

## The cursed blood novel Chapter 5 - Chapter 5 (English Translation)

Chapter 5 2 Chapter 5 # Chapter 5: Iron Range The wolves came into The Pickaxe on a Thursday in November, and I almost shattered a pint glass with my bare hand. Not literally. But the moment the door swung open, the cold air carried their scent across the bar. Pine-sap and granite and the unmistakable musk of shifted wolves. Layered. Organized. A pack scent that clung to their jackets like cigarette smoke clings to a smoker's. My hand locked around the glass I was drying. I squeezed until the tendons in my forearm stood out like cables. Scent before thought. Scent before breath.

Five years of hiding. Five years of no wolves in Breck. Now three strangers walked in trailing pack scent like a neon sign, and every cell in my body went to a place I hadn't been since January in the North Cascades. Three of them. That was worse than one. One wolf might be passing through - a loner, a drifter, someone between territories with no agenda. Three wolves moving together meant purpose. Organization. A pack that had sent them here. The first was a woman.

1/9 1 O O 620 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 Chapter 5 Late twenties, lean and watchful, dark hair pulled back tight, the kind of compact build that said \*tracker\* before it said anything else. She came through the door first and her eyes swept the room in a single fluid pass. Cataloguing exits. Reading threat levels. 620 Doing the thing we all do in unfamiliar territory - the scan that looks casual to humans and screams \*wolf\* to anyone who knows what they're seeing. Behind her, a broad-shouldered man in a Carhartt jacket and Sorel boots. Dark beard, wind-chapped face.

The third was younger, quieter, hanging back near the door with his hands in his pockets and his chin up. A rear guard, watching the lot while the other two cleared the room. The woman's gaze passed over me. Paused. Half a second, maybe less. Then kept going. She hadn't caught my scent. Not fully. The Pickaxe was saving me. Five years of fryer oil and Pine-Sol and the mineral tang of iron dust that lived in the walls, the ceiling tiles, the grout between the floor tiles. It was layered so thick over everything that my own scent was buried.

To wolves scanning casually, I was just a bartender in a flannel shirt, standing behind a bar that smelled like every dive in the Iron Range. Human. Unremarkable. Nobody. But the woman's pause had been half a second too long. She'd caught something. A trace, maybe. The faintest thread of Ashvein scent beneath the fryer oil. 2/9 20 T ||| O < M Chapter 5 Not enough to confirm. Just enough to make her nostrils flare and her head tilt a degree to the left before she overrode the instinct and moved on. I set the glass down carefully. My hand was shaking.

62 I pressed it flat against the bar top and held it there until the tremor stopped. My pulse was hammering in my throat like a trapped thing. I pulled my left sleeve down with my teeth. Discreet. Casual. A motion I'd rehearsed a thousand times in a mirror. "What

can I get you?" My voice was even. I'd had five years of practice making my voice even. The man in the Carhartt ordered three Grain Belts. The woman said nothing. She'd taken the stool with the best sightline to the door and was scanning the room again, slower this time, her nose working beneath the casual facade.

The third wolf stayed near the pool table. Not playing, just present. I could feel the triangle of their positioning like a net being cast across the room. Their pack scent was unfamiliar. Not from any territory I'd known in the Cascades. Something western, coastal, carrying the faint notes of old-growth forest and river stone. An organized scent. A deliberate scent. The scent of wolves who'd been sent somewhere specific to look for something specific. I poured three Grain Belts. 3/9 O F III O < 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 MMM. Chapter 5 Set them on the bar.

Retreated to the far end where I kept the inventory clipboard. Distance mattered. Every foot between us was a foot their noses would have to work harder to cross. Hank was at his usual stool, telling his walleye story to no one in particular. Two of the taconite guys were playing pool in the back. The jukebox was running. Springsteen, "State Trooper," the live version that sounded like a man screaming into a void. A normal Thursday. Nine P.M. Three hours until close. The wolves drank slowly.

The woman the tracker, I was sure of it now, from the way she held herself, the way her attention moved in systematic sweeps rather than casual glances - kept her nose working. I could see it in the slight flare of her nostrils every time I moved behind the bar. The way she'd pause mid-sip when a draft from the kitchen shifted the air. She was trying to get a clean read through five years of accumulated grease and iron dust and Pine-Sol. The fryer was winning. Barely. The man in the Carhartt watched the pool game. Checked his phone.

Said something low to the woman that I couldn't catch over the jukebox. She shook her head. A small, frustrated gesture. \*Can't confirm.\* My gut unclenched half a notch. Then clenched back twice as tight. Liv was off tonight. I was alone behind the bar. PO 20 T O < 4/0 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 MMM. Which meant no one to notice that my hands hadn't stopped shaking. Or that I'd pulled my sleeves down three times in twenty minutes. Or that I was standing at the far end of the bar with my back against the bottle shelf. A woman with an exit strategy she hoped she wouldn't need.

