."

I frowned at the thought. "Don't remind me."

"Not a fan of your birthday?" Mark asked.

I shook my head. "Not really."

"That explains why you didn't tell me your birthday was coming up. I could've planned something for you," Mark said.

I chewed on my cheek a little. "I was hoping the topic wouldn't come up. My birthday brings up some negative feelings." I looked at the ground, feeling embarrassed.

Mark grabbed my chin and had me look at him again. "You deserve happy memories on your birthday. I want to change that for you." Mark leaned forward and kissed my forehead, making me blush. "Have a good night, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sweet dreams, Mark."

The sun woke me up the next morning, and my body felt completely heavy. I had spent a good portion of the night tossing and turning. It had felt weird sleeping in a bed by myself. I didn't like that feeling. I had only slept in Mark's bed a handful of nights, but it was enough to make me miss the feeling of the warmth of another person.

I got out of bed and stretched before finding an outfit for the day. I felt oddly excited at the idea of a party for me tonight. It had been a long time since I had a party for myself like that, and part of me missed the rush of energy

from people dancing and socializing. I wasn't sure how big or extravagant the party would be, especially since I knew very few people at the pack house. I couldn't imagine strangers wanting to join the celebration of me. When I went downstairs, I was shocked at the hustling around the house. People were everywhere, carrying things in and out of the house. I snuck around the people, trying my best not to get in anyone's way or get run over by the large objects being transported. My eyes were wide as I watched the chaotic procession march on. What on earth was happening?

I decided to follow a man who was carrying something that almost looked like a colosseum. He went into the backyard, where I found even more chaos. There were so many objects and bundled up light strings, and in the center of it all was Scythe, barking orders at people. Percy was by his side, but he was simply checking things on a clipboard.

I weaved in and out of people to make my way over to Scythe. I stood next to him, and he still hadn't noticed my presence, "What is this chaos?" I asked, a laugh slipping into my voice. "This can't be for my birthday party."

Scythe's eyes widened when he saw me. "No! No! No! The birthday can't be here during the preparations!"

Percy shook his head. "It's all a mess right now anyway. It's going to look nothing like this when we are done."

"Still! It'll ruin the surprise," Scythe whined. "Adira, go back inside and don't come out here again until I specifically give you permission."

"This is too much Scythe. You are going overboard. I would be fine with just a small dinner, or nothing at all." I looked around at the madness of people dropping items off while others were detangling lights or setting things up. There was no going back from this point, and I knew that despite my protests.

"I don't want any complaints from you, missy. Now shoo and let me do my work." Scythe shooed me away with his hands.

I sighed and started going back inside. There was no way this was just going to be a small get-together.

Chapter 25

When I went back inside, a wonderful scent hit my nose and instantly lured me to the kitchen. This was the first time I had been near the kitchen at a meal time, and it was incredible how many hungry mouths there were.

There were several tables set up, like a restaurant would have. Families were gathered at the tables with their children. There was a mix of arguments and laughter echoing in the dining room. It felt like a true home.

There was a table set up buffet style with a variety of food laid out for people. It made sense instead of everyone ordering to go. The more I watched the people flurry around the area, the more amazed I was. I had no idea there were this many werewolves in this pack.

Growing up, my wolf pack was decently sized, but this was easily twice the size. I had no idea such a large wolf pack was so close to the town I grew up in.

My stomach growled, and I started heading to the buffet to make myself some food. I hadn't realized I was hungry, but the scent of bacon filled my nose, making my stomach grumble. I grabbed a couple of pieces of bacon and a chocolate chip muffin in a napkin and then left the dining room. There weren't any open tables, and I felt a little weird sitting by myself.

As I left the dining room, I heard Daniel and Jori talking in the hallway.

"With all due respect, sir, I don't think this is smart," Daniel said.

"You worry too much. No one is going to get her while she's here with me," Jori said.

"You have never dealt with a sorcerer before. None of us have. We don't know what to expect," Daniel argued.

As I approached, I saw that Daniel was clearly tense, especially compared to Jori's relaxed nature.

"Hey, what's going on?" I said, stopping next to them.

"I think we should cancel your party. I'm still convinced there will be an attack on you today, and I think a party will be a good excuse for someone to get past security," Daniel explained. He crossed his arms.

"And I was just telling Daniel that I think it's overboard. There haven't been any signs of a threat in the area according to our patrols.

There's a good chance your attacker doesn't even know you're here. Even if they do, this pack is one of the safest packs for hundreds of miles. No one is going to get past my security." Jori was completely confident in his statement.

"I think overconfidence is going to cause issues," Daniel said flatly. He was not happy with Jori at the moment. His face was in a deep scowl I hadn't seen before.

"Maybe Daniel is right," I said. "I don't have to have a party. I promise I'll be fine."

“Adira, darling, we are going to have a party for you. I will be by your side all day, so there’s nothing to worry about.” Jori grabbed my hand and pulled me closer to him.

He smelled of fresh pine needles, and his closeness calmed me down.

Daniel clicked his tongue and let out a frustrated sigh. “Don’t come crawling to me when this backfires.” Daniel turned his attention to me. “Adira, have you noticed any sudden urges of power or anything different? Happy birthday by the way.”

“Thanks,” I smiled. Daniel was the first one to actually wish me a happy birthday. “I haven’t noticed anything unusual as of yet. I will let you know if I do.”

Daniel nodded, and then he gave me a pointed look. “Stay on your toes today, and be careful. You’re a good one, Adira, and I would like to consider you a friend.”

Daniel walked away after that, and I felt myself smiling. I liked the idea of being friends with Daniel. He was a little bookish, but I thought it was a charming feature. He seemed like he would be reliable and stable.

“Don’t worry too much about that,” Jori said, bringing my attention back to him.

I looked at Jori, who still had an arm around my waist. “What if he’s right though? What if my attacker still comes after me here?

Other people could be put in danger for my sake.” I didn’t like the way Jori wasn’t taking things seriously.

“It’s your birthday, and I don’t want you to worry about something like that,” Jori said. “Besides, no one has ever successfully

I felt a little better that Jori had increased security, but something still wasn’t sitting right with me. It was like there was a rock in my stomach, and Daniel’s caution rang in my ears. I didn’t have any facts to back up the odd feeling overcoming me, so I just nodded. “Okay. If you think it’ll be okay, I’ll try to trust you.”

Jori pulled me in and kissed the top of my head. “Good. I want you to trust me, and I want to prove my worth to you.”

I felt myself blushing from Jori’s contact. Being near him made me feel heated, but I tried to shake it off and took a step back from

him. I was getting into dangerous territory with Mark and Jori, and if I wasn’t careful, I would force myself into a decision sooner than!

wanted to.

“So what is there to do around here?” I asked. I imagined the party wouldn’t be until later in the day. I thought about doing more

research by reading that journal, but I didn't want to do that, especially not on my birthday. While I didn't like celebrating, I usually tried to do something relaxing on my birthday.

"You could go on a date with me," Jori suggested.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Jori really didn't understand the wait until my life was no longer in danger thing. "I told you that I will, but not until later."

Jori put up his hands in defense. "Okay, fine. We won't call it a date. Let's just hang out."

I furrowed my eyebrows. It felt like Jori was using a loop hole, but I supposed it wouldn't hurt to hang out and get to know him better. "I guess we can do that."

"Great! Go put something on that you don't mind getting a little dirty and meet me at the front door in fifteen minutes." Jori was beaming.

"I don't think we should leave the pack house," I said nervously.

Jori laughed. "Don't worry, we won't be leaving the pack grounds. Plus, I'll be with you the entire time."

I smiled nervously, but something inside me told me to trust Jori. It would be worth it. I let out a sigh. "Okay, if you say so."

I ran up the stairs and went to my clothes. Jori said to wear something I didn't mind getting dirty, but I didn't have many options. I only packed for a two-day trip. I grabbed my dirty clothes from the day before and sniffed them. They passed the smell check, so I went ahead and threw them on. If I ended up sticking around for longer, I would have to ask Rie to take me shopping again.

I headed back down the stairs, and Jori was already waiting for me by the front door. He was wearing a pair of dark jeans and a white t-shirt with a jacket. I paused at the sight of him. Despite his clothes being simple, I could see how toned he was, and it made something inside of me purr.

"Ready?" Jori asked.

