

Chapter 17 Funeral Rites

ELIANA.

The sirens blared loudly from a distance on this cold autumn morning on the outskirts of Oakland. The wind was in the withered trees and the streets were eerily. Why wouldn't it?

News had only just spread that Adam's body had been found.

I mounted the front porch with my arms folded across my chest. I let the breeze sweep through my hair as I swallowed a hard lump down my throat. Shifting my gaze, my eyes fell to my Grandma. She was weeping, utterly broken at the news of Adam's passing.

This was someone who'd stuck with her from the moment she was unlawfully banished from town. He'd sneak out to the cabin with leftover food and was even the first to have the nurses prescribe her some medications. Because let's face it, Nana was old.

She was getting even frailer by the day. But the reason she even made it thus far was because of Adam. I understood her devastation, which made it even harder for me to contain the guilt that ate into my chest. He was devoured by an animal, they said.

That much was true.

But what wasn't was where his body was found. He was magically found on Blood Hound grounds this morning, putting to rest any suspicion or accusation that had anything to do with Denver or his Pack.

I promised to keep this secret. Because I knew it wasn't him who did it.

And neither Black Mountain nor Blood Hound could handle a war right now. Denver had his brother to deal with, and we had a narcissistic, evil monster that was about to be Alpha. Finding out the truth would do more bad than good. I soothed myself with that as I tore my eyes away from Nana. Suddenly, they grew moist at the surface of my eyelids.

"I can't believe it" There was a crack in her voice.

"I knew something was wrong when he didn't come back" Nana was distraught. "He always came back. I never would've thought he was dead. I can't even—" "Nana" I called.

"It's okay" My eyes trailed up to Ivan who smothered her back softly.

"They say it's an animal but I don't believe it. He was always so careful you know. God!" She heaved a deep exhale. "I never even told him goodbye nor did I tell him a thank you. That boy's done so much good to me that I can't even put it together" Bile formed in my throat.

Hearing her speak of him the way she did shattered my heart. Because Nana didn't really like a lot of people but you could tell she really liked Adam. I didn't know him but the one time we talked, it was obvious that he was a nice person. Unfortunately, bad things happen to nice people.

"And you're sure, what they're saying is correct" My Grandma's hands frantically reached for mine and I looked down at her. "You're sure you didn't see him again that night?" She asked.

I had to clear my throat before lying to her face.

"I already told you, nans. One second, he was there and the next he wasn't" This time, I couldn't restrain the tears from falling down my face.

I could handle a lot of things but lying to my Grandma would always get me.

"I'm so sorry" I whispered, watching the light leave her eyes. She faced the floor and after a brief silence, she whispered. "I don't believe it." My heart sank in my chest and an arch appeared between my brows.

"What?"

"I don't think it was an animal. He would've been able to protect himself" She muttered. "They say it's a mountain lion, I call bullshit" Ivan added. Both our eyes met. I'm not sure he even believed that himself.

We were trying to stop Grandma from worrying and hurting more than she already did. "A bear or a mountain lion, I call bullshit" She lifted her eyes to me. And if there was one thing Nana was pretty good at, it was her conspiracy theories and her ability to always voice them out.

This time, I feared, she might've been right.

"What...what do you think did this?" I stuttered. Her eyes narrowed in on mine and for a tense second, my heart raced. Then she said.

"Hunters."

A sigh fled my lips as I unfolded my arms.

"Hunters?" Ivan bore the same expression across his face as he echoed.

"They're back. I just know it. It's been so long but they always come back you know. And it starts out the same way, one of us mysteriously dies, they call it an animal attack, then another dies, still no suspicion. Then another. By the time we realize it, we've lost a score of us."

"And they're inching near an attack that could destroy us" Her eyes gleamed all knowingly and Ivan exhaled. "You should get some rest" He withdrew his hands. "I'm serious. I'm not crazy!" Nans raised her voice and when she looked up at me, I couldn't even say anything.

She pressed her lips together with a light scoff.

"You see, Adam would never think I'm crazy!" She muttered before storming back into the house. "Ma—" I called but she didn't hesitate. I let out a deep breath from my lips but as the door laid open, my eyes fell on Elijah in the room.

"Hey!" I walked back in, leaning to cradle him close. His heart was beating fast and there was worry in his eyes. "Is everything okay, mommy?" He asked softly. "Everything's fine" I sniffled forcefully.

"But Grandma was crying and I can hear noises from outside" He argued.

The sirens were far but somehow, they echoed even closer.

"It's okay" I squeezed his hands with a smile. "It's okay. Go to your room okay?" I nodded. "I promise I'll come up and meet you in a while"

His eyelids flapped lazily and he let go of my hands with a pout.

"Okay." He whispered.

I stood up, watching him climb up the stairs and into his room. Once the door closed, I clamped my lips with my hands, holding back even more tears that were about to stream down my cheeks. I filled my lungs with air, reminding myself that I had to be strong.

"Not now" I mouthed, batting my lashes. "Not now."

I closed the door and once again faced the breeze against my skin.

