

## Chapter 6 A Fresh Start

ELIANA.

SIX YEARS LATER.

My eyes settled on the untamed flames of the bonfire and even with the warmth that emitted from it, it was still a cold night in the mountains of Tuscany, where I'd stayed for the last six years.

There was a rumble in the skies above me, preceded by a bolt of lightning that struck the earth. The breeze was cold against my skin, grazing through my hair which swayed left and right.

I folded my arms with a jacket over my shoulders. Until the rain started to pour, I wouldn't go back into my tent, I resolved in my head. It had rained heavily here each night for the past week. And although it was hard to believe the Tuscany mountains were a real place, they really were.

I had to see for myself when I stumbled here one random day six years ago after journeying halfway across the earth in search of a home. There wasn't one quite as welcoming as here. But the weather said otherwise.

Of course, I had found ways to cope but still, on some days when the harsh winds would blow, I was reminded that this place wasn't my home.

Not that it wasn't Blood Hound or Black Moon, as you have seen, all my life I've always struggled to fit in. It wasn't any different now with the humans. Tuscany was filled with them. It was about 95% mountains and forest but the remaining 5% were humans.

Not a single shifter was here. It was nothing like Oakland which was a good thing because when I arrived here, that was exactly what I was looking for—a fresh start, a new beginning. For both myself and my—

"Help!"

"Help, mum!" Immediately drawing me out of my thoughts were the screams that echoed from inside the tent. I arose and burst through the zipper, grasping his little hands as he shivered. Elijah was panting with beads of sweat forming along the lines of his forehead.

He was drenched and he was quivering like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Are you okay?" I held him close to my chest, placing a soft kiss against his forehead and his breathing slowed down after some time. Then he could speak, the first thing he did was lift his gaze into my eyes.

"I had a nightmare." There was a crack in his voice and I could see in his eyes that he was so afraid. "It's okay" I held him tighter. "It's not real"

"You're here with me now. Mommy's here" I heaved. And as the winds started to howl outside the tent, I finally closed it up. I could still see the reflection of the fire as it started to die down because of the rain.

But soon after, it had completely disappeared.

Elijah had fallen asleep again in my hands and I heaved a deep breath as I looked down at him. As I said, this was supposed to be a fresh start, a new beginning for myself and my son, Elijah.

But these days, it started to feel like the exact opposite.

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"Twenty-four!"

"Twenty-five!"

"Twenty six—" "Fuck!" I cursed as I fell on my bed, heavy breaths escaping from my lips. I turned to face Alicia who was counting my push-ups and as she handed me the bottle of water, she had disappointment in her eyes.

"That's far less than the last time." She muttered, reaching for my hands to help me up. I leaped to my feet, gushing down the water and then wiping the sweat across my face. It was the next morning after a heavy downpour and it looked nothing like it had rained last night.

The sun was shining intensely in the skies and everyone had come out of their tents for their exercise. Life in Tuscany was a routine, you get up as early as 6 AM, and training starts. Breakfast is strictly by 10 AM, not a second less or a second more and it was only for about an hour.

Training continues until noon and then we're allowed into the woods to hunt down dinner. That could last for hours and alas by 6 PM, we return back to the tent with our pairs and our game.

Sometimes it felt like nothing had changed. The trees surrounding us were just like Oakland—well the part of it that wasn't the city. And the commune I was in was very similar to how Packs operate.

The routine, dining together, training but at least I wasn't a slave to these people like I was to my own Pack.

They were strangers and humans but they also opened their arms to me and my child when I wandered here five years ago. They knew very little of where I came from nor did they know anything about my past. I acted lost and naive which wasn't really a facade because I was lost.

I'd left Denver without thinking about where I was even going and to top it all off, I wasn't just responsible for myself but for the child I was carrying. Those weeks on the roads were the toughest and I didn't even think I would make it alive as a Rogue.

I just kept walking and running and walking for weeks on end, months. Until I ended up here and it's where I've been with Elijah ever since. I didn't think I ever wanted to leave again. Here, they knew me as a human and Elijah too. It was like I could be someone different.

Away from my past and all the trauma I'd endured. I was no longer Eliana, I went by Ana here. It was what everyone including Alicia knew me as. It was tough keeping my secret sometimes and although it helped that I still hadn't come fully into my wolf form, at this I had given up, but it was especially harder when you have a growing son whose wolf aspects wasted no time in kicking in.

Elijah was six years old now, his violent nightmares started when he was five. It was accustomed to the male shifters at the infancy stage, and so was the increased awareness and heightened senses. I had to hide that from everyone else in the commune because we were humans here.

I thought we could be but with each day that passed, I realized it was impossible. But I didn't want to leave, I told myself. If I did, there was nowhere else to go.