"Yep! I was excited at the prospect of getting to know Jori a little better. Moon wanted me to give him a proper chance, and this was the best way I could think to do that.

Jori grabbed my hand and led me outside. He took a sharp turn to the left and took me to the side of the house. There was a lot of foliage there, and it was a little difficult to navigate through.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Patience, my darling. It's a surprise. Sorry we have to go this way. Normally I would have taken you through the backyard, but if Jori

saw me, I'm pretty sure he'd have my head for letting you see the party area." Jori laughed a little at this.

"Do you miss them?" I asked. I wasn't clear about the exact timeline for when Mark and the others broke away from the pack, but Rie and Jori seemed to fit easily back into the flow of everything.

Jori didn't respond right away. "Watch out." He grabbed a branch and held it back for me to be able to walk through with ease. He still hadn't responded to my question after a moment, and I started wondering if he hadn't heard me. I didn't want to repeat my question just in case he had heard me.

After a few minutes of walking in silence, Jori stopped. He turned to me with a big smile, and I could hear the rushing of water nearby.

"Welcome to my secret hideout!" Jori pulled back some vines, revealing a grove. There was a small waterfall that poured into a crystal clear pond. Purple flowers surrounded the water, even though we were well into fall now. All around us, the trees grew pretty thickly, giving the area privacy. It almost looked like paradise.

I walked past Jori with my eyes wide. "Wow, this is absolutely incredible. Can you swim in the water?"

"You can, but I wouldn't recommend it right now. It's a little cold." Jori followed closely behind me.

"I would love to have a secret hideout like this. It's so peaceful, and it would be a great place to just get away." I sat on a large rock and watched as the waterfall poured down. The sound of the rushing water was soothing, and for just a moment, I felt like I could escape my problems.

Jori sat down on the rock next to me. "I'll tell you what, if you pick me, I'll share this place with you."

I looked at Jori with a small frown. "Jori."

Jori raised his hands in defense. "I know. I know. I'm not trying to convince you. I'm just trying to make sure you know everything you would be getting with me."

I pulled my lips into a tight smile and turned my attention to the waterfall. This was a serene place, and I would love to be able to visit here whenever I wanted. That wasn't a good enough reason to pick Jori though.

"I do miss them," Jori said in a whisper.

I looked at him, unsure if I heard him correctly. Between the waterfall and the quietness of Jori's voice, I wasn't sure if I had heard

him correctly.

“Rie, Scythe. They were my friends too. That was one of the hardest parts about everything that happened. I lost all of my friends, even my best friend.” Jori seemed genuinely sad, and this was the first time I had seen him show emotion that wasn’t cockiness or flirting. It felt real.

“Maybe you could talk to Mark and work things out. You don’t have to reconnect the packs, but maybe you could repair the friendship.” I felt sad thinking Mark and Jori used to be best friends. It wasn’t easy losing the people you cared about.

Jori shook his head. He was avoiding eye contact with me. “I don’t think that’s possible, not with you being both Mark’s mate and mine. If you choose me, I can’t imagine Mark ever wanting to be my friend. And if you were to choose Mark, I would want to kill him.

Chapter 26

“I wish that weren’t the case,” I admitted. “It makes me not want to choose either of you. I can’t stand the thought of coming between a friendship.”

“This friendship has been broken for a while,” Jori said. “You making a decision isn’t ruining anything that wasn’t ruined. You might as well pick your own happiness.”

I frowned at this. “It’s not that easy. I don’t think I will be truly happy with whatever decision I make, because I will be hurting someone either way, which will hurt me. I can’t win.”

“It’s okay to be selfish sometimes,” Jori said. “You’ve been through so much hurt that I think you deserve to be special.”

I didn’t know how to respond to Jori, so I stayed silent. His words rang true on a logical level. It was okay to be selfish to a certain extent. It felt wrong not to consider the feelings of others. It wasn’t in my nature.

We sat there in silence, but I didn’t mind it. I felt comfortable and safe around Jori, and I didn’t feel the need to fill the silence. After a while, I felt a chill come over me. I tried to suppress it, but my body shook anyway.

“You’re cold,” Jori said. He started slipping off his own jacket and put it on my shoulders.

I grabbed the jacket and tried to hand it back to him. “If you give me your jacket, then you’ll get cold instead.”

Jori pushed the jacket back at me. “Well, I’m not going to wear it anyway, so you might as well wear it yourself.” He suddenly turned

to me, leaning in. "Unless you would rather have me warm you up with my body."

"The jacket will be fine," I laughed nervously. I slipped on the jacket, not wanting to push the subject more.

Jori didn't move, even as I pulled the jacket on. He reached up and took a strand of my hair between his fingers. He twirled the strand in his fingers, leaning even closer to my face.

"The concept of mates was always so interesting to me," Jori said, keeping his face only a few inches from mine. "A few days ago, we didn't know the other person existed. But now, looking at you, all I want is to be your everything. I want to protect you, and touch you, and make you mine. Just being near you is setting my skin on fire."

I gulped at his proximity. Even though Jori wasn't touching me, I could feel his heat radiating from him. I felt my own body start to heat up as well. My body burned for him, and I was frozen, unable to make a move towards or away from him. Finally, I turned my head away from him.

Jori let go of my hair and sat back. "Do you feel that uncomfortable when I'm that close?"

I turned back to Jori slowly, and there was a frown on his face, making me feel guilty. "It's not that I feel uncomfortable. It's that I don't know if I will be able to control myself, and I don't want to do anything that I will regret. I don't know you, and I don't want to just act on instinct."

"Maybe you should stop overthinking and just let yourself give in for once." Jori leaned forward again.

I reached up and touched Jori's cheek. His face was surprisingly soft. I left my hand on his face, but I didn't make any other movements. I could see myself melting into the man in front of me, giving everything up for him. But I didn't know him. Not really.

"I... I can't," I managed to say. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I felt like I could barely breathe. Growing up, I had heard many couples describe the mate bond, and I always thought they were exaggerating. They said that they were pulled to each other like magnets, and being near their mate and not being able to touch them was nearly painful. I thought they were needy or giving an excuse for their carnal behaviors, but now I understood it a little better.

Every cell in my body was reaching for Jori. My fingers felt like they were on fire with the minimal contact they had. It would be so easy to give in.

Jori leaned in closer, brushing his lips very slightly. "Tell me to stop then." I opened my mouth to say stop, but instead I closed the gap, pressing my lips against Jori's. His hand was instantly in my hair, and he pressed his lips against mine even harder. His hands were rougher than I expected. He tugged on my hair, making me tilt my head back.

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A cool breeze swam through the little grove, sending a chill down my spine. This snapped me to my senses, and I pulled away from Jori. I quickly stood up to put more distance between us. My chest was heaving up and down as I tried to catch my breath.

"We should head back. People might start wondering where we are," I said breathlessly.

Jori smirked, slowly standing up. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist me. We can go back for now, but just know this place is always here if you want more privacy with me." Jori held out his hand, but I walked past him without taking it.

Now that I had created some distance between us, the guilt was starting to wash over me. I had just kissed Mark last night, and now! I was kissing Jori. It felt wrong, even though the moments had felt right. My head felt too clouded right now, and I felt myself power walking away.

"Hey slow down," Jori called out after me.

I could hear his footsteps behind me, but I didn't slow down. I just wanted to get back to the pack house and take a moment to myself. Luckily, the path was pretty easy to follow back, so I didn't need Jori to lead the way. I burst out of the foliage, and I could see the pack house again. Jori was still calling my name, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't face him right now.

I ran up the steps to the front porch of the pack house, but before I got to the door I felt a firm grip on my wrist, pulling me back.

"Adira, please stop," Jori said between breaths. "Please look at me. Are you okay?"

I still didn't turn to Jori. I didn't know how to explain my sense of shame to him. "Please let go of me."

"Not until you look at me."

I turned to Jori, but I looked up at the ceiling. I could feel the tears start to build, but I didn't want them to fall. I didn't want to start crying. "Will you let me go now?"

“You’re still not looking at me.” Jori’s grip was firm and unwavering. “I think you should let her go,” a deep voice reverberated from behind me. I turned to look. “Mark.”

“This isn’t any of your business,” Jori said.

“She asked you to let her go,” Mark said. “You’re not listening to her, and she’s clearly upset. That makes it my business.”