"What do you think they're doing now?" A voice echoed from behind and I turned back to face Ivan. We'd already seen them carrying what was left of his body which only meant what was remaining was the funeral rites.

It was much different for us, I realized, from the humans.

Here, we lay the dead the same day their body is found. There are a ton of rites to be observed that would last the entire day, including a shifting ceremony and a remembrance feast that would later stretch into a vigil where the body is finally cremated, burned to ashes and then laid to rest.

"I can hear them" I clamored, leaning against the porch railing. "But I can't go, can I?" I swallowed a hard lump down my throat. "It's way too risky, not when Jaxon knows you're around" Ivan replied.

"He's enjoying it, isn't he? Taking his time and keeping me on edge so he would strike when I least expect it. Is that his plan?" I scoffed. "I have no idea of that but The Alpha could really be unpredictable" Ivan replied.

I physically had to stop my eyes from rolling all the way back.

"He's not The Alpha, not when my father is still alive" I hissed angrily.

"He already asked that we address him that way" Ivan explained and after a brief pause, he took a step back. "Unless, you want to plan on challenging him for that..." He perched up a brow.

"Oh you are!" He was almost surprised. "Barely" I replied.

"You do know the cost, right?" Ivan asked. "I have to find myself a mate blah blah" I shrugged. "Find yourself?" He echoed. "That's the job of the Moon Goddess, or have you no mate?" Ivan asked.

I withheld the urge to retch at that moment. "Oh I do."

Ivan fell quiet and when I looked back at him, his eyes were filled with intrigue. "Come on," "I'd rather not" I hissed. "Or is it that guy that refuses to leave over there?" He darted his eyes far across the roads.

And when I did, I was surprised to still find Denver parked in his car at a distance from us. Last night, he didn't leave. He promised to make sure Blake never returned but I assumed he'd have gone by morning.

"Ugh" I scoffed. But somehow, there he still was.

"So, it is him" Ivan cooed in a sing-song voice. I wasn't having it but then again, I didn't deny it. "Does he know?" He then asked and I realized that was a question I never fully knew the answer to.

"It doesn't matter because it's never going to happen" I shook it off.

"What? You challenging Jaxon for Alpha or—"

"Denver" I interrupted. "As for Jaxon, I'm sure I'll find another way" By the tone of my voice, it was clear I no longer wanted to talk about this and thankfully, Ivan got the hint. He wasn't so pushy.

He could make as a good friend, I thought.

As I looked back at Denver, our eyes met. Ivan's phone started to ring as I excused myself. Sprinting down the porch, I made my way across the road and as soon as I got to his beat-up Wrangler, I knocked on his windows.

He first acted as if he hadn't seen me coming and there was a facade of shock when our eyes met again. "Oh it's y—"

"What are you doing here?" I interrupted, folding my arms across my chest. "Don't you think it's a bit too risky and reckless to show up especially at this time? There's an ongoing funeral rite—"

"Yes, that is far kilometers away" Denver persisted. "Do you know what Jaxon would do if he finds you here?" I asked. "I'm more concerned about what Jaxon would do if he finds you here. And the reason I haven't left, believe it or not is to make sure nothing terrible happens to you again" Denver continued.

"Since when do you care?" I shrugged.

"Since my brother came back to town" He said. "I can take care of myself. I already told you I trained as a warrior" He burst out laughing.

"This isn't some cult commune, this is Oakland. It's far worse, it's a place where your nightmares become reality. A cursed town that is a lot more worse with people like Blake and your stepbrother Jaxon" He added.

"So no, I'm not leaving. At least not for a while."

"I promised to make sure that not you or your people are harmed again. Now shuu" He started to raise the windows of his car as soon as the howling of wolves started to draw closer.

"You standing here, now that's risky" He mouthed and as I backed away, a light scoff escaped my lips. It took a while before he tore his gaze away from mine. Denver could lie all he wanted about why he was doing this but somewhere deep down in his stoic exterior, I knew he cared.

And it was just as surprising for me as it was for you.

I made my way back to the porch and I'd barely climbed the first step before Ivan called my name. "Eliana!" There was tension buried in his voice and it was even scarier looking into his eyes.

"What is it?" I started to panic.

"The call I just got, it was from one of the nurses at the Pack Clinic whom I'd given that...substance to test for you" A hard lump swelled in my throat as I awaited his next words.

"Where did you get it from?" His voice was low.

"Why, what happened to it? Is it bad?"

"No, it's Serpentina. It's not bad. It's dangerous. Capable of slowly killing a person in the most natural ways, its effectiveness is the reason why it's banned in most places across the world" Ivan explained and my jaw hung loose. I'd heard that name before.

Serpentina.

"They're poisoning him!" My hands clamped over my lips and a chill went up my spine. "How did you get it, Eliana?" He asked and at that moment, a tear dropped from my eyes.

"Who did you get it from?"

"My father." There was a crack in my voice.

"Jaxon's been poisoning him this whole time and Nora's been in on it. Maybe Sierra too. It's the reason he's sick" My voice fell into a whisper and Ivan backed away in shock. "What the hell" He cursed and I could feel my heart raging in my chest. "Yeah," I paused.

"What the hell."