The wolves finished their beers. The man left a twenty on the bar. The woman slid off her stool and paused. One last sweep of the room. Her gaze lingered on me for a beat that lasted exactly long enough to make my pulse spike before she turned for the door. The third wolf was already outside. They moved the way they'd entered: organized, deliberate, a unit. The door closed behind them. Cold air gusted in and guttered out. Springsteen wailed on. I stood very still for a long time. My knees were locked. The small of my back had gone slick with sweat under the flannel.

The Solvar pulsed against my wrist, and for the first time in months it felt like what it was. A mark. A brand. A thing that identified me to anyone who knew what to look for. If

the fryer hadn't been running. If I'd reached for a glass and my sleeve had ridden up. If that tracker had been standing a foot closer Three wolves. Not passing through. Sent. The difference between a lone wolf drifting through your bar and an organized pack sending scouts to scan it was the difference between a stray spark and a lit fuse. 20 ЕЛЯ Т III О < 62 Chapter 5 Mon, Apr One was chance.

The other was the beginning of something. I locked the door at closing time. Climbed the back stairs to my apartment. Sat on the mattress on the floor and stared at the north-facing window and breathed. In for four. Out for six. The trick an EMT passing through had taught me my second year, when I still had panic attacks behind the walk-in cooler. Five years. And still three wolves in a bar could unravel me to the studs. The town was called Breck. Population nine hundred and shrinking, built on a mine that had been tapping out since the Reagan administration.

I'd arrived five years ago on a Greyhound that stopped in Virginia, Minnesota. From there, a county transit van as far as Eveleth. From there, I'd walked. By then I'd run out of bus routes and money and the forward momentum that had carried me out of the Cascades. Breck wasn't a destination. It was where the inertia gave out. I remembered the walk in pieces. Not scenery. Body. The hot blister on my left heel where the boot had worn through the sock. The way my stomach had stopped asking for food and started asking for \*anything\*. Salt. Sugar. A piece of ice.

The cold sinking into my hips until my gait went stiff and short. A rabbit's hop instead of a stride. 0020 20 T 619 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 MMM. Chapter 5 The first thing I'd smelled at the edge of town wasn't pine or snow. It was taconite dust and diesel and, impossibly, somebody frying onions somewhere behind a wall. My mouth had filled with water so fast I'd had to lean on a fence post to keep from buckling. And under it all - quiet, almost shy - the thing I hadn't felt in nine days of running. Nobody here knew what my wrist meant. Nobody here would flinch when I walked into a room.

My shoulders dropped a half inch. It was the first half inch they'd dropped since the longhouse. Greta Lindahl owned The Pickaxe and the studio apartment above it. She'd hired me the day I walked in. \*Can you pour a beer without a head on it?\*

The simplicity of the transaction had been so clean, so mercifully free of history, that I'd felt something loosen in my chest for the first time since the severing. Not hope. Not safety. Just the absence of being known. A place where the Solvar under my sleeve was nothing but a weird scar on a drifter from out west.

A place where nobody's nostrils flared. \*Maybe here I can breathe.\* I hadn't said it out loud. I wouldn't have trusted it out loud. But I'd felt it the way you feel the temperature drop before a storm in the skin, not the mind. 38 Three years later, Greta retired to Duluth and left me the keys. Now I opened six nights a week and closed alone and climbed the stairs to a studio with 62 20 719 Apr 20 MMM Chapter 5 62 sloped ceilings and a radiator that clanked like a prisoner tapping code through the walls. I slept on a mattress on the floor because I'd never bought a bed frame.

I hadn't bought a bed frame because buying one would mean I was staying. I couldn't afford to name what I was doing here. Staying implied choice. I wasn't staying. I was just not leaving yet. The Solvar lived on the inside of my left wrist. Silver crescent moons, raised and permanent, cold the way a river stone is cold after a night in frost. In summer it faded to a background hum I could ignore if I stayed busy. In winter it deepened, settled into the bone, became the baseline frequency beneath everything I did. I wore leather cuffs.

Wide, biker-style, thrift store in Two Harbors, my first year. My hand went to the cuff now, without permission. Tugging it a quarter inch lower over the scar. The hundredth time today. The ten-thousandth time this year. It was a reflex so old my body did it in my sleep. Liv called them my \*signature look.\* I let her believe in the aesthetic because the truth - \*every wolf who sees my bare wrist will know I was rejected, and rejected wolves are found wolves, and found wolves get sent home\* was not a conversation I could have with a human. There were no wolves in Breck.

That was the whole architecture. Five years, and those three strangers were the first wolves to walk through my door. The odds had held. Until tonight. 8/9 20 1 T III O 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 MMM. Chapter 5 62 The carefully maintained fiction that I was safe here had cracked along a fault line I'd known was there but had chosen not to look at. I lay down on the mattress in my clothes. Pulled the blanket to my chin. Tucked my left wrist under my right hand so I could feel the cuff's edge against my palm - the familiar pressure, the small permanent lie.

Outside the north window, the snow started falling. I watched it until the shape of the pane blurred, and the Solvar throbbed once, cold, and the breath in my chest went out slower than it had gone in. Not safe. Not anymore. But not found yet, either. Not yet. - End of chapter- 1 O 9/9 11:48 Mon, Apr 20 MMM. admin