I could feel the tension rising between the two of them, and it was worse because they were both alphas. I pulled my wrist, and this time Jori let go of me. I took a step back from the two of them. “I’m okay. Please don’t fight.”

Mark didn’t take his eyes off of Jori, and he looked like he was about to boil.

Jori smirked in return. “See, the lady said all was good. It’s none of your business, like I said.”

My lips curled down as my frustration grew. “Jori, that’s enough.” He was clearly taunting Mark, and I didn’t like it. “Please, can you two not fight for just today.”

Mark shifted his demeanor after my words. He seemed to shrink in height and looked ashamed of himself. “Yes, of course. Rie has been looking for you, so I was helping her search. She was stressing about getting you ready for the party.”

“Isn’t the party not for a couple of hours?” I said. At most it took me an hour to get ready for anything. That was a rare situation too.

“I don’t know what she has planned for you, but I do not wish to be you right now,” Mark laughed.

“I will leave the birthday girl to go get ready then,” Jori said. “I will see you later, darling.” Jori leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek before going inside.

I found myself blushing, but I wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or excitement. I didn’t like that he did that in front of Mark. It almost felt like he was marking his territory.

“I guess I should get going,” I said, looking at the ground. “I don’t want Rie to go too crazy.”

“Wait, don’t go yet,” Mark said quickly.

I stopped and looked at him. I felt ashamed standing in front of him, and I hated that. “If this is about Jori-”

“No, no. I’m fine. I just got a little overwhelmed and needed a moment to myself. Sorry for worrying you.” I was careful not to tell Mark about the kissing. I didn’t do anything wrong per say. I hadn’t picked

Mark, but something still felt wrong about it.

“Okay. As long as you are sure. Jori can be a prick sometimes.” Mark ran his fingers through his hair. “I was getting pretty worried about you. I tried calling and texting you, but you weren’t answering.”

“You did?” I pulled out my phone and saw several missed calls and text messages from Mark. “Oh shoot. My phone was on silent, and I didn’t hear it. I’m so sorry for worrying you. Jori wanted to show me that grove.” I cut myself off, wondering if Mark knew about the place. Jori did say it was his secret hideout.

Mark nodded carefully. “You’re safe. That’s all that matters. Oh and happy birthday, Adira. I have a present for you, but I’ll give it to you later. I’m pretty sure Rie will beat me if I keep you any longer. She already said she was behind schedule.”

I smiled. “You got me something? You didn’t have to.”

Mark smiled back. “I wanted to. I care about you, Adira. All I want is for you to be happy.”

Chapter 27

The moment Rie laid eyes on me, she rushed over to my side. “Thank goodness you’re here! Where have you been? Never mind that.

We need to start getting you ready.”

Before I could say anything, Rie started dragging me upstairs. The first thing she did was force me into the shower, saying she would get everything else ready for when I got out. I stood in the hot shower, letting it warm up my body. My fingers were still chilled from being outside for so long. The weather was pretty nice, considering the time of year. However, the water had cooled down the air, and with the small breeze, it made me pretty chilled. The hot water felt like a nice comparison.

When I got out of the shower, I saw my clothes had been replaced with a white bathrobe. I tied it around my waist. It was softer than any towel or bathrobe I had even felt before. It made me feel like I was in a fancy hotel. I left the bathroom to look for Rie.

When I found Rie, she was sitting in the game room, but it no longer looked like a game room. Most of the big items had been pushed to the side, and there was makeup, clothes and various other items spread around the room. Rie was sitting on the couch, braiding a young girl’s hair.

“Adira! Perfect. Give me a moment, and I’ll start on your hair,” Rie said.

“I can dry my hair myself,” I said. I sat on the couch next to Rie. There were several girls here getting ready, and I didn’t recognize

them.

“Except you won’t be. It’s your birthday. You won’t be lifting a finger tonight,” Rie declared. She was halfway through the braid.

A teenager was curling her hair nearby, and she looked over at me. “Oh, so this big hoopla is for your birthday?”

I nodded. “Sorry. I’m sure your house has been pretty chaotic because of me.”

“Girl! Are you kidding me? I love parties! It has been pretty drab around here, so I’m so happy Alpha Jori is finally letting us do something fun. In my opinion, you’re my hero.” The teen girl had a big smile on her face. “I’m Cindy, by the way.”

“I’m Eva!” the little girl in front of Rie shouted, bouncing up and down. She wasn’t any older than six.

“Eva, hold still,” Rie scolded.

Eva whined in response. Then she looked at me. “Are you going to become part of our pack?”

My heart sank at her question. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?” Eva kicked her legs up and down, making Rie mutter in frustration.

“She has to choose Alpha Jori as her mate first,” Cindy said. She was very blunt with her words.

Did the entire pack house know what was going on with me and my mate situation? I really hoped not. I didn’t want anyone to look at me like a villain, especially when I didn’t know what to do yet. Of course people would talk about it, though. I have never heard of

someone having two mates before, so I’m sure most werewolves were in the same situation. Once you found your mate, it was supposed to be easy. Finding your mate could be the difficult part, because more often than not, your mate was not a part of your pack.

My mother always thought it was the goddess’s way of making sure to breed strong genetics and form alliances. Some packs were rather small, so things would get messy pretty quickly if everyone found their mate within the same group. It was for that reason many packs participated in an annual ball. Only wolves of age typically went, but I had attended the ball when my family had hosted when I was still a little girl. Often the Alpha and his family would attend as well to monitor their pack members.

My eyes lit up with a sudden realization. “Hey Rie, did this pack attend the Lycan Ball for the Lyna Pack?”

Rie c****d her head, thinking about the question. She finished tying the end

of the braid with a ribbon, adding a bow to it. "That would have been a while ago, huh? I'm sure members went. The pack usually attends. I wouldn't have gone myself though."

"Do you think Jori or Mark would've gone?" A memory that had been long forgotten was now playing in my head over and over again. I don't know how I had forgotten those piercing blue eyes.

Rie's eyes lit up. "They did. I remember being jealous of them, because I wanted to go to see the people in the pretty dresses. Normally they didn't attend the events, but the one for Pack Lyna was a special occasion since it was the year of the Lycan. Goodness,

"I think I met them there," I said. A smile was beaming inside of me as I remembered everything that had happened.

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Rie jumped up. "Did you really? That's insane! I guess Pack Lyna doesn't reside that far away. I'm surprised we all haven't met before. I guess you have though. Do you think Mark and Jori remember it?"

I shrugged my shoulders and stood up next to Rie. "I have no idea. They sure made an impression on me, but I don't know if I would've done the same."

Rie smiled softly. "You leave more of an impression than you realize. You might be quiet sometimes, but there is an energy about you that leaves you wanting to know more."

"Really? No one has ever said that to me before." I was much more used to people running away from me.

"She's not wrong," Cindy agreed. She was now applying her makeup. "The first time I saw you, I instantly took notice of you. — Normally, I don't notice new people around here, unless it's a cute boy. But I was hoping I would come across you again."

"This is a surprise to me. I thought most people didn't like me." I sat back down thinking about this. Why would the people around me want to get to know me better when for years everyone ran away?

"It can be a little scary," Eva said. She jumped up and ran over to Cindy.

"Big sis, can you help me with my makeup?"

"Eva," Rie scolded. "That's not a nice thing to say."

"No," I said instantly. "I'm curious as to why Eva thinks I'm scary. I've had a lot of werewolves offer to let me join their pack only to turn around and reject me. I've never understood why."

Eva turned and looked at me. "I didn't say you were scary. I said being around you can be a little scary."

"What's the difference?" It seemed like the same thing to me.

Eva pursed her lips and moved over to me. She grabbed my hands and looked me dead in the eyes. "You seem nice enough, but you know how werewolves have that wolfy smell?" I nodded when Eva paused for a response. "Well you have that wolfy smell, but it also smells... weird. It's almost like you're not actually a werewolf, but you are wearing the scent of one."

I looked over to Rie. "Is that true?"

Rie hesitated and started inspecting her hands pretty closely. "Well, kind of, yeah. I didn't know how to describe it before, but Eva said it pretty well. The werewolf scent is the first thing that's noticeable about you. But then you realize that there's something else. I could see it unnerving some people."

"Some boring people," Cindy said. We all looked at her, so she added, "I think it's pretty cool. That's why I wanted to get to know you better. You're different, and I think of that as a positive, not a negative."

