

## Chapter 19

Maya

The shadow didn't move like a person. It glided between the darkness, too fast and too low.

My breath caught as I stumbled back, heart tripping over itself. The lights flickered again, catching a gleam of wet, sharp teeth like daggers before everything went black.

The sound came first. It was a scrape, a drag of claws against wood, and then the smell.

The smell of iron and... Earth.

The deep smell of blood.

And then it lunged.

I barely had time to scream before it slammed into me. My back hit the floor and air punched from my lungs as a heavy weight pinned me down. My elbow cracked against the tiles as pain shot up my arm.

The thing above me wasn't human... wasn't even a dog or a normal wolf. Even in the darkness, I could see the outline of fur, the flash of sharp canines, the hiss of its breath fanning against my face. Its eyes gleamed a sickly yellow, wild and too intelligent to be animal.

My entire body froze. I didn't even know if I was breathing.

It lowered its head, teeth glinting inches from my neck. I pressed my palms against its chest, if it even had a chest, and pushed. It didn't budge. Of course it didn't budge.

My heart screamed louder than my throat did.

Then, a snarl tore through the air, deep and violent enough to make the walls vibrate. But it wasn't from the monster that held me down.

The weight above me shifted, and the creature's head snapped toward the sound. Before I could process what was happening, the door burst open.

Caden filled the frame like a storm, hair wild, chest heaving, and eyes burning so dark they didn't look blue anymore.

The growl came again, but this time it was from him. A sound that

wasn't human. Not even close.

"Mine."

His voice, low and guttural and wrong in the best and worst way possible.

The word sent a ripple through me, hot and terrifying and somehow... right.

Something deep in my chest—something I didn't recognize—stirred in answer.

Behind him, the shadows broke apart. Two massive wolves stepped into the light, so large they made the one over me and the one from the woods look like a stray. One was pitch-black, fur sleek as oil and eyes steely silver. The other was a dark, smoky brown, muscles rippling under its coat as it snarled.

They didn't hesitate.

They lunged.

The sound that followed was chaos. Snarls, growls, and the sickening thud of bodies colliding filled the space of the living room.

I didn't even know how they fit in the living room, even though it was huge.

The air filled with the smell of blood and smoke and something ancient. Caden was already at my side, pulling me to my feet, his hand strong around mine as he yanked me away from the fight.

"Don't look," he said.

But I did.

The black wolf's jaws locked around the intruder's shoulder, throwing it across the room like it weighed nothing. The brown one followed, claws tearing through fur and bone until the air itself seemed to split from the noise.

I stumbled as Caden pulled me down the corridor, my knees barely working.

"What—what was that?" I gasped. "What are they?"

He didn't answer. His hand gripped mine tighter, pulling me faster until we turned a corner and stopped. He turned toward me, eyes still darker

than night, chest rising and falling fast.

"You're hurt," he said, catching my wrist before I could hide it.

"It's nothing," I managed, even though my arm stung where the thing's claw had raked across it. A small streak of blood glistened along my skin.

He swore under his breath, lowering my hand toward the light. He sniffed, as if he was smelling something new. Then his eyes darted down. My wound? No... my blood. For a second, I thought I saw his pupils widen... not from fear, but recognition.

"What the hell just happened?" I whispered.

He released me too fast, muttering something I didn't quite catch.

"Not yet."

"Not yet what?" I demanded, my voice shaking. "Caden, what's happening? I just saw three wolves, one of them, whatever that thing was, attacked me in our house, and you're acting like this is normal!"

His jaw tightened. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me!"

Before he could respond, another voice echoed down the hall—rough, sharp, and furious.

"Caden!"

It was Tylon.

He came out of the shadows, shirtless and breathing hard, his skin slick with sweat. His hair was damp, sticking to his forehead, and the veins along his arms stood out against his tan. Even angry, he looked carved from calm control. Except now, that control was cracking.

"What the hell happened here?" he snapped, but something told me he already knew what happened. There's no way those wolves were gone so quickly.

Caden didn't flinch. "An intruder. It was handled." Even now, Caden's response didn't sound... real.

What did he mean it was handled? Did he somehow summon those wolves? They did flank him at his sides like he controlled them.

Tylon's eyes flicked toward me, scanning the length of my body, landing

on the blood streak along my arm. For a second, his expression softened—just barely—before it hardened again.

"Handled?" he hissed. "You call letting her get attacked handled?"

Even as he made the accusation, it wounded deeper, like he expected Caden to somehow... know that I was being attacked or came earlier.

Caden's nostrils flared. "She's fine."

"Fine?" Tylon growled, stepping closer. "You're playing with fire. You should've—" He cut himself off and dragged a hand through his hair, pacing once before looking between us.

"stop attacking him!" I said as I stepped in front of Caden. "How the hell would he know? and if you forgot, it's your house that thing came into, not Caden's." That seemed to sober him up a bit.

"Clean this up before the Council hears a word."

What did the council have to do with not hearing about this? My head spun trying to make sense of any of it.

"Council?" I repeated, voice breaking. "What are you talking about? Why aren't we reporting this? Who are you people?"

Neither of them answered.

Tylon turned toward Caden, his voice dropping low. "Handle it before they find out," he said. "Or we're all screwed."

And then he walked off, just as fast as he came, the scent of smoke and steel still hanging in the air.

I looked at Caden, but he wasn't looking at me anymore. His jaw was tight, his expression unreadable.

"Caden," I whispered. "What did he mean? Who's really the Council? They know about the monstrous wolves? Do you know that this isn't biological answer?"

He didn't answer that either. His gaze flicked to my arm one last time before he turned toward the blood-stained corridor.

"Go to your room," he said, voice hollow but firm. "Lock the door."

"Caden—"

"Now."

I wanted to argue, but something in his tone stopped me. The same

something that made me believe the walls weren't as safe as I'd thought.

As I backed away, I glimpsed through the window, seeing the brown wolf dragging the limp intruder's body into the dark.

The metallic smell thickened, burning the back of my throat.

I stumbled into my room and slammed the door shut, my heart racing against the silence.

And as I leaned against it, shaking, one thought wouldn't leave me.

Those wolves hadn't just been with Caden.

They'd known him.

And that growl... that word.

'Mine.'

It hadn't just been a threat.

It had been a claim.



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