"I'll do better tomorrow" I nodded at Alicia who scoffed lightly from her lips. At that moment, there was a bell that rang from a distance and I pulled out my phone to check the time.

"It's ten!" I reflexively announced, kicking my feet forward. "Time for breakfast" My eyes searched through the dispersing crowds for Elijah.

"Where is my son?" I asked and Alicia shrugged her shoulders. I faced the children's section where I had just seen him some seconds ago but he had disappeared now. My heart stomped in my chest as I walked back, in the opposite direction from where everyone else was facing.

"Have you seen Elijah?" I started to ask, gliding through shoulders and bodies. "Freya!" I grasped his nature teacher and she was startled at first. The rest of the kids were packing up but Elijah was still missing.

"Where is he?" I panted heavily.

"I was just looking for you." She gritted through her teeth and it was a tone that showed something was clearly wrong. She roped my hands into a tent and I expected to see Elijah but instead, it was another kid who was bleeding from his mouth.

"That...that isn't Elijah" I stuttered and Freya looked me dead in the eyes. "You don't say" She remarked. "This is Chester, one of the kids in Elijah's grade and a very close friend of his. Today, Elijah attacked Chester and he's the reason for the bleeding as you can see" Freya said and I clutched my lips immediately.

"Where is he?"

"This is the third fight he's been involved in and it's only just been a week. The rest of his mates are scared of him—" "He's a monster!" Chester interrupted and his eyes were filled with tears. Soon, mine began to water too.

"Ana," Freya called and I looked back at her. "I'm afraid if this happens again, you and Elijah might have to leave the commune. The safety and wellness of everyone is our utmost priority an—" Her voice started to fade into my ears and it was barely audible at this point.

I plunged myself outside the tent and my vision dazed as I stared ahead at the woods. I closed my ears with my hands and shut my eyes until I was relieved again and by this time, Freya was right next to me.

"Where is he?" I asked her for the last time and she threw a look into the woods. "He ran away," Without waiting to hear another word, I sprinted down the hill and ran through the forest.

"Elijah!" I yelled his name. This had only happened once in the past and the fear was just as crippling. "Elijah!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, shaking my head off every negative thought that was telling me something bad had already happened to him.

My feet splattered through the muddy earth as I went deeper into the thick forest and it was darker with each step I took. But alas, I found him.

Beneath an enclosed shed with his back against a tree and his arms around his knees. "Elijah!" I gasped in relief, throwing myself forward to where he was. He turned to me and I immediately grasped him in for a hug. The tears in my eyes streamed down my flustered face.

"I was so worried" I wept and there was a crack in my voice. "You can't leave me like that, Elijah. I told you, and you promised the last time" I looked into his eyes and they were so afraid. I couldn't even yell at him.

"I'm sorry, mommy" He apologized. "I didn't want you to be worried."

"It's okay" I held his hands.

"They were just saying so many mean things about me in class today, Chester too and I thought he was my friend. I just got so angry and I don't know what came over me" He explained and I pushed a hand down my throat. Of course, I knew what came over him.

It was his wolf.

That's the thing, he wasn't a human. He didn't even know that himself, none of them knew. Maybe this was a bad idea, and as much as I wanted it to be, Tuscany wasn't my home. It wasn't Elijah's home.

He ought to be around a Pack, of wolves who could train him to control his anger and be noble. They couldn't do that here, but then again his Pack was I'm pretty sure non-existent at this point. It had been six years since I last heard from anyone in Oakland.

"I don't really belong here, mommy. No matter how hard I try, they still make fun of me. I can't ever fit in" And Elijah broke down into tears on my shoulders and as a mother, hearing my child cry the way he did at that moment, it shattered my heart.

"I'm sorry" He whispered. "I know" I replied softly with a hand smothering down his back. "This isn't your fault, Eli" I said before pulling away from him. "Well, punching Chester was," I scoffed and he chuckled softly for a moment.

"I told you before, use your words. Even when you're angry, use your words over your fist" I ran my hands through his hair and he pouted. "It won't happen again Mommy" He promised even going as far as joining his pinky finger to mine and I broke it off with a kiss.

Pulling him up, we were set back down the hill when my phone suddenly rang. And I stumbled in my tracks immediately—nobody ever called. Pulling it out of my pocket, there was a furrow between my brows.

And the voice that I heard next caused my heart to sink into my chest. My hand was shaking as I placed the phone to my ears.

"Eliana." Her voice was tender and shaky. No one had called me that in years. "Grandma?" I recognized her voice almost immediately and hearing it again left a sting in my chest. "Eliana..." She called again.

This time, bearing as much familiarity.

"It's your father," She wasted no time in breaking the news and my heart leaped in the back of my throat. "He's deathly ill, Eliana. Please come back home." And those words kept ringing in my ear as I stood there.

Come Home. Home.

Not Tuscany, not Tombsdale but Oakland—My Home.