"That's very kind of you." I smiled at the thought. It made sense why people ran away. I had never known I smelled differently.

Cindy shrugged. "Just being honest. Eva, if you want me to do your makeup, I'll need you to come over here."

"Right, we need to get started on you or we're going to run out of time," Rie said, pointing at me with a brush.

Rie went into hyper-focus mode after that. She started by brushing out my hair and then blow drying it. She had me sitting on the floor in front of her while she worked her magic. Next, she grabbed the hair curler and sectioned off parts of my hair. Curl by curl, she quickly turned my usually flat hair into a voluminous curly mess. She quickly added hair spray and then ran her fingers through my hair. I felt her tugging at specific places on my head, but I wasn't allowed to see anything until I was completely done. Rie waved over Cindy, who was finishing up Eva's makeup. "Will you help with her makeup when you're done with Eva?"

"Of course! I will be there in a moment."

"Should I put my dress on while waiting?" I asked.

Rie gave me a pointed look. "No, we can't risk getting anything on your dress. I'm going to start on your nails."

Rie got up and grabbed her nail kit. When she came back, she motioned me to sit on the couch. She took my hand and started. giving me the full nail treatment. Usually when I did my nails, I just put on a layer or two of nail polish and called it good. Rie, on the other hand, was trimming my cuticles and polishing the nails.

When she was all done with the prepping, Cindy came over and started

working on my makeup. I had never felt so pampered before. closed while Cindy worked on my makeup. I easily lost time as they finished dolling me up, and I had no idea how long everything took.

“Okay! All done,” Rie finally announced. She stood up and stretched out a little. “Now to get you dressed.”

“Rie! Where’s the birthday girl?” Scythe demanded. He was stomping up the stairs. “It’s time for the party to start.”

Eva ran over to the top of the stairs, and when Scythe made it to the top, she pushed on his torso. “No! You can’t come up here. No boys allowed!”

“I wouldn’t need to come up here, if you all were down there already.”

Scythe crossed his arms.

“Go away! We’re not ready. You can’t see.” Eva pushed on Scythe again, but he didn’t budge.

Rie was laughing. “Don’t worry, Scythe. We’re almost done. It’s fine for the birthday girl to be fashionably late at her own party. We’ll be down soon.”

Scythe rolled his eyes. “Fine. You have fifteen minutes or I’m coming back up.”

“We’ll be down when we’re down!” Rie shouted after him. She turned back to me. “Let me grab your dress.”

Rie ran off to grab my dress. She came back, and I started pulling the dress up. Rie helped me zip up the back and then took a step back to look me over.

“Wow! You looked like a princess,” Eva said. “I want to look like you one day.”

“You look beautiful,” Rie agreed, a huge smile on her face. “Are you ready to see what you look like, Princess Adira?”

I laughed at the new title I was given. I nodded my head and followed Rie to a mirror. I took one look and felt myself tearing up.

Chapter 28

I stared in the mirror, and I didn’t recognize the mirror staring back at me. I had dressed up and done the full makeup when I was still a teenager, but ever since being on my own, I hadn’t put nearly as much effort into my looks. The person standing in front of me had dark brown hair that fell over her shoulders in loose curls. Little stair pins hung throughout the curls, adding a little bit of a sparkle. The dress seemed to fit perfectly with the complement of the makeup and curls in my hair. I couldn’t decide if I felt more like a princess or a

fairy, but I was in love either way. I felt magical, like nothing bad could happen.

"Thank you so much," I whispered without taking my eyes off the mirror. I twisted a few times to watch the bottom of my dress flow around me. I could feel the tears starting to build in my eyes. It was the first time in a while that my tears were from happiness.

"No, no, none of that. We can't ruin your makeup. We don't need to see your diamond tears right now," Rie said.

I took a deep breath and smiled. "Don't worry. These are tears of joy."

"Either way, we don't want them. Come on. We should get going before Scythe storms over to us again." Rie tilted her head towards the stairs.

I ran my hands over my dress again to make sure it was real. I took one last look in the mirror and gasped. My eyes were sparkling as if a thousand stars had invaded my pupils. "Um."

Rie looked at me and her eyes instantly widened. "What's going on?"

My body felt like it was buzzing. "I don't know. Maybe my powers are emerging." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to see if that would help. When I opened my eyes again, my eyes were back to normal.

"Whoa! That's so cool," Eva shouted.

"Powers?" Cindy narrowed her eyes. "Is that why you don't smell quite like a wolf?"

I nodded slowly. I wasn't really planning on telling anyone without a need to know basis. "I think I'm only half werewolf."

"Oh, so the other half of you makes your eyes glow?" Eva asked.

I laughed. "I guess. I don't really know much about the other part of me, but I'm learning."

"Can you do it again?" Eva was standing right next to me, looking up at me. She was blinking her eyes rapidly.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure how I'm doing it, if I'm being honest." I still felt like there was an energy running through my body still, even though my eyes were no longer glowing. I glanced in the mirror just to double check.

"Maybe it was because you were happy?" Rie suggested. "You were practically glowing the moment before, and then you were actually going."

I thought about this for a moment. The last time my eyes were glowing was when I was attacked and scared. Maybe Rie was right. Maybe the power was linked to my emotions, which is why it didn't suddenly emerge just because it was my birthday.

“You might be right,” I agreed. “We should probably go downstairs before Scythe comes back and drags us back out.”

Rie laughed. “I could take him, but you are probably right.”

Rie led me downstairs and towards the backyard. I moved slowly as I descended the stairs, terrified of tripping over my dress with my heels on. Cindy and Eva were following behind me. As we walked down the hallway that led to the outside, I felt like I was floating.

Outside of those doors was a party people had spent so much time and effort for me. I didn’t even care what everything looked like. I just felt honored that they even wanted to celebrate my birthday, despite my protests.

Rie stopped at the back door. “Ready?”

I nodded, and Rie opened the door for me. I stepped outside, and it felt like I was transported into a completely different world. Fairy lights were hung up over the entire backyard, encasing the party in a world of lights. There were flowers and fountains filling up any spare space in the yard as well. Large heaters were placed throughout the backyard to fight off the chilly night air.

Refreshments were set up to the side, and tables were scattered throughout the edges of the backyard. The center of the grassy field was left open as a dance field. I looked around at everyone standing around, and there were at least fifty people here. I had no idea

At first, no one was looking at me, but one by one, eyes started to turn my way and look at me. It wasn’t long before everyone was looking at me. My face flushed with all of the attention on me, but my eyes still scanned the backyard for the familiar faces I knew. Scythe was the first one I saw, but he was still ordering people around, and it was easy to spot him because of this. My eyes continued searching

the crowd, looking for one pair of eyes in particular.

The crowd started to part as a body made its way through. My heart was racing with anticipation. Finally, the man made it to the front of the line, and my heart clenched. I was staring at a familiar pair of dark eyes.

Jori made his way over to me and held out his hand. “Care for a dance?”

I looked around at the party. “There’s no music.”

“We will fix that,” Rie said. She touched my shoulder before slipping past me. She went over to where Scythe was standing. Eva and Cindy disappeared into the crowd as well, probably seeing their friends and family.

Jori still held out his hand. “Come on darling. We don’t need music to start dancing.”

I looked around once more before grabbing Jori's hand. "Okay." Jori led me to the center of the dance floor. He didn't hesitate to put one hand on my hip and hold up the other hand in the air. He started swaying me back and forth. I could still feel eyes on me, and I suddenly felt on edge. It must have looked weird with the two of us barely dancing with no music.

I was relieved when stringed instruments started playing music. It was faster paced than what Jori and I were doing, but Jori quickly matched the tempo. I did my best to let him lead me with the dance, but I felt a little clumsy. I had never danced with a man like this before. In high school, my friends and I would have dance parties, but most of it was flailing and jumping around like idiots. This was different.

Noticing my struggle, Jori lifted me up, so my feet were barely touching the ground. This made it easier for him to spin around with me in his arms. We moved all around in different motions, and I could tell Jori was very skilled with dancing. His eyes were glued to mine,

but my eyes were still wandering around the crowd. So many people were watching us, and I couldn't help but wonder why we were such a spectacle to watch. I was starting to feel dizzy in Jori's arms.

