

Chapter 25

At first, I assumed the noise must be Lacy or Ottis making one of their surprise visits.

But when I turned my head to look over the back of my chair, I wasn't met with either of their smiling, wrinkled faces.

Instead, I saw a young man and woman stumbling forward at the other end of the dock, both looking distinctly disoriented.

They couldn't have been much older than me—and only by a couple of years at the most—and seemed out of place in the peaceful forest scenery.

Despite theirustered behavior and casual outfits, both strangers were far too beautiful to be found in a sleepy little town like Pinewood.

The man was tall, lean, and muscular. He had short, coiled black hair, sharp facial features, and rich, mahogany skin that almost seemed to sparkle in the midday sun.

The girl was much smaller, although maybe not quite as small as me, even if the man next to her towered over her.

There was something oddly familiar about her—as if she was an actress from a movie I couldn't quite place. Perhaps I only thought that because she looked like she belonged in Hollywood.

Her glossy brown hair tumbled down her shoulders in perfect waves, and her slender legs seemed to go on for miles. Her eyes were a striking blue that I could see all the way from where I sat.

The man clung to the woman for dear life, his arms wrapped around her shoulders as they stumbled forward on the dock, almost falling into the lake before righting themselves.

It was almost as if they had fallen from a great height and were now struggling to regain their balance.

The woman was having a much easier time of it than the man, who looked like he was about to take the woman down with every uneasy step he took.

"I can't believe you just did that," the woman yelled at the man. "Get off me, you jerkwad!"

She shoved him away from her, and the man yelped, tripping over his feet and falling off the dock. He crashed into the lake with a huge splash.

"Oh, shit!" the woman said, rushing to the edge of the dock. She fell to her knees and looked at the water. "Liam!"

The man resurfaced seconds later, gasping for air. He coughed and glared at the woman. "Did you just push me into a fucking lake?"

"I didn't know we were on a dock! You know I can't control where I land!" she shot back.

She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes fiery. "And it serves you right for latching on to me when I told you that you couldn't come! Do you realize how much of my energy you just used?"

He met her glare with one of his own. "Do *you* realize your mate would feed me to his fucking wolf if I let you apparate halfway across the world without any protection?"

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Wolf? Mate? These people are definitely werewolves. Or, at the very least, werewolf adjacent. Did Ace send them?

I sunk further behind my chair.

Before the woman could respond, Liam ducked his head back under the water.

I assumed he was going to swim to the ladder nearby when, all of a sudden, he shot out of the water like some sort of superhero and landed back on the dock on the other side of the brunette woman.

She whirled around to face him, still glaring with her hands on her hips, seemingly unfazed. She put a finger to his chest, getting ready to tell him off again.

But then Liam's head snapped up. His eyes connected with mine.

His *blood-red* eyes.

It was suddenly clear that this man was not a werewolf. He was something much worse.

Before I could stop myself, I gasped and fell back, tumbling out of my chair and into the lake behind me, butt first and arms flailing.

The cool water was a shock to my senses. For a moment, I panicked, unable to decipher which way was up. Combined with my fear, my muscles were too weak for me to pull myself up.

There was a sudden pounding against my skull and a distant voice in my mind.

"*Doe? What is it?*" Ace demanded through the mind-link. He sounded practically hysterical with worry. "*What happened?*"

I never put my bracelets back on. I left them on the arm of the chair I'd been sitting in, meaning Ace had full access to my emotions right now. He could most likely sense every bit of my fear.

Not good. The last thing I wanted was for Ace to feel me drown to death. Or, worse, feel me get my blood drained by an evil, red-eyed... creature?

Looking for oxygen, I heaved in a breath only to choke on water. Just as my panic started to mount, two large arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me against a hard chest.

I was dragged deeper into the lake, down to the bottom while I struggled, thrashing and kicking the person holding me.

A moment later, the water started to rush around me. Liam and I shot up and out of the lake and into the fresh air, then landed back on the dock.

He set me down and carefully unraveled his arms from around me as I coughed and gasped.

"Oh, my god!" the brunette yelled. She rushed to my side and crouched down next to me.

I remained on my hands and knees, wheezing and coughing up water, gagging on the taste of the murky lake. After I finished hacking up a lung, I took several deep breaths and glanced up.

Liam now stood behind the woman next to me, watching me with concern and dripping with water. His eyes were just as red as before.

"*Doe? Doe! Talk to me!*" Ace continued to scream in my head, building on the pounding ache in my skull.

I shoved my mental walls back up and grabbed the silver bracelets, successfully cutting off my connection to my mate. Now was not the time for him and his hysterics. I had much bigger worries.

"I am so, so sorry! Are you okay?" The girl put a hand on my shoulder.

I inched away from her touch. "E-Eyes," I sputtered, pointing at the man behind her. "H-his eyes are red—"

She whirled around. "Damn it, Liam, change your eyes! You're scaring her!"

Liam's eyes widened and then shut. When they opened again a second later, they were an exceedingly normal brown color rather than the demon-red they had been before.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

"You don't have to worry about Liam," the girl tried to assure me. "He may look like the spawn of a demon, but he's harmless, I promise."

I eyed the huge monster of a man behind her. He looked anything but harmless. He was almost as big as Ace, moved faster than should be possible, and could change his eyes from red to brown at will.

It didn't take a genius to recognize that this man was not fully human and very, very dangerous.

Liam raised his hands and took a few steps back to show that he meant no harm. "I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry."

He gave me a small smile that almost came across as boyish. Harmless. I could already tell this man was used to using his charms to get away with everything. He had the looks for it.

I wouldn't let that fool me, though.

"He's not even supposed to be here. I was hoping to talk to you alone." The girl studied me closely. "Are you Dorothy? Dorothy Kennicott? The mate of Ace Stoll?"

I blinked. My stomach plummeted. "How...how do you know who I am?"

Her lips turned up into a wide grin. "My name is Belle Dupree. Or, uh, Belle *Stoll*, I guess. I think you and I have a lot to talk about."