I was ready to be done dancing and take a moment. That's when I noticed a pair of blue eyes staring at me from the crowd. I found myself trying to stare back at Mark, but Jori started spinning us around once again. I strained my neck to catch sight of Mark, but I could only catch glimpse after glimpse of him. We moved farther away from Mark, making it even more difficult to see him.

"What's on your mind, darling?" Jori asked, finally drawing my attention back to him.

"Oh nothing." I felt embarrassed, as if he caught me looking at something I should be. The vibrating in my body had returned, and I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. "Why are so many people looking at us? Shouldn't they be dancing as well?"

Jori chuckled. "I think everyone is just nosy and wants to see their alpha dancing with their future Luna."

My stomach felt like it was in a knot. "I think I need something to drink. I'm parched."

Jori stopped moving, but he didn't let go of me. "Would you like me to get you something?" I shook my head. "No, it's okay. I want to check out the scenery a little bit and thank Scythe and Percy for everything they've done."

“I can come with you.”

I let go of Jori’s hand and placed it on his chest. “It’s okay. I will find you later.”

Jori still had his grip around my waist. I knew he didn’t want to let me go, and I could see the struggle in his eyes. “Okay, but don’t take too long.”

I smiled in response and then started heading to the refreshment table. There were so many different types of food, and the drink selection was incredible. On top of it, there was a chocolate fountain with several items to dip in it. It was incredible that Scythe found someone to cater so last minute for the party. Everything was absolutely incredible.

I grabbed a water bottle and moved off to the side to catch my breath. I think the anxiety of having everyone stare at me in Jori’s arms was making my powers stir, and I didn’t want my eyes to start glowing again.

I turned and saw Scythe coming straight towards me. “Scythe! How on earth did you do all of this in twenty-four hours?”

“I’m magical.” He smiled and gave me a wink. “Not quite as magical as you, though. How are you feeling, by the way?”

“I’m a little on edge. Before we came down, my eyes started glowing again. I feel like something is building inside of me, but I don’t

know what it is or how to control it.” I squeezed my water bottle tightly.

Scythe grabbed my hand. “Try not to worry about it for now, and just have fun. Tonight is your night, so try not to worry too much too. Did you see the chocolate fountain?”

I nodded laughing. “I did, but I haven’t had a chance to try it yet.”

“Well, don’t forget! But make sure there’s room for cake. That will be served later.” Scythe was beaming in a way I hadn’t seen

before. He was completely in his element at the party.

I saw Percy walking towards us, and I felt a little nervous. Scythe was so happy, and I hoped that things between Percy and Scythe could work out. I didn’t know all of the details of what had happened, but when Scythe first arrived, I could see his pain and longing, and I never wanted him to feel that way again.

“There you are,” Percy said, stopping next to Scythe. “One of the children pulled at some of the fairy lights, and now they are not working. I need your help.”

“That’s my queue to get back to business,” Scythe said. “Happy birthday, Adira. I hope this evening is as special as you are.” He

wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug. He then whispered in my ear. "Your Prince Charming is making your way here now."

Percy turned to me. "Happy birthday." Then he turned to leave with Scythe by his side. I saw Percy purposely bump into Scythe's arm, and it made me hopeful for the two of them.

"Happy birthday, Adira," Mark said, his deep voice filling my ears.

Chapter 29

Turning around, I saw Mark standing right behind. A sense of relief filled me as he stood so close.

"Where have you been?" I asked. Mark was standing only inches away from me, but I didn't want to move away.

Mark shrugged. "Here and there. I was waiting for my opportunity to snatch you for myself. I didn't want to bother you while you were with Jori."

"Well, I'm glad you found me when you did."

Mark held his hand out to me. "Would you like to dance?"

I looked over at the dance floor, which had finally filled up with other people. The idea of going back out there made me feel queasy.

I didn't like the idea of everyone looking at me again, especially after they all saw me dancing with Jori. "I don't want people staring." I

looked at the ground, feeling guilty. I wanted to dance with Mark. I wanted his arms around me, but I was scared.

Mark grabbed my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction. "Let's find a place people won't stare then."

He led me towards the edge of the backyard. It was still filled with lights and decorations, but there was a small corner behind an extravagant statue that no one else was occupying. When we were behind the statue, Mark pulled me close into him, placing his hand on my hip.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

I placed my hand on Mark's shoulder and pressed myself into him. "This is perfect. Just a warning, I'm not a very good dancer."

"Good thing no one is looking. We can dance however we want." Mark just swayed us back and forth, not bothering with any fancy moves like Jori had. It was much more of my pace.

I looked up at Mark, and I couldn't help but admire him. He was so different compared to Jori. He was patient and calm. He didn't

try to do anything spectacular, but his small gestures were still meaningful.

I was drawn to both of them, but something felt different with

Mark. I didn't feel nervous with him so close.

"Mark?" He hummed in response to me. "Do you remember going to the Lycan ball?"

Mark tilted his head. "I went to a few of them when I was younger. I didn't end up going to one when I was of age, though, because of everything that happened. Why do you ask?"

"I think we've met before." I thought about the red-headed boy who had come to the party my parents had hosted many years ago.

"I take it that it was at one of those parties?" Mark asked. He continued swaying us back and forth. I could tell he was searching his brain for the memory.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you don't remember. About ten years ago, my family hosted the Lycan ball in the town neighboring this one." I thought back on that day. "I wasn't having any fun at the party. I was too young to really participate, and my parents didn't want me getting in the way. I was bored out of my mind. Then this family with two boys around my age showed up. My mother didn't want me running around, but I snuck away to see if I could play with them.

"There was one with dark hair and another with red. They didn't seem interested in playing with me, but I followed them around.

Then the one with dark hair pulled on my hair, making the bun fall out of place. He ran away after, saying to leave him alone because girls were icky."

Mark's eyes brightened. "Then the red-headed boy comforted you by offering you a chocolate-covered strawberry. He tried to help you fix your hair, but he only made it worse because he didn't understand how a girl's hair worked."

"He even got chocolate in my hair," I finished. My cheeks were burning from smiling so much. "You remember?"

Mark smiled. "How could I forget my first crush?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Don't lie to me. Why would you have a crush on me?"

"I'm not lying," Mark laughed, "You were so spunky. You didn't let the fact that you were wearing a dress stop you from chasing us to ever see you cry again. I only wanted to see your beautiful smile." Mark reached up and stroked my cheek. "This smile. I can't believe I didn't realize it was you."

"We have grown up a lot. I didn't recognize you at first either. To think we would end up here so many years later. It doesn't feel real.

Mark let go of my waist and spun me out from him. When he spun me back in, he grabbed my waist and dipped me. I giggle from the shock of it. Mark pulled me back up to him, and somehow he was closer than before. I wrapped both of my arms around his neck. "It feels like a fairytale." I rested my head on Mark's chest and let him sway me back and forth, I closed my eyes, and I could feel his heart beating against his chest. It was racing, and I couldn't tell if he was nervous or something else. "This has been the best birthday I have ever had."

"I bet I can make it better." Mark let go of my waist, but he still kept his other hand in mine.

I looked up at Mark, wondering what he was doing. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small blue box. My heart started racing at the thought of what that little box contained. He opened it up, revealing a silver chain with a blue glass heart attached to

"It's beautiful." I felt myself tearing up a little.

Mark took the necklace out of the box and motioned for me to turn around. I pulled my hair to the side as he placed the necklace around me.

"I wanted to give this to you, because I wanted you to know that you will always have my heart. No matter what happens or who you choose, I will be here for you. I don't want you to ever forget that." Mark finished clasping the necklace and then placed a soft kiss on my neck. Goosebumps ran down my body from the simple gesture.

I turned back around, wrapping my arms around Mark. "Thank you. I love this so much."

Mark wrapped his arms around my waist. He leaned forward and brushed his nose against mine. "I just hope you are happy."

Mark's lips were so close to mine that I could barely resist. I wanted all of him in this moment. His breath was tickling my lips, and I wanted to close the gap between our mouths. A small voice was fighting my urges, which was the only reason I was hesitating. I knew it was Moon. She wanted me to give Jori a proper chance. I understood why. I felt the pull to him, but being here with Mark, it was hard thinking about choosing Jori.

Maybe it was because I was alone with Mark, and the atmosphere was oozing romance. Or maybe it was because I had met Mark first. It could even be because I had a deeper connection with Shadow than Moon. It could have been any of these reasons, or maybe all of them, but I didn't want to wait to pick my mate. I wanted Mark. The way he made me feel compared to Jori was so different, and I just wanted to be around Mark for the rest of my life.

I lifted my toes, closing the distance between Mark. Just before we kissed, the music cut off and a loud speaker echoed throughout the party. I turned away from Mark, turning my attention back to the party.

“Good evening everyone!” Scythe boomed over a microphone. I couldn’t see him, but I knew it was him. “I hope you all are having a great time here.” Cheers erupted in response. “Excellent. I think it’s time for a toast to the birthday girl. Has anyone seen her?”

Mark tightened his grip on me. “I think our time alone is up.” I pouted, looking back at Mark. I would rather stay here with Mark than go back to a bunch of people I didn’t know. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Come on. Let’s go before Scythe makes a scene. Don’t worry, I won’t leave your side.” Mark let go of my waist and started leading me back to the party.

“Oh there she is!” Scythe said,

Everyone turned their attention to Mark and myself. I saw some confused looks as well as some dirty looks. Mark squeezed my hand in reassurance. I wished we were back in our corner away from prying eyes.

Scythe waved us to the front of the crowd. Mark continued leading me up there, and we stopped next to Scythe. I let go of Mark’s hand. Everyone had a glass, Scythe passed me a glass and grabbed the microphone again.

“I’m so happy everyone was able to make it today,” Scythe continued. “I’m grateful to see so many of you again, and I hope we can do something like this in the future. We are here because of this lovely lady here.” Scythe motioned over to me. “I am grateful to have met Adira, and I know many of you haven’t had a chance to meet her yet. I highly recommend introducing yourself to her if you can. She’s

quite special, and she’s the reason we are all here. Let’s raise a glass to Adira. Happy birthday!”

Everyone shouted happy birthday and then took a sip of their drink. I took a small sip of my own as I looked around at all of the people celebrating me. They all lowered their glasses, giving me a weird look.

Scythe leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Adira, you’re glowing, like literally.”

Chapter 31

“Don’t scream or alert anyone, or others will die as well,” Theron whispered in my ear.

My entire body was frozen in fear. I was supposed to be safe at the pack

house. I was supposed to be safe with Mark and Jori. Did either of them see me with this strange man? Did anyone notice this man who did not smell quite right?

“You’re the one who has been trying to kill me,” I said flatly. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I could hardly breathe.

“I have been the one orchestrating it, yes. But it seems my associate was less than adequate, so I figured I would take things into my own hands,” he explained. His grip tightened on me and it started to hurt.

“But why? I don’t even know you.” My eyes were locked with his, and I could see the pure hatred in them. This wasn’t just some random bounty hunter.

Theron continued spinning us around the dance floor. “Because you’re going to take everything from me. I want to take everything away from you before that happens.”

“But I’m not trying to take anything from you.” I wanted to look away from this man and try to signal for help with my eyes from anyone, but I couldn’t look away. I was scared, frustrated, and confused.

“Doesn’t matter. You are the oldest in the Caspian Bloodline. You are to inherit the powers of the coven, and I can’t have that happen.” Theron’s smile turned to a grimace.

I still didn’t understand what he was talking about. “I don’t care about inheriting powers. Just take them.”

“You really don’t understand. Father abandoned you, and you never learned the ways of sorcerers. You would be a weak leader.”

There was venom in his voice.

“No, I really don’t understand, and that’s not my fault. I’ll give you whatever you want. Please just don’t kill me.” The vibrating in my body returned. It started building in pressure, making it more difficult to focus.

Theron chuckled, squeezing my hand even tighter. “I can feel your powers trying to break through, birthday girl. So much potential has been squandered for years. Even if you could release your power now, it would be nothing compared to what it could have been. Who knows if your body could even handle it.”

My nerves felt like they were on fire. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to control it, but it felt like too much. Theron’s grip only got tighter, too. “Please let me go.”

“Oh, that’s not happening, birthday girl. The only way to make sure you don’t get in my way is to kill you.” Theron leaned in closer.

You should just accept your fate. No one will really miss you anyway, half-

breed.”

My eyes snapped open, and the fire burst inside of me. “I recommend you let me go now. You are surrounded by werewolves, and they won’t let you escape.”

Theron only grinned. “How would they manage that when they’ve all been poisoned with wolfsbane?”

“You’re lying.” I looked around, and everyone seemed just fine.

“You’re so easy to accuse me of lying when you don’t even know, as you have said yourself. These fools were so careless. Do you know how easy it was to slip the wolfsbane into the drinks used for toasting? I almost feel sorry for everyone. Wolves are such fools.”

Theron let go of my waist and spun me out and then spun me back in. I hit his chest harder than I expected as I twirled back in.

“What is your problem? Why would you poison everyone?” I was horrified by the man in front of me.

“Don’t worry. It shouldn’t kill any of them, but no one would be able to fight against me, even if they tried. You have survived our attempts twice. I wanted to guarantee this time would work. Besides, it’s sort of a guarantee for me. If you choose to fight me and try to get away, I will make sure every last one of your friends dies. The choice is yours. Come peacefully, or let a bloodbath occur.” His eyes flickered black yet again.

The rage inside of me only grew. “You’re a psychopath. If you touch anyone of them, I’ll kill you.”

Theron let out a hearty laugh. “I’d like to see you try. You have no control over your powers, and your wolf side is weak from the friends.”

I looked around at the crowd of people. I couldn’t see any faces I recognized in the crowd of dancers, but I thought about everything Rie, Scythe, Mark, even Jori and Percy had done for me. I thought about innocent little Eva and Cindy too. I didn’t know anything about Theron, but if he was as powerful as he claimed, I couldn’t stand the idea of everyone dying because of a choice I had to make. Tears started gathering in my eyes. Choosing my mate seemed so unimportant in this moment. I just wanted everyone to live.

“I’ll go with you without a fight. Just promise me you won’t kill anyone.” The tears slid down my cheeks. With my free hand, I reached up to wipe them away.

“How disappointing. It would’ve been fun to show you what a true sorcerer could do, unlike you, half-breed. But, alas, I am a man of

my word. I won't kill your friends, at least not tonight." Theron stopped and dipped me.

The world turned upside, but I caught a glimpse of piercing blue eyes. Mark. He was definitely staring right at us, but I didn't have enough time to process what was going on in his face. Did he recognize I was in danger? Was he upset that I was dancing with another man? A part of me wanted him to come over and rescue me, but I knew he would only end up hurt, especially if his wolf was weak from wolfsbane.

Theron frowned. "Looks like our moment is over." He let me go and flipped me around, pressing my back into his chest. The hand that was on my waist was now pressed around my neck. I could still breathe, but it was much more difficult.

Mark stopped in his tracks. He had been pushing his way through the dance floor, but when Theron made his move, Mark froze. He was at least ten feet away, staring at me with a mix of horror and anger. People were still dancing unaware of what was happening, making Mark flash in and out of my view. Slowly, people stopped dancing, realizing what was happening, and gasps echoed throughout the party. Once again, all eyes were on me.

"I wouldn't make a move, pretty boy, or else I'll snap her neck," Theron said, staring directly at Mark. People moved away, clearing the space between Mark and myself.

"If you harm her, I will kill you," Mark seethed.

Rie ran up next to Mark, her eyes with fright. She didn't dare move closer. Jori was the next to approach. His fingers were curled into fists, and he was rolling up his dress shirt sleeves to his elbow. He moved past Mark, heading straight towards us.

"Get your hands off my mate," Jori seethed. "No!" I shouted as Jori got closer. I didn't want anyone making Theron mad.

Theron squeezed my throat even tighter, making me cough. My hands flung up to Theron's arm, trying to loosen his grip, but it was no use. Seeing this, Jori stopped in his tracks.

"I would be careful with your next move," Theron cautioned. "You have no control over this situation."

Jori's jaw clenched and his eyes grew darker. "How dare you invade my pack house and threaten my mate. Do you really think you will get away with this unscathed?"

Theron c****d his head. "Interesting. I would have thought the red head was her mate based on his reaction as well."

"I am her mate," Mark said, stepping forward to join Jori. Theron hummed in response. "Very interesting indeed. I suggest if you don't want to see your mate die in front of you right here, right now, you back off. I see you trying to summon your wolf. It's not working, is it?"

Jori's eyes widened in realization. "Bastard! What have you done?", "What I needed to get my prey. It was useless for you all to try to keep this half-breed alive. Even running away to another town?

What a stupid idea. At least pick something further away from her hometown next time. It was like you wanted me to find her." Theron stroked my cheek, and I could feel the pure anger emitting off both Mark and Jori.

"I'm going to kill you," Jori seethed. He started moving forward again.

"Don't!" I pleaded. Theron loosened his grip on my neck to make it easier for me to speak. "Please don't attack him."

Jori froze again. This time it was Mark who spoke though. "Adira, we are not going to just let him take you like this."

Theron smirked at them. "I would listen to her. We've made a deal. Her life in exchange for all of yours."

I choked up at Mark's pleas, and tears started pouring down my eyes.

"You don't stand a chance. He's poisoned everyone here with wolfsbane. If you try to fight, then you'll die. I can stand the idea of you dying, Mark. Please just don't."

Mark's jaw hardened. "I made you a promise. I will never stop fighting for you. If that means I die in the process, so be it. You're worth it."

"I'm not. I'm not more important than anyone else here. Please," I begged. I was shaking with fear and rage. Why was this happening today of all days? This was my birthday. Everyone worked so hard to make me happy, and here I was, ready to give my life so everyone could live.

"This is getting too sappy for me," Theron said. "I'm over it."

"Don't make a move," Jori threatened.

Theron scoffed in return. "You really think you are in charge here? Such a fool. Maybe I should kill just to prove you wrong. Maybe should kill you all."

"You promised!" I snapped. The idea of him killing everyone was too much. The heat inside of me boiled over, and I could feel my skin burning. I looked at my hands, and they were glowing brighter than they had before. I could feel the dam ready to burst. Then I felt a sharp pain in my neck.

“What do you think you are trying to do?” Theron asked, dropping the syringe from his hand. “I didn’t think I would need this to suppress your powers, but I was wrong. It’s time for us to go. I’ve had enough of this show.”

Mark and Jori both lunged forward, but Theron disappeared with me in his arms.

Chapter 32

It was dark and cold, and the air was damp. There was a dim light coming from somewhere a little ways away from me. I couldn’t make anything out in the room until my eyes adjusted. Even then, I couldn’t make out as much as I usually could. I could tell the wolfsbane was dimming my senses, but it didn’t feel as much as I was dosed with a week ago.

Theron let go of me, and my body betrayed me. I fell to the ground, hitting my knees hard. I cried out in pain.

“Don’t even bother trying to run away. You are much too weak for that now,” Theron said. He moved across the room and flipped on a light switch.

I instinctively shut my eyes, the bright lights hurting them. I rubbed my eyes, but my arms felt heavy. I opened my eyes, and even though it was still bright, I could see a little better. The room we were in was like a dungeon. The walls were made of grey bricks, and there was a large iron door as the only exit. There was no furniture in the room.

My eyes finally landed on Theron, who was inspecting the room. “What did you inject me with?”

“Does it matter?” Theron laughed. “You’ll be dead soon anyway. It was just a serum to calm you down so your powers didn’t emerge, not that it would’ve changed anything. Even if your powers emerged, you don’t know how to use them, so I easily would’ve overpowered you still.”

“You’re awfully cocky.” I tried to stand up, but my body was still weak. “If you were so confident, then why bother poisoning everyone?”

Theron snapped his head towards me. “I don’t take unnecessary risks. In order for me to inherit the power that is rightfully mine, you must die.”

“But I don’t want to inherit any powers! I didn’t even know I was a sorceress until a few days ago. Just take the power and leave me alone,” I begged. I was scared now that I was alone with Theron. I wasn’t

ready to die.

“Because Father insists the eldest child takes over the coven,” Theron spat. He bent down and grabbed my neck. “And you are his eldest.” He threw me to the ground and my elbow hit the ground. I grabbed my elbow as the pain radiated through. “Father?” I repeated, processing the information. “Does that mean you’re my brother?”

“I will never be your brother,” he snapped. “Your b***h mother seduced my father and then ran away with the half-breed child. Just because she got to Father, and he cheated on Mother, resulting in your sad existence, does not mean we are family. It does not mean you deserve to inherit the Caspian powers. It does not mean you deserve to be the leader.”

“My mother wouldn’t do that,” I said quietly. I didn’t know that was true, but my mother always taught me to be myself and think about how my actions affected other people. I couldn’t imagine her cheating on my father. Except my father wasn’t my father. Someone lied to me my entire life, and I wasn’t sure why or who. Perhaps my mother had lied to protect herself and her secret.

“If your actions are any reflection of your mother’s behavior, then how can you doubt it? You have two mates ready to fight for you? How can you be so selfish, you little slut.” Theron’s voice was laced with many years of hatred.

“That’s none of your business!” I shouted. “You don’t even know the situation. How can you be like this? I didn’t even know you existed. I didn’t know I was a sorceress. I didn’t know anything. I don’t deserve this!”

Theron kicked me in my side. “Shut up! Don’t pretend to be innocent. Your father’s favorite, even though you didn’t grow up with us. I thought I was going to grow up to take over the coven, but when I turned sixteen, father told me that you would be the one to take over once he found you and you were of age. You’re older than me by a few months, so you are the one who was meant to take over. It’s nonsense. I deserve to take over. I’m the one who trained for years. I’m the one who supported Mother and Father, while you were running off with the wolves.”

“You know nothing about me,” I growled, pushing myself up. “You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“And frankly, I don’t care. I’m done with this conversation” Theron started walking towards the door.

IV

Theron turned towards me and easily pushed me to the ground. "I will do with you as I please." He opened the door and left, leaving me all alone in the cold room. I heard the click of a lock behind him and knew there was no escape.

I curled into a ball, trying to warm myself up as much as possible. I wished I was wearing something other than a dress in heels. I wished I had a jacket or at least a t-shirt and some pants. The tears started pouring out of my eyes, and it wasn't long before I was sobbing. I was angry that Theron was punishing me for something that wasn't in my control. I didn't even know what happened with my mother. I wished I could ask her for her side of the story, because right now I was imagining the worst of her. Not that it mattered anyway. She let father kick me out and fend for myself when I was only sixteen. My family didn't care about me.

I felt cursed because of my bloodline. First my family rejects me, and then I discover it's my estranged family trying to kill me for the same reason I was kicked out. I didn't care that I was half sorcerer and half werewolf. I didn't deserve to be rejected over and over again because of it. I just wanted someone to look at me and see me for me. Mark looked at me like that. He didn't care what I was. He stood by me every step of the way, trying to help me and save me. He was ready to risk his life for mine.

Jori had been willing to risk his life for me too. He made it clear that he wanted me as well, and he didn't seem to care about my history, but there was a rock at the pit of my stomach whenever I thought about Jori. Even though I knew he was my soulmate, and there was a part of me that wanted, in this moment, all I wanted was to be in Mark's arms. Whatever part of me wanted Mark outweighed any part that wanted Jori.

It was so obvious to me now. Sitting here alone, knowing Theron planned on killing me, I knew it was Mark, and now I would never be able to tell him the truth about how I felt. I wanted nothing more than to escape and run back to Mark and start a life with him. This only frustrated me more, and the tears poured out faster.

After a while, I had no more tears left to cry. I grew silent and tired. My body was heavy, and it just wanted to get some rest, but I was afraid. I didn't want Theron to return when I was asleep. I fought against my body for as long as I could, but eventually I lost that fight.

“Wake up.” A cold nose nudged my hand. I groaned in response. I was cold and sluggish. “Can’t I sleep a little longer?” “Adira, now is not the time to sleep.” The cold nose pushed my face again. I cracked my eyes open and saw Shadow’s bright eyes in my face. “Shadow?” “We are in danger. Please get up,” Shadow begged. She sat down and pawed at my side. I slowly pushed myself up. “I know we are in danger, but I don’t know what to do. He’s much stronger than us.” “Nonsense.” Moon jumped out of the air, appearing to come from nowhere. “You have way more power than that wimp. You just need to access it.” “But how? And even if I could access it, I don’t know how to use my powers.” I felt hopeless talking about it. “Theron said he had years of training. How am I supposed to compete with that?” Moon flicked her tail in my face. “You don’t have to defeat him or even compete with him. You just have to escape. Your powers are tied to your emotions. Surely you have figured that out by now.” “Don’t be so condescending to her,” Shadow snapped, growling at Moon. “Do you wish to die, pup? Because if Adira doesn’t figure out how to release her powers and control them to at least a minimum, then the three of us are dead. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with putting the pressure on her.” Shadow rolled her eyes. “There are other ways to go about it.” Shadow turned directly to me. “Can’t we just transform into a wolf and break free?” I frowned. “I don’t know if we would be able to get through the door that way.” “I’m telling you, focus on trying to release your powers. That’s the only way,” Moon said. “But how can I do that?” I rubbed my eyes, still feeling tired. Moon licked her paw and then started rubbing her face. “Easier said than done,” I muttered. I didn’t have confidence I would be successful, but I had to try. I was not ready to lay down and die yet.

Chapter 33

When I woke up, my bones felt completely chilled. The ground was damp, and the room was dark again. There were no windows in the room, so I had no way to tell what time it was or how long I had been in there. I was still

alive, which was surprising to me. Theron seemed bent on killing me, so I didn't understand why he didn't just kill me at the party or when he escaped with me.

I wasn't complaining. It would give me a chance to figure out a way out of this mess, even if it was a slim chance. I slowly pushed myself up, and there was a sharp pain in my side. I sat on my knees and slowly felt my rib cage. I winced halfway up. I wasn't sure if it was just bruised or if they were cracked. I took a few deep breaths before attempting to stand up. The pain radiated through my body as I stood, but I gritted my teeth and pushed through it.

I walked over to the door and pressed my ear against it. There were no sounds on the other side of the door. I knocked on the door to try to get Theron's attention, but there was no response. After a few moments, I moved over to a wall and leaned against it. Slowly, my body slid to the ground. I still felt tired from before.

Crossing my legs, I took a deep breath, which caused another sharp pain to shoot through my body. I closed my eyes, and tried to focus on the ball of light I saw before. At first, all I saw was darkness. I pushed through the pain and continued taking deep breaths and navigating through the darkness inside of me. Eventually, I came to an image of a misshapen dark lump that resembled a ball of coal.

The lump was icy, and I felt my lungs freezing as my mind moved closer to this. I knew this was where my power source came from, but I couldn't feel any power coming from it. Is this because of the serum Theron injected into me? If I couldn't even summon the faintest power, I would never get out of here. I would never see Mark again to be able to tell him he was the one I wanted. I couldn't leave this world without telling him this.

Tears started streaming down my face, but I didn't move. All of this was Theron's fault. He had no right to come into my life and try to take it from me. I finally had a chance at a happy life where the people around me actually care about me. I had a chance to fall in love and build the family I didn't have, but he had taken that away from me just because of an act his father committed over twenty-one years ago.

The dark lump flickered for a moment, and a small rush of heat sparked inside of me. That was it! I needed to use my anger to fuel my powers. I took another deep breath, and instead of trying to push through the pain, I tried to focus on it and the reason it was there. Theron kicked my side and

threw me to the ground. He took away my happy celebration and threatened my friends. The dark lump sparked again, and this time it started to glow a deep orange. I continued focusing on the orange lump and imagined fueling it. It started glowing brighter and growing in sight.

The door slammed open, pulling me out of my meditation. My eyes snapped open, and I instantly gasped. The person standing in front of the door wasn't Theron, but it was someone I recognized.

"Haley?" I stared at my coworker, not believing my eyes. I had to be hallucinating. "What are you doing here?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "You really are stupid, aren't you? No wonder bae wants to get rid of you. You don't deserve to inherit his powers." She was standing in the doorway holding a silver tray.

"Bae?" I repeated.

"Do you really need me to spell it out for you? God, I thought you were smarter than that at least. Theron is my boyfriend. He's going to treat me like a queen once he takes over his family's coven and inherits their powers. I've been helping him try to eliminate you. Too bad that wolfsbane I put in your drink didn't do the trick. You've been a real pain, don't you know?" She walked over to me and looked down on me.

I felt completely sick. To think someone I worked with was assisting with trying to kill me. She had completely fooled me for months, and I felt so stupid. I always knew Haley didn't like me. She wasn't subtle about it, but I never once thought she wanted to kill me.

"Does power mean that much to you?" I looked up at Haley and saw her in a completely new light. The shadows flickered on her do anything to get it.

"I deserve to be treated like a queen. Bae said he can give me everything I've ever wanted if I help him achieve his goals."

"Then why are you here, serving me food? If you are truly his queen; why are you doing such a menial task qui could feel my anger boiling inside of me as I looked up at her.

Haley clicked her tongue and dropped the tray in front of me. It clattered to the ground, and whatever was on it, splashed onto my face.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Bae has his reasons for everything. Although I don't understand why he hasn't just killed you. We're wasting precious time." Haley didn't try to hide her

annoyance with the situation. "He thinks you could still be useful, though."

"How?" This intrigued me. Theron had made it seem like killing me would solve all of his problems before.

"I don't know. He thinks he can steal your power or something like that. It's a waste of time, if you ask me."

"Does Theron not agree with you?" I could feel the frustration behind Haley's words. Maybe if she doubted Theron, I could get her on my side.

Haley rolled her eyes. "He tells me I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Sounds like he doesn't respect your opinion. If he truly sees you as his queen, shouldn't he treat you like an equal?" I wiped the food off my face and flicked it off my fingers.

"Shut up!" Haley kicked the tray on the floor, spilling the rest of the food.

"You don't know what you're talking about. I would kill you right now if I could." She turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. She locked the door, and then her footsteps echoed down the hallway until they disappeared.

I let out a sigh, absorbing the new information. I pushed the tray that was used to hold the food. I dipped my finger in the slop that was on it and took a small taste. It tasted like chalk, and I didn't bother taking another taste. I hoped I wouldn't be here long enough to feel the need to eat that garbage. I could skip a few meals just fine, but any more than that, and I would start to grow weak.

Everything became a blur the longer I was locked up. I was going through what felt like an endless cycle of meditating, sleeping, Haley dropping off food, and then repeating. No matter what I did, I couldn't get the image of the ball inside of me to glow more than a small flame. My anger wasn't enough to fuel it, and the more I failed, the more I felt discouraged.

I still hadn't touched any of the meals dropped off, afraid of what might be in it. Theron was no stranger to poison, so I was afraid the food was laced with something that would dull my powers or subdue my wolf. Without both of those features, I knew all would be lost. However, the longer I went without food, the more difficult things became. I could hardly muster the strength to stand or move, so I spent more and more time sleeping and sitting.

The door started to open, and I was expecting Haley to come in with another tray of mush, but when I looked up, this time I saw Theron's familiar brown eyes. They reminded me of the brown eyes I saw in the

mirror. I had always wondered where my brown eyes had come from. My mother had green eyes, and the man I thought was my father had icy blue eyes. Growing up, I had just assumed it was from some grandparent, but I knew my eyes belonged to my biological father.

Theron walked over to me and looked me up and down. "Foolish girl. You're growing weak."

My breathing was slow, and I didn't have the energy to keep fighting. "Why haven't you killed me yet? Why bother keeping me alive?"

"I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. I was starting to think it was hopeless getting out of here.

"I've thought about it. Believe me, it'll feel amazing when I take your life with my own hands." Theron crouched down in front of me and stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. "But I have time. I can't inherit my family's powers until I turn twenty-one. If I can figure out how to steal what little powers you have from you, I will become the greatest sorcerer there ever was."

I didn't say anything in return to Theron. I was too tired, and I wanted to save the energy I had left. Theron nudged me, and I opened my eyes. He was looking at me carefully.

"Aren't you going to respond?" Theron asked.

"I live my happily ever after." I looked at Theron, not afraid for the first time in a while. "People like you don't change. No matter what I say or do, you aren't going to change your mind, so I'm saving my energy."

Theron huffed in response. "You think you know it all, half-breed?"

I laughed at this and stared directly into Theron's soul. "I don't know anything, not really. Except that there is something deeply wrong with you."

Theron slapped my face, making me gasp. "How dare you insult me! You don't know who you are dealing with. Once I figure out how to take your powers, I'm going to kill everyone you have ever cared about in front of you. I will rip your mate's throat out in front of you and all you will be able to do is watch him bleed out. Only when you have reached your lowest point will I kill you so slowly you'll be begging me